

Navigating the Trauma of Wildfire

By Rani Bhadare

Editor's Note: In recent years, the western United States has seen catastrophic wildfires that have resulted in a significant loss of forests, structures, and lives. Unfortunately, these catastrophic wildfires will not be isolated events for the foreseeable reality, resulting in foresters and other natural resources professionals navigating the trauma that landowners, and themselves, will likely experience in the aftermath.

For some homeowners, they may experience trauma because their home and forest burned. Some homeowners may experience trauma because their home didn't burn while their neighbors did. Even foresters or other natural resources professionals may experience trauma seeing burn scars on landscapes they spent a career stewarding. Having the tools and understanding how people or you may react following a wildfire will be as invaluable as knowing how to reforest the landscape.

My family was among those who lost their homes in the 2017 Tubbs Fire, which burned nearly 37,000 acres in northern California. In total, 5,643 structures were destroyed and 22 people killed. As a licensed clinical psychologist with experience in community mental health, I saw firsthand how the fire affected myself and the community. I searched for resources that could help us cope with this trauma, yet surprisingly found



little specifically for wildfires. Wildfires are a unique crisis and form of trauma because you may not experience a threat to your own life but a threat to your home can feel like a threat by proxy. Also, the sense of loss incurred from wildfires such as the loss of one's home, belongings, and community can be experienced as a form of grief.

Following the 2020 Labor Day fires, Lauren Grand, an Oregon State University Extension forester and colleague, reached out to ask for information I could provide on the emotions landowners may experience following those catastrophic wildfires. What follows is a deeper dive into what I shared with her.

The invisible aftermath

After the wildfire, there is a period of shock and cognitive fog because the brain is overwhelmed to see the loss of land and community. This cognitive fog is not something within your agency: Your brain is literally not processing information effectively; it has difficulty concentrating, and your memory is compromised.

Three days and up to one month after the wildfire, a person may exhibit acute stress disorder and have symptoms like negative mood, anxiety, trouble sleeping, and a tendency to avoid distressing memories or reminders about the wildfire. Sometimes, these symptoms resolve naturally, or with the help of therapy and other forms of social support. Other times, these symptoms linger or worsen, and three to six months after the wildfire may morph into a form of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Everyone can experience forms of PTSD, not just the firefighters, and even foresters may be impacted to a lesser degree. What's important is validating everyone's own unique response. There is no right or wrong to feel when dealing with a wildfire. The experience can even unearth and activate earlier forms of trauma or loss.

Here are some common symptoms of acute stress disorder and PTSD.

- A person may have recurrent/involuntary/intrusive distressing memories of the event.

- A person may have an inability to remember aspects of the event.

- Hypervigilance/exaggerated startle response: This is related to cues/triggers that remind a person of the fire (i.e.: smelling smoke, seeing a campfire, a tiki torch near a tree, candles, "red flag" weather, emergency alerts on phone/tv/radio, seeing a structure fire or forest fire on media, or someone flicking a cigarette butt without putting it out completely).

- Flashbacks: These may look like true "flashbacks" (not just a memory of the event, but it feels like one is transplanted to the past and reliving the event), or subthreshold "images" of the fire ravaging their home/property/community.

- Nightmares: A person may have recurrent nightmares/night terrors related to the trauma.

- Avoidance: A person may begin to avoid triggers/cues/reminders related to the traumatic event; person may relocate; may decide never to live or visit that type of climate again (near/on mountains/open rural spaces); person may begin to avoid their own thoughts/memories of the trauma. Avoidance provides short-term relief, but in the long run this worsens the associated anxiety).

When someone is experiencing these reactions, it's important to talk through their emotions, lean on social support, and tap into mental health resources. Additionally, we should normalize their reactions. All too often people don't understand why they are having these reactions. Normalizing doesn't mean minimizing their suffering but rather recognizing that this is our brain's way of coping with the trauma. We humans are geared for survival, so when something like this happens, it can leave a person stuck in a "survival mode."

Compounding the anxiety of PTSD,



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people may also experience grief or depression from suddenly losing their home, property, or pets. There are six stages of grief: shock, anger, denial, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

There is no timeline for grief, nor is it a stepwise linear process.

What's important to know about grief is that it's experienced as waves: waves of sadness, waves of feeling, or waves of disbelief. The task of grieving is "to show up to the pain" and allow yourself to experience the pain of loss, to sit with it, cry, journal, or talk it out. Grief becomes complicated, like trauma, when one makes attempts to avoid the pain of loss. However, during the initial stages of grief, it is okay, and adaptive to engage in some avoidance, or "healthy distraction" to maintain self-care and a healthy baseline.

When someone is experiencing trauma, grief, or depression, there are visible symptoms. These are some examples of visible symptoms.

- Irritable behavior/anger outbursts: When one is experiencing more overall stress, anxiety, and depression, there are less moments of relaxation or peace, and a person is less able to manage daily stressors as effectively. I like to say, "Sometimes, depression and anger are

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two sides of the same coin."

- Reckless or self-destructive behavior (related to loss of sense-of-agency, and hopelessness, decreased ability to manage emotions and distress)

- Problems with concentration

- Sleep/appetite changes

- Dissociative symptoms: bouts of experiences in which one feels that reality is not real (de-realization), or that they are not real (de-personalization)

Reforestation with the trauma

This is the emotional backdrop that you may find yourself encountering when working with landowners who have experienced loss due to wildfires. And these consultation visits will be unlike those you have had conducted before, which means you may need to adapt how you work with the landowner.

Although there may be a timetable if salvage logging or replanting will be conducted, it's important to remember that these landowners may be experiencing shock and cognitive fog that will make it difficult to make important decisions, and these decisions may feel

overwhelming or very anxiety-provoking. Those who lost land/property are likely still processing the trauma and may need some time to process/vent emotions during the meeting.

I would also advise to make the landowner feel safe in the process since the loss of their home or forest has probably left them feeling unsafe. If you can give them a sense of safety, they may be more likely to trust you and be less anxious about the needed reforestation work.

Also show empathy. It's overwhelming to lose everything that they need to navigate society, such as their driver's license, social security card, or other documents. Their priority might not be to address their land. This is where you can say you empathize and normalize that what they're going through is difficult. If you have a timeline when decisions must be made, put it on the system, not yourself.

Here are helpful tips for approaching these meetings.

- Allocate more time for this task as some time will be going toward reflective listening. I recommend using validating statements that may include, "I understand this is a tough time." or "I understand these decisions might be difficult to make right now."

Continued on next page



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- Provide handouts/brochures with your contact info and a list of decisions the landowner needs to make at some point.

- Normalizing the impact of the fire/loss on the mental health and perhaps a list of mental health resources in their community; you might also encourage the landowner to consult with friends/family who they trust regarding these decisions about their land.

- A good tip for ending the discussion or redirecting it into the handouts/brochures/etc. is saying “I’m so sorry for your loss and I understand what a difficult time this is. I’d like to leave you with this information today, and perhaps I can follow-up in x days/weeks.”

- In terms of when to push a landowner to make the decisions, I know we all have certain fixed deadlines we have to adhere to and other more flexible deadlines. If

it’s possible to extend a flexible deadline to afford the landowners more time that would be invaluable. If not, you may say, “I understand this is difficult, and you may not be sure, but unfortunately there are deadlines built into the system and I empathize deeply with how difficult or frustrating this process can be.”

- If there are FAQs perhaps a handout on this also or a community forum that allocates time for collective processing and FAQs about the process

Even if you feel out of your depth during these meetings, just remember that showing and expressing compassion will make a difference.

Find the positive in the trauma

In the immediate aftermath of a wildfire, it can be difficult to see any positive outcomes. Some may relocate while others rebuild. Those who stay are creating long-term change that will mitigate future fires. New proactive practices were adopted, such as robust public messaging, learning how to Firewise one’s home, and identifying the evacuation routes. As a result, even if residents still experience the trauma of their earlier loss, these actions enable them to gain a sense of safety and control. *WF*

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Taking care of yourself

Foresters may not think of themselves as first responders, but your profession is among those who are first to respond to a wildfire and then work in a landscape that has been destroyed. You also may experience the same responses as landowners, and it’s important to take care of yourself, so you don’t experience burnout.

In the initial response during a wildfire, you may find yourself coping so you can focus on performing the work that’s needed. While coping is necessary, it’s also important to recognize that it can be detrimental long-term.

- In the initial stages, make an effort for self-care and healthy distraction, and access social support network and community resources.

- Make a plan toward recovery (recovery of important documents, essentials, etc.) and take steps toward those goals while also allocating time and space for relaxation/self-care.

- During the later stage, process/talk out your experience, whether with neighbors who experienced the same trauma, a trusted confidant, priest/rabbi/etc., or a mental health professional.

- Don’t hesitate to reach out to your primary care doctor or mental health professional for mental health concerns and also concerns related to sleep and appetite, as these are often impacted by stress. There are some medications that can help for sleep disturbances that stem from trauma.

- Healing comes with gradual unconditional acceptance of the event, and regaining feelings of safety/security.

In the middle of a crisis, it can become difficult to take care of yourself with so many other worries preoccupying your mind. However, this is a good time to think about your personal resiliency, healing, and a sense of normality. Here are some self-care strategies you may want to consider.

- Practicing proven stress-reduction techniques, such as regular exercises, meditation, and deep breathing.

- Allowing yourself to feel bad, cry, and release negative emotions in a healthy manner.

- Giving yourself permission to feel good. You can have periods of joy even when coping with loss.

- Making small decisions daily to feel in control of your life once more.

- Putting off major life decisions, such as switching jobs, if possible.

- Lowering your expectations of what you “should be doing.”

- Not isolating yourself too much. Spending some time with people is healthy in recovery.

- Talking about your ordeal with friends and family.

- Taking advantage of community support.

- Focusing on what you are thankful for in spite of your loss.

- Staying away from unprescribed mood-altering substances, such as alcohol and other drugs.

- Getting plenty of rest when possible and maintain a normal sleep/wake cycle.

- Eating well-balanced meals.



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