

Readiness and Response: Trauma Informed Discussion Cohort for Environmental Professionals in Crisis Management

By Hannah Buehler

In the face of a rapidly changing climate, professionals in floodplain management, fire resilience and ecological restoration are increasingly finding themselves on the front lines of both conservation and community assistance before, during and after environmental emergencies. While natural resource personnel are trained to have an ecological grounding in place, the social and emotional impacts that disasters and emergencies can have on staff, organizations and the human communities are often overlooked. Assisting in rescues, witnessing wildlife losses like fish die-offs, and engaging with community members who have lost their homes or loved ones in an emergency event are emotionally demanding tasks, which, when unrecognized can compound emergency response and recovery workloads leading to burnout, **compassion fatigue** and high turnover rates in an increasingly essential sector.

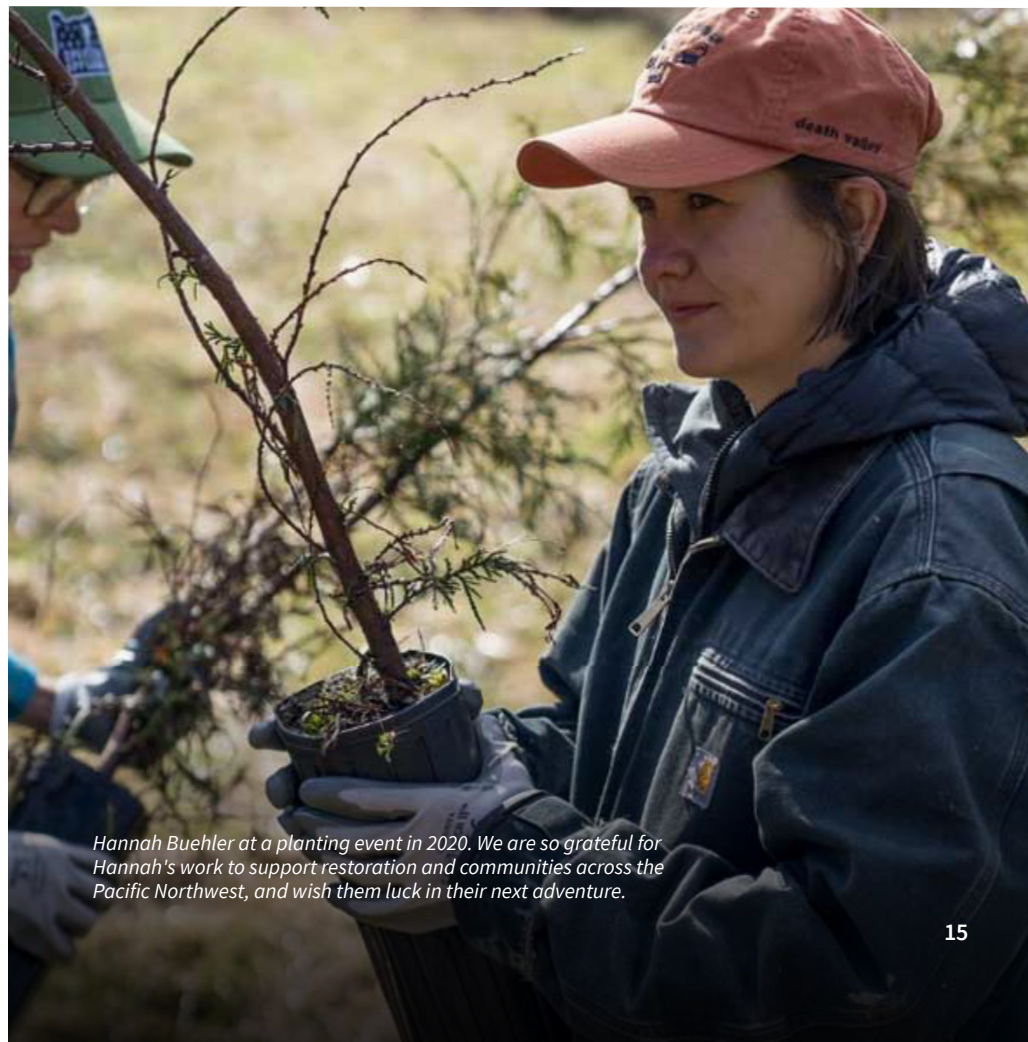
Compassion fatigue is a measurable decline in empathy and sympathy that results from prolonged exposure to the trauma or pain of others.

Building Resilience Through Trauma Informed Care Training

In order to build skills and resilience to support one's self, team, organization and community in the wake of an emergency event, in 2022 the BEF team developed an online **training module** on trauma informed emergency readiness and response. The training

module is specifically tailored to the experiences of floodplain and natural resource professions and their unique relationships to climate-impacted emergency events. This training module is a part of a larger BEF project to create a trauma informed care training curriculum for those who work within the environmental sector through an **online module platform**.

The heavy lifting to create this module was done by Hannah Buehler, who will be departing our team in June 2024. Hannah's efforts drew upon conversations with numerous professionals impacted by flood and fire events in Washington and Oregon. We will miss Hannah and are grateful for their work and for the contributions of many partners.



Hannah Buehler at a planting event in 2020. We are so grateful for Hannah's work to support restoration and communities across the Pacific Northwest, and wish them luck in their next adventure.

Key Components of the Training Module

- The emotional timeline of the recovery process
- Caring for oneself and community during emergency events
- Building adaptive teams and organizations to respond to crises
- Practices to bring your brain back online when undergoing stressful or emotionally challenging circumstances
- Equity and accessibility considerations in planning and response
- Cultivating compassion satisfaction, conviviality, and meaning throughout the recovery timeline

Alongside this online training module, over the past year, BEF staff also hosted three discussion cohorts to foster dialogue between participants as they went through the online course material.

The initial two cohorts consisted of floodplain managers based in Washington who were part of the state-wide Floodplains by Design Network. The third cohort was formed after a presentation to the Oregon Fire Resilience Learning Network and was comprised of fire resilience and recovery workers based in Oregon. These cohorts aimed to build relationships, develop shared language and engender deeper awareness around the impact of trauma following environmental emergencies and its effect on the health of our region's environmental sector.

“I really appreciate hearing others stories as they relate to content. It grounds the discussions for me and helps me draw new insight from others’ lived experiences around the content.”

-Testimonial from Spring cohort participant

Discussion Cohort Highlights Intrapersonal Impact of Trauma

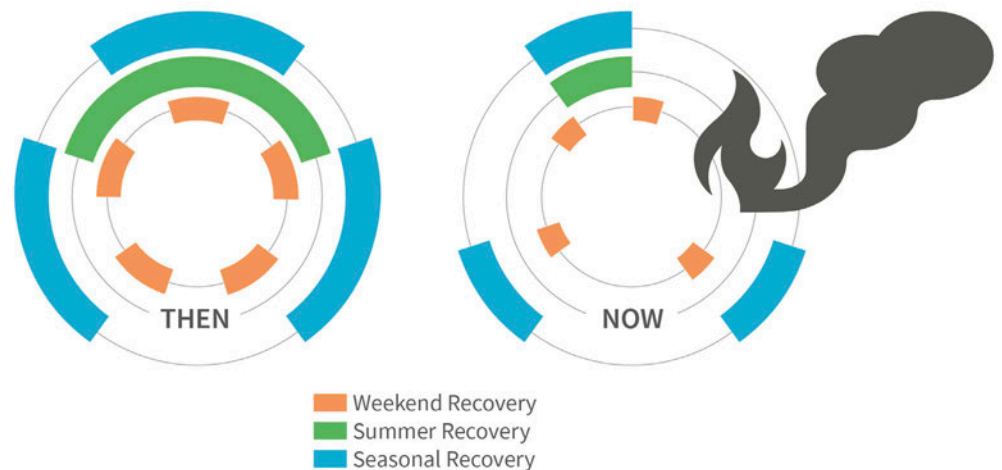
Intrapersonal: occurring within an individual

Following a brief orientation session, our first session looked at the **intrapersonal** level of the impact of trauma. This included discussion of how traditional cycles of rest and recovery have been interrupted and altered by both social and environmental stressors. Over time, work culture in the U.S. has established norms for cycles of rest and recovery, typically observed during weekends, summer holidays, and winter breaks. These periods traditionally offer vacation time or lighter workloads, allowing for mental and physical rest. While this model has its limitations and does not meet the needs of everyone

in our communities, these breaks have provided predictability and transparency on times for prioritizing work and times for prioritizing rest. Now, social and environmental stressors frequently disrupt these rest cycles. For example, the increasingly prolonged wildfire season in the Pacific Northwest now begins earlier in the summer season when many take vacations or enjoy family time while kids are out of school, and extends into the fall. When wildfire and smoke impacts cut into this time off, deep rest is less accessible, leading to persistent toxic stress in the workplace and disrupting our ability to take time off and come back to work refreshed.

In the first session we also looked at how both changing cycles of rest and recovery impact our nervous systems and workplace stress impacts cognitive functioning. We identified symptoms that correspond with various levels of stress so that we can better identify when we or colleagues are moving from a tolerable level of stress into a toxic level. Groups also identified activities we can prioritize at each level of stress ranging from making to-do lists to deep breathing exercises to bring down stress levels and regulate our nervous systems in the workplace. Meetings concluded with action planning to integrate self-care activities into daily routines, emphasizing strategies like time blocking, micro breaks, and accountability partnerships to promote overall well-being and longevity in the workforce.

Recovery Cycles



Interpersonal Relationships

Interpersonal: *involving relationships among people.*

The second of the sessions looked at the **interpersonal**. Pre-emergency supportive interpersonal relationships can play an essential role in preventing stress levels from reaching a level of toxic stress and trauma during and after an emergency event. Developing trauma-informed approaches to communication and relationship building within our teams before emergencies occur can help us and others to keep our frontal lobes online when emergencies do occur. Through parallel process, the culture we develop through day to day interactions within our teams and organizations will ripple out and affect the communities and environments we hope to serve. During emergencies, increased stress can strain these important interpersonal relationships, so the cohorts discussed how caring for ourselves and finding joy and satisfaction in our work are critical to our long term ability to stay engaged in our work. Integrated floodplain management groups and fire collaboratives are often great examples of spaces where participants can develop nurturing relationships that serve them during emergency events.

Things that bring us joy in our work:

- Working towards a vision, not just against things
- Seeing multi year projects completed
- Helping others stay in the good fight
- Striving to build something for future generations
- Moving through barriers you don't think will be solvable
- Giving rivers space and helping farms, salmon and people thrive

Organizational Practices

In the last of the sessions, we turned to the organizational level to examine how trauma informed policy, practice and procedure can help support staff and the community around emergency events. Just like preparing ourselves and our teams can help keep our brains and the brains of our coworkers, partners and community members online and out of states of toxic stress during emergency scenarios, organizations

that are prepared for emergencies provide a sense of support, security and predictability for staff, community and the ecosystems we serve. In this section we also explored the significance of building regional networks and partnerships before emergencies occur, promoting equity in emergency response, and avoiding decision-making pitfalls during crises.

“This group opened my eyes to how all manner of agencies need to be trauma-informed, both for the communities they serve and for the wellbeing of their own staff. I no longer feel like my focus on self-care, trauma-informed practice, and emotional support are out of place in the Emergency Management world.”

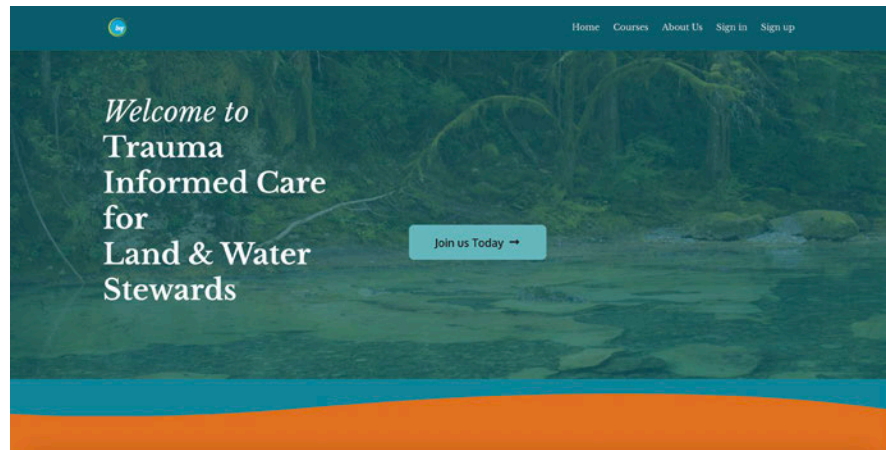
– Testimonial from summer cohort participant

How Do We Respond?



Moving Forward

The work of environmental professionals in floodplain management, fire resilience, and ecological restoration is critical not only for ecological preservation but also for cohesive community support during and after environmental crises. BEF’s trauma-informed emergency readiness and response training, along with the module discussion cohorts, aimed to highlight the emotional and social impacts of environmental emergencies on environmental professionals and build shared language and community around those experiences. Through these discussions and networks, we are working to build a regional network of voices advocating for trauma informed practices, self care, relationship building and intentional organizational policies that can equip environmental workers with the tools to better navigate the challenges posed by a changing climate. This holistic approach ensures that both the ecological and human aspects of environmental crises are managed with compassion and foresight, ultimately leading to more resilient communities and greater longevity of our region’s integrated floodplain and natural resource management workforce.



Welcome to
Trauma Informed Care for Land & Water Stewards

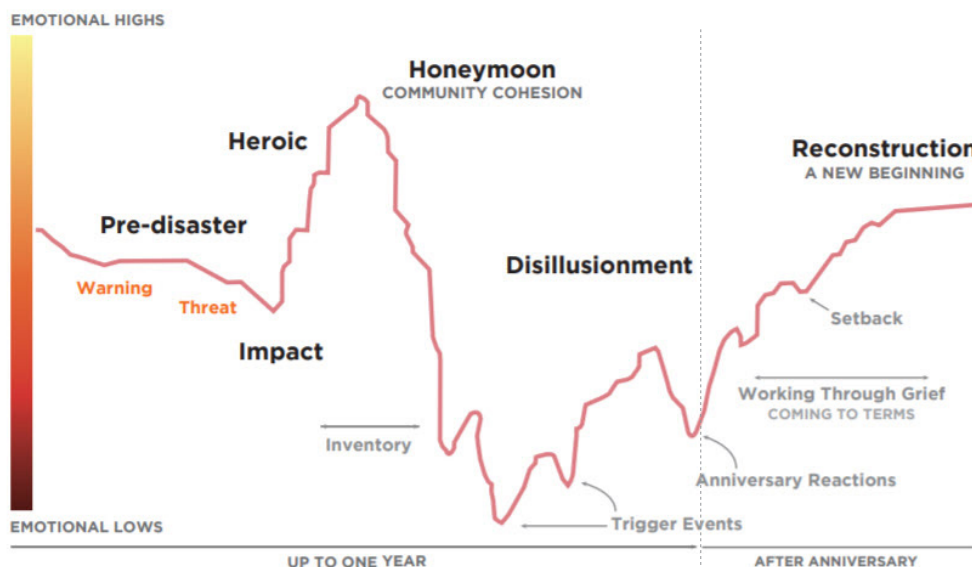
Join us Today →

Access the Online Training

If you would like to access the training module, please follow the instructions below. On this training platform you can also access other trauma informed training modules on topics like [land acknowledgements](#), [the neurobiology of trauma](#) and [workplace wellness](#).

1. Follow [this link](#) to the online training platform. Click the “sign up” button in the top right corner, create a username and password and click “Start my learning journey now”
2. Once logged in, click the “courses” button in the menu bar at the top of the screen to access any of the training modules, including the module “Trauma Informed Emergency Readiness and Response.” Click “enroll” to be taken to the course page
3. On the module page, scroll down past the module description. Click the play icon next to the “introduction” slide to begin.

Phases of Disaster



Source: Zunin/Meyers, as cited in Training Manual for Mental Health and Human Service Workers in Major Disasters, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2000).