

# Fanning The Flames of Old Memories

By Dr. Mary Schoenfeldt, January 10, 2025



Disaster trauma is an interesting phenomenon, it never really goes away. It may get acknowledged or managed at the time and then can lie dormant but like the seeds of many plants, when another fire comes along, it bursts back to life. Some call this being triggered or activated but whatever you call it; it can be difficult to understand and manage.

Take the catastrophic Southern California fires for example. The news media is keeping people in the area informed but also devoting much of the broadcast time to ongoing stories of the destruction for the rest of the world to see. Either on broadcast TV or social media, it is hard to get away from it. The images and stories are intense.

Studies in brain science tell us that one of the ways people process trauma is through the neurological paths in the brain. Our brain “files” experiences and feelings into a file based on patterns that then are accessed again when something similar is seen or experienced. On the positive side, it’s why we can drive to the grocery store and not be consciously aware of how we got to the

parking lot... it was a familiar pattern, and we opened the file, used the information and put it back with hardly noticing we'd done it because we've done it so many times before. And, that file of experience did not contain a lot of emotion.

During and after a disaster, the file that is created is much more complex and overloaded with emotional experiences. There are 132 chemicals that dump into our body in a crisis that are called Survival Chemicals. Those chemicals allow us to do extraordinary things like pick up heavy objects or run faster than we ever thought was possible. All well and good, but the other thing those chemicals do is tell our brain we don't need the higher function Executive Brain, the frontal lobe where we have good judgement and can deliberately process a lot of information at once, but instead, what we need to do is feel intense emotions like fear so we take actions to stay alive. We rely on the midbrain to guide us, and that midbrain is full of intense feelings and emotions and are the center for fear and the fight, flight or flee reactions. Those survival chemicals also activate what is called the reptilian brain and that is the brainstem that controls our heart rate, breathing and blood pressure and a host of other physiological functions.

When we experience a disaster, we often find ourselves experiencing what can be termed as trauma. Trauma is defined as a reaction to a "deeply distressing or disturbing experience that can have a profound physical and emotional impact on a person." The American Psychological Association defines it as "an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or disaster." That definition fits anyone who has experienced a disaster in their own community.

A traumatized person can feel a range of emotions both immediately after the event and in the long term. They may feel overwhelmed, helpless, shocked or

have difficulty processing their experiences. Trauma can also cause physical symptoms. Trauma can have a long-term effect on a person's wellbeing.

Let us go back to the files in our brain. If a person experiences trauma because of their own experience in a wildfire or other type of event, when they hear about or see images of similar disaster, their brain goes to the file that holds the memories.



And remember, that file was not created and filled up by our thinking frontal executive brain, but by our mid brain with all the fear and other emotions that were present when WE were impacted directly. So now, months or years later, we open that file, and we revisit our own trauma and the resulting emotions. The most common reactions are anxiety, substance abuse, chronic stress reactions and PTSD. In other words, an increase in heart rate and blood pressure, anxiety, trouble concentrating, quick to tears or anger, trouble sleeping, depression, and memory lapses... what is it I need at the grocery store anyway! We do that because our body and brain cannot differentiate between today and yesterday, it only knows what is in that particular file that got reopened hearing or seeing about another disaster.

So, what do we do about it? That is the real question. Here are a few ideas, in no particular order:

1. First, acknowledge that you are feeling something.
2. Turn off the TV and put your phone down. Stay away from news and social media so the images and stories do not open your own file.

3. Help someone...research tells us that a healing and coping activity is to do something for someone else. So, get with your friends and neighbors, host a potluck dinner, and do a pass the hat donation collection that will be donated to a credible non-profit working to help those currently impacted by this disaster.
4. Prepare or update your own Go Bag. It is a reminder that you are ready for whatever might come your way.
5. Talk, write, tell your story to others. Research on Post Traumatic Growth tells us that putting feelings into words makes a significant difference.
6. Eat and drink things that are healthy, stay away from sugar, caffeine and alcohol for a while or at least pay attention to them and practice moderation.
7. Seek professional help if you are feeling overwhelmed or helpless. Disaster Distress Helpline is available round the clock. Call or text 1-800-985-5900

Disaster trauma does not go away but it is manageable. And like the plant seeds, it just might give us a chance to germinate something new or different in our lives. That is called Post Traumatic Growth and that is a conversation for another time.

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