



ITRC Calls for Universal Resilience Education and Skills-Training by 2025 to Prepare People for the Traumas and Toxic Stresses of Climate Change

Devastating wildfires displaced hundreds of people along the U.S. west coast in 2018. Faced with the reality of injury or death of loved ones, losing their homes and livelihoods, or seeing their finances depleted, many experience significant psychological traumas that can negatively affect them, their family, and community for years.

Wildfires are just one of the more frequent and extreme disasters and toxic stresses generated by rising global temperatures that can be expected in coming years. More intense wind, rain, and snow storms, floods, heat waves, droughts, coastal storm surges, and other disasters, as well as persistent overwhelming worries and pressures will produce accelerating levels and types of traumatic stresses for people across the U.S. and globally.

Research and experience shows that climate change-generated disasters and toxic stresses can produce significant mental health problems such as severe hopelessness, helplessness, anxiety, depression, PTSD, suicidality, and more. They can also produce serious psycho-social-spiritual maladies including increase drug and alcohol abuse, family neglect and abuse and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), interpersonal aggression, violence, and more that harm children, organizations, communities, and entire societies.¹

In many cases the harmful mental health and psycho-social-spiritual impacts of climate change are likely to be far worse, and last longer than the physical health impacts. Because traumatized and stressed people often retreat into a self-protective survival mode that leaves them uninterested in external issues like greenhouse gas reductions, these conditions also threaten to slow or derail society's capacity to reduce the climate crisis to manageable levels.

Disaster mental health programs, while very important, will not be able to assist all of the people impacted as the frequency and scale of disasters accelerate. Even when disaster assistance programs are effective, they will not help the millions of people that are adversely affected by the accelerating persistent toxic stresses generated by climate change.

The International Transformational Resilience Coalition (ITRC)** believes that widespread preventative is the only viable solution. In specific, psychological and psycho-social-spiritual--or what we call transformational--resilience education and skills-training should be made available to all adults and youth across the U.S. and globally no later than 2025.

Methods of Building Transformational Resilience

Research and experience indicate that building psychological and psycho-social-spiritual resilience involves helping individuals and groups strengthen existing and/or learn new age, culturally, and demographically appropriate "Presencing" --or self-regulation-- skills that enable them to calm their mind, body, and emotions when distressed. It also involves helping everyone learn "Purposing" --or adversity-based growth--skills that enable them to use difficulties as powerful catalysts to learn, grow, and find new sources of meaning, direction, and hope in life.

The combination of these skills can help people to think and act in healthy ways even in unhealthy conditions such as those generated by climate disruption. The skills can also motivate people to use adversities as stimulus to increase their own sense of wellbeing by assisting others or helping to heal the planet. Thus, widespread resilience training will also motivate many people to do their part to reduce the climate crisis to manageable levels.²

Presenting and Purposing resilience skills can be spread throughout the community by organizing teams composed of a diverse group of respected leaders that together support existing adult and youth resilience programs, and help launch new ones in K-12, after school, and higher education, workforce development, social service, civic, faith, and other settings.

The Multiple Benefits of Universal Transformational Resilience Education and Skills-Training

In addition to preventing climate change-related mental health and psycho-social-spiritual disorders, universal transformational resilience education and skills-training will go a long way in preventing adverse mental health consequences from human-caused disasters (e.g., school shootings, community violence) and non-climate related natural disasters (e.g., earthquakes). It will also help people with strains ranging from everyday stress to early childhood and adult toxic stress/trauma. And, it will prevent many diseases and illnesses and thus lower health care costs for individuals and providers. Studies show, for example, that up to 75% of illnesses today are directly due to, or aggravated by, stress.

Further, universal resilience education and skills-training can reduce costs for businesses due to reduced employee productivity and heightened turnover. The World Health Organization, for example, estimated that stress has cost American companies more than \$300 billion each year. Presenting and Purposing skills can greatly reduce these numbers.

The Need to Strengthen Existing Resilience Programs and Launch Many New Ones

In the summer of 2018 the ITRC completed an exploratory research project that assessed the nature and potential to expand human resilience building initiatives in California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, and Alaska to all residents. The results were released in January 2019 in a major report *Preparing People on the West Coast for Climate Change*. It found numerous well-established resilience building programs already underway along the west coast, and more in development. The report concludes with a set of recommendations to ensure that, by 2025, transformational resilience education and skills-training initiatives become universal regionwide. [Click here for a link to the ITRC report and examples of resilience programs underway on the west coast.](#)

Transformational Resilience Education and Skills-Training Should Become Universal Worldwide

In sum, the ITRC believes that, much like everyone in society learns to read and write, transformational resilience education and skills-training should become universal in the U.S. and globally by 2025. Without this, the mental health, physical health, safety, and wellbeing of individuals, families, communities, and entire societies will be seriously impaired. Conversely, giving every adult and youth the opportunity to learn resilience skills will not only prevent serious problems, it will also motivate millions of people to engage in activities that help others as a way to help themselves and which will often include solutions to the climate crisis.³

** The International Transformational Resilience Coalition (ITRC) is a network of almost 400 mental health, trauma treatment, social service, climate and environmental, disaster management, social and climate justice, education, faith, and cultural competence practitioners working to build widespread levels of psychological and psycho-social-spiritual--or transformational--resilience for the traumas and toxic stresses generated by climate change. A 22-member National Steering Committee oversees the ITRC's activities. Steering committees in the Pacific Northwest and in California assist with the ITRC's work in those regions. For more information go to: <http://www.theresourceinnovationgroup.org/intl-tr-coalition>

¹ For research on the psychological and psycho-social-spiritual impacts of climate change see, for example: Obradovich, N., et. al. Empirical evidence of mental health risks posed by climate change. *PNAS*, (2018) 115 (43) 10953-10958; Hayes, K. et. al. Climate change and mental health: risks, impacts and priority actions. *International Journal of Mental Health Systems*. (2018) 12:28 <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13033-018-0210-6>; Fullerton, C. S., et. al. (2013) Posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, and alcohol and tobacco use in public health workers after the 2004 Florida hurricanes. *Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness*, 7 (1), 89–95; Vins, H. et. al. (2015). The mental health outcomes of drought: A systematic review and causal process diagram. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 12 (10), 13251.

² See, for example: Doppelt, B. (2016) *Transformational Resilience: How Building Human Resilience to Climate Disruption Can Safeguard Society and Increase Wellbeing*. Greenleaf Publishing (Routledge/Taylor & Francis), New York.

³ For more information on the need, methods, and benefits of building transformational Resilience for climate change see the research in the ITRC Library found on this page: