



## **Community is Medicine**

# **The Urgent Need and Many Benefits of Using a Public Health Approach in Communities to Prevent and Heal Climate Traumas**

For National Prevention Science Coalition to Improve Lives  
September 6, 2023

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Website: <http://itrcoalition.org>



## Origins of Today's Presentation

- ITRC history and activities since 2013
- Findings of intensive 2+ year international research project
- Three years facilitating a “Community of Practice” (CoP) with people from many nations involved
- The Federal “Community Mental Wellness and Resilience Act of 2023.”
- New Book: *Preventing and Healing Climate Traumas: A Guide to Building Resilience and Hope in Communities* (Routledge Pub)

We must grasp that we are in the midst of a rapidly accelerating

## ***Climate-Ecosystem-Biodiversity “Catastrophe”***

that is ***Already*** and will ***Increasingly*** alter ***Every Aspect of Society!***



Climate catastrophe will create an ***Epidemic*** of ***Mental Health Problems:***

We must ***Think*** and ***Respond Proactively*** through a ***Population-Lens,***

not merely ***treat*** individual symptoms or ***react*** to the next disaster.

## Most Pervasive Impact:

# Cascading Disruptions to Systems People Rely on for Basic Needs that Stress Everyone!

- Water, food, and other resource disruptions and shortages
- Job and income losses
- New illnesses and diseases
- Loss of place, community, culture, and natural environment
- Disruption of close family and friend social support networks
- Involuntary migration and in-migration
- Heat and disaster-triggered crime, aggression, and violence
- Worries about our future and our children's future
- Many other often surprising never-ending “stress pileups”



**Often Activated By or Mixed With  
More Frequent, Extreme and Prolonged Emergencies and Disasters  
That Traumatize Millions**

Disasters can traumatize 20-40% of those who are directly impacted, as well as those who know some who is impacted or even watch it from afar.

**Wind, Rain, and  
Snow Storms**



**Wildfires**



**Heat Waves  
and More Extremes**



**Floods**



**Sea Level Rise and  
Storm Surges**



**Droughts**



And many other surprise emergencies and disasters...

# **Everyone Will Be Impacted: This is a *Population-Level* Problem**

But in Near Term in Different Times, Ways, and Magnitudes Those at Greatest Risk Are

- BIPOC residents
- Low-income residents
- Migrants
- Ethnic minorities
- Single women
- Young children
- People living alone
- The elderly
- Those with insecure housing
- Those living in high-risk zones
- Activists
- Those with pre-existing conditions
- First responders

Climate impacts are aggravating existing inequalities and injustices and adding new ones that create even greater impacts for many of these groups.

But beware that emphasizing the “vulnerable” can allow wealthier people to think their resources make them immune—hence no need to cut emissions.

# Left Unaddressed the Result Will be a Global *Epidemic* of Individual, Community, and Societal Distresses and Traumas

## Psychological, Emotional, and Spiritual “Distress”

An understandable and normal response associated with stressors and demands that are difficult to cope with, or that result from witnessing others in harmful situations, or that result from fantasizing about future impacts.

## “Individual Trauma”

"a blow to the psyche that breaks through one's defenses with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively... As so often happens in catastrophes...(people) withdraw into themselves, feeling numbed, afraid, vulnerable, and very alone." (Kai Erickson)

# Community and Societal Trauma are *Not* Well Understood

## “Community Trauma”

An event or series of events that create ...

"a blow to the basic tissue of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs their prevailing sense of community... (it is) a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared." (Kai Erickson)

Community trauma can also affect people with shared identities, such as religious or spiritual, refugee, and internet-based groups.

## “Societal Trauma”

Goes beyond a specific geographical area or group with a shared identity to affect entire cultures, nations, or all of humanity: e.g. the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Left unaddressed, the climate catastrophe will be

**the greatest societal trauma modern society has ever experienced!**

# “There is No Physical Health Without Mental Health”

Dr. Brock Chisholm, first Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO)

## Co-Morbidity is Very Common

Adverse mental health conditions often aggravate existing or directly produce new physical health problems.

*and*

physical health problems can lead to mental health issues.

But professionals in both fields often fail to recognize this.

# Pervasive Traumas Feed On Themselves and Can Create “Epidemics”

Unaddressed trauma becomes buried in the nervous system and can cause people to

Deny, Dissociate, Blame, Attack Others, Self-Sabotage or Reenact

As seen time and again throughout history the combo can Unravel

**Families, Groups, Communities, and Entire Societies!**



**Continual Activation of the “Emotional Brain” (Limbic System)**

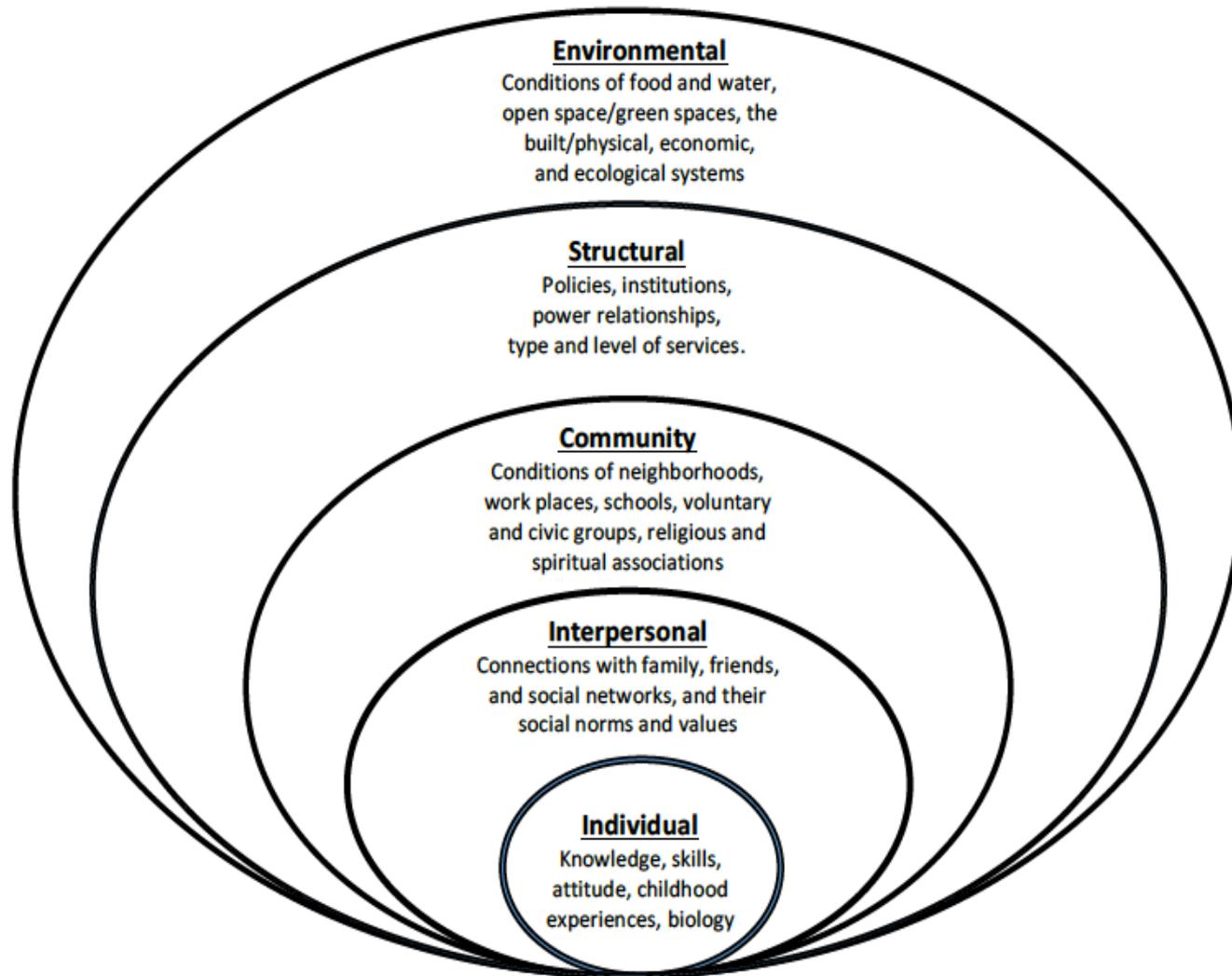
**Caused by Relentless Stresses and Traumas Are Also**

***Blocking Climate Solutions!***



# Climate Traumas—and Most Other Traumas--Result From Interacting Individual, Family, Social, Economic, Physical/Built and Ecological Factors

## The Social-Ecological Model



Mental health and social services will remain very important.

**But They Cannot Address Today's Epidemic of Mental Health Struggles  
and Have No Chance of Preventing or Healing the Scope or Scale  
of Those Speeding Our Way!**



We must get out of our silos and  
think systemically and respond holistically!

If we take this path the climate catastrophe can activate  
Deep-Seated Transformational Changes!

## We Must Build Population-Level Capacity For “Transformational Resilience”

When suffering is caused by previously unseen **external forces** that have **no end point, resolution,** or simple **cure** the priority must be to help people develop the capacity to...

- **buffer themselves** from and **push back against** the stressors and...
- find **constructive** new sources of **meaning, purpose, hope** and **courage.**



# “Transformational Resilience”

Help everyone develop the capacity for:

**Presencing** (or self-regulation) to calm their body, mind, emotions, and behaviors in the midst of adversities...

*and*

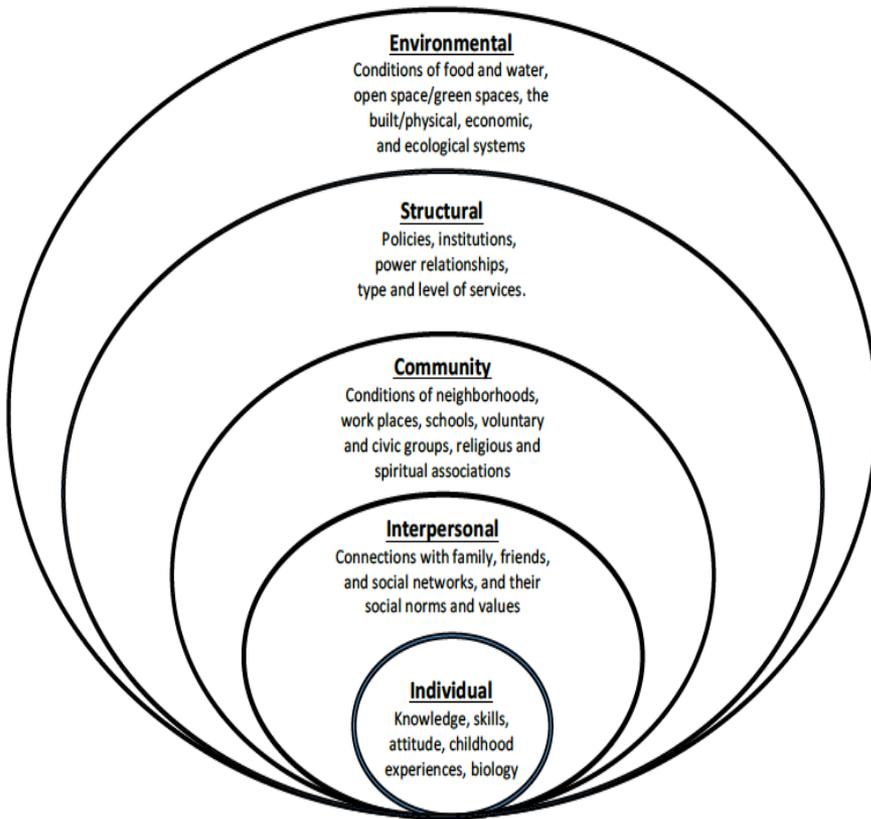
**Purposing** (or adversity-based growth) to find new sources of meaning, purpose, hope, and courage in life.

**The combination can rebuild faith in the future!**



# The Capacity for Transformational Resilience is Also Shaped by Interacting Individual, Family, Social, Economic, Physical/Built and Ecological Factors

## The Social-Ecological Model



Family, friends and neighbors have always been key to prevention & recovery.

This will become even more crystal clear as the climate catastrophe worsens.

## The Noted Pioneer Clinical Psychologist Dr. George Albee Once Said:

“No epidemic has ever been resolved by paying attention to the treatment of the affected individual.”

This key point led our research to determined that addressing these population-level multisystemic traumatic forces requires a

## Public Health Approach

to

## Mental Wellness and Transformational Resilience



# A Public Health Approach to Mental Wellness & Resilience

- Takes a **population-level approach** --- not one that merely focuses on individuals with symptoms of pathology or high-risk groups--though they are included by using “proportionate universalism” and “life-course” approaches:

Our mantra must be **“Leave No One Behind.”**

- Prioritizes **preventing problems before they occur** --- not merely reacting to or treating them after they emerge—and integrates group and community-minded healing methods into the prevention strategies:

We must always remember that **“Prevention is the Cure!”**

- Does so by strengthening **“protective factors”** –social supports, resilience skills, habits, local resources etc. that build and sustain healthy thinking and behaviors -- not just fixing deficits or treating individuals with symptoms of pathology:

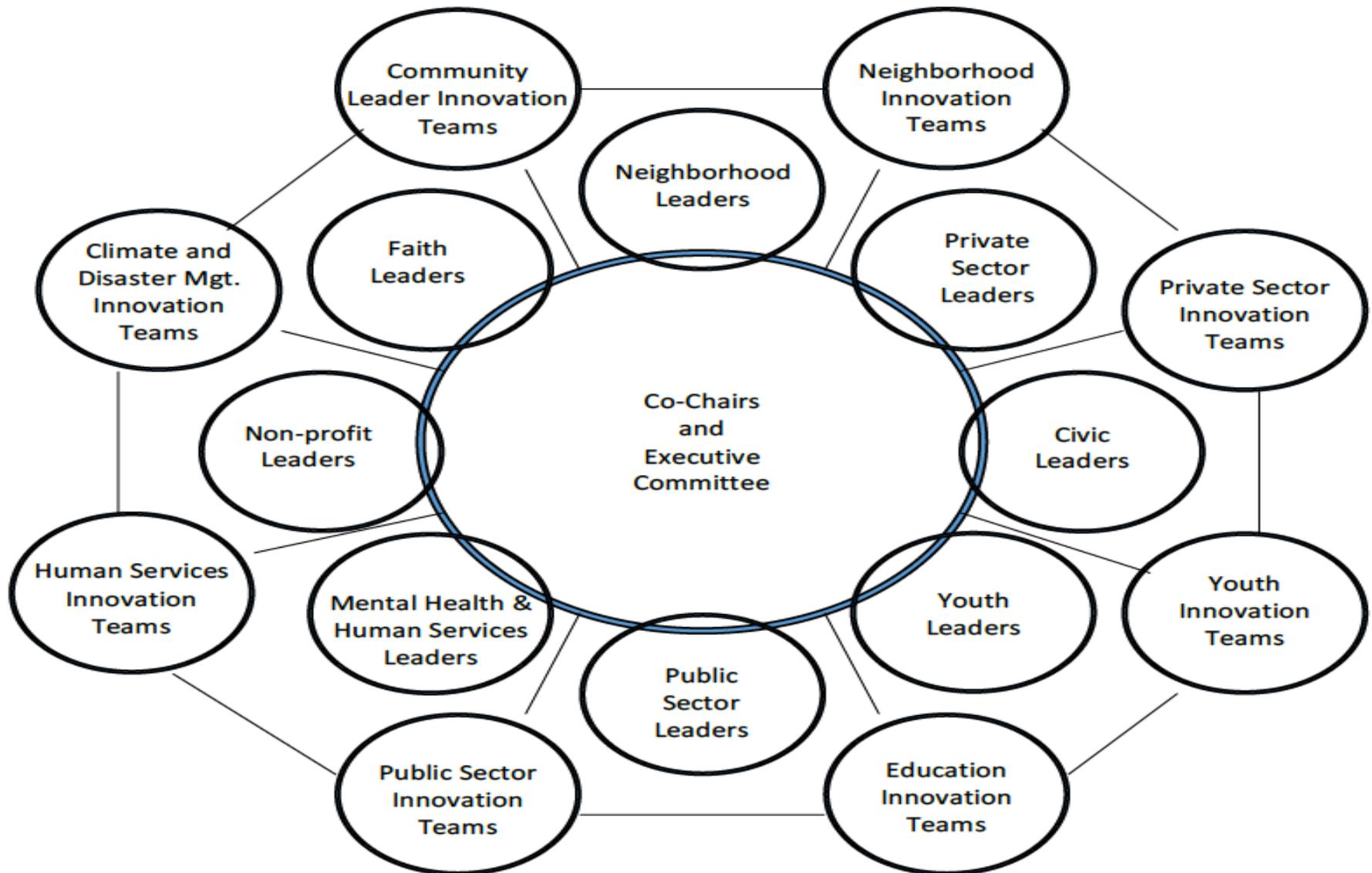
Our emphasis must be on **“Building Strengths and Resources”**

- We know that mental wellness and transformational resilience can be enhanced.
- The most effective way to do so is to:
  - establish the “social infrastructure” in communities—often called a Resilience Coordinating Network (RCN)--
  - that engages a broad and diverse array of local grassroots and neighborhood leaders, civic groups, non-profit, private, and public organizations
  - in jointly planning and implementing multisystemic strategies that strengthen the capacity for mental wellness and resilience among all residents.



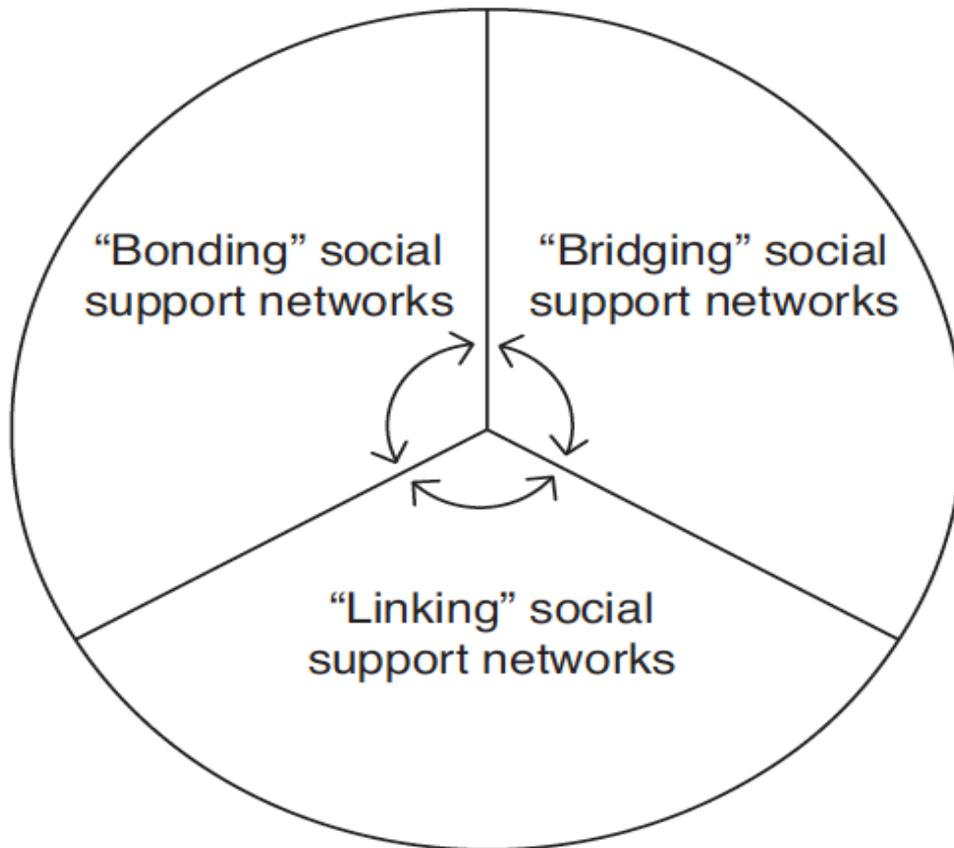
# A Sample "Ideal" Resilience Coordinating Network (RCN):

**'Well-Coordinated Decentralization' using a 'Ring Team' or 'Hub & Spoke' approach**



# Our Research Identified Five Foundational Areas Required to Build Population Capacity for Transformational Resilience for the Climate Catastrophe

## By Far the Most Important: Build Social Connections Across Cultural, Economic, and Geographic Boundaries in the Community



Building social connections is vital to address the widespread toxic isolation and loneliness that is generating profound mental health problems.

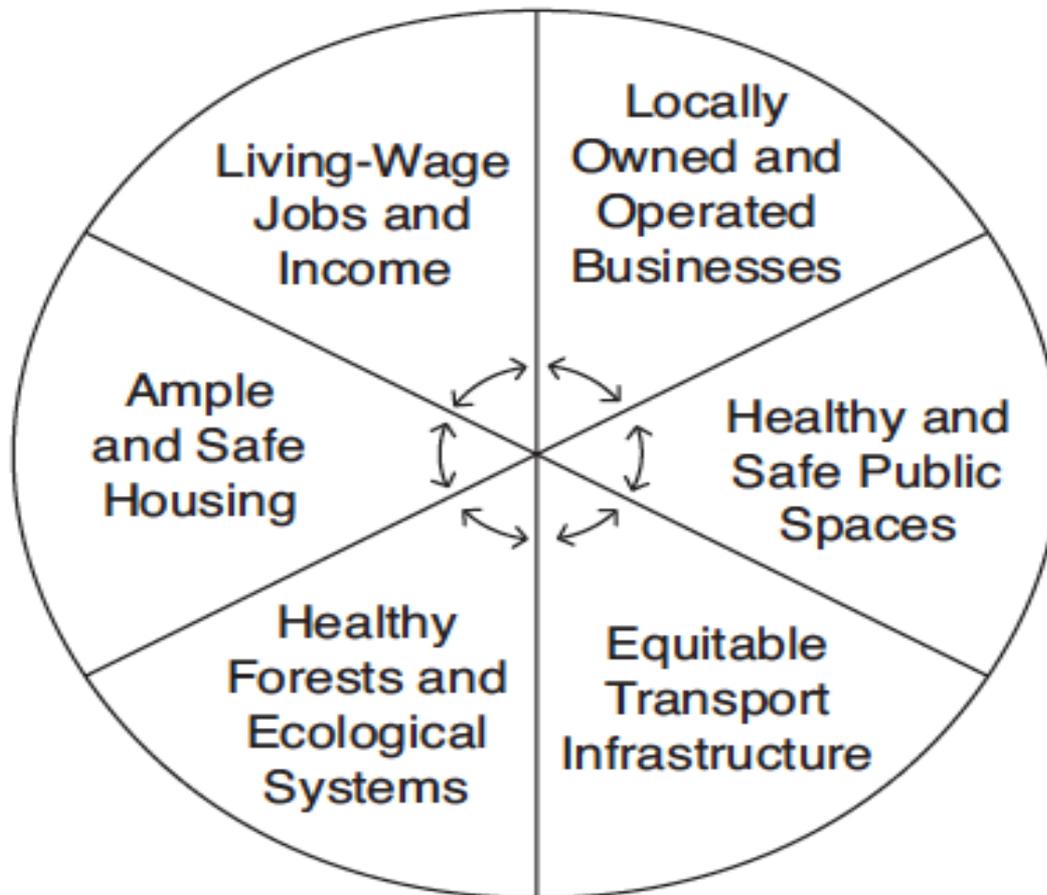
Family, friends, and neighbors are far more important than first responders during most disasters.

Are also key to preventing and healing all types of mental health issues.

And are essential to build the social efficacy and collective purpose needed to address the climate catastrophe.

# The Five Foundational Areas Required to Build Population Capacity for Transformational Resilience for the Climate Catastrophe

## Ensure a “Just Transition” by Engaging Residents in Creating Low-Emissions Climate-Resilient Physical/Built, Economic, and Ecological Conditions



Unhealthy local conditions often create mental health problems.

Seeing progress builds hope and courage which enhances mental wellness & resilience.

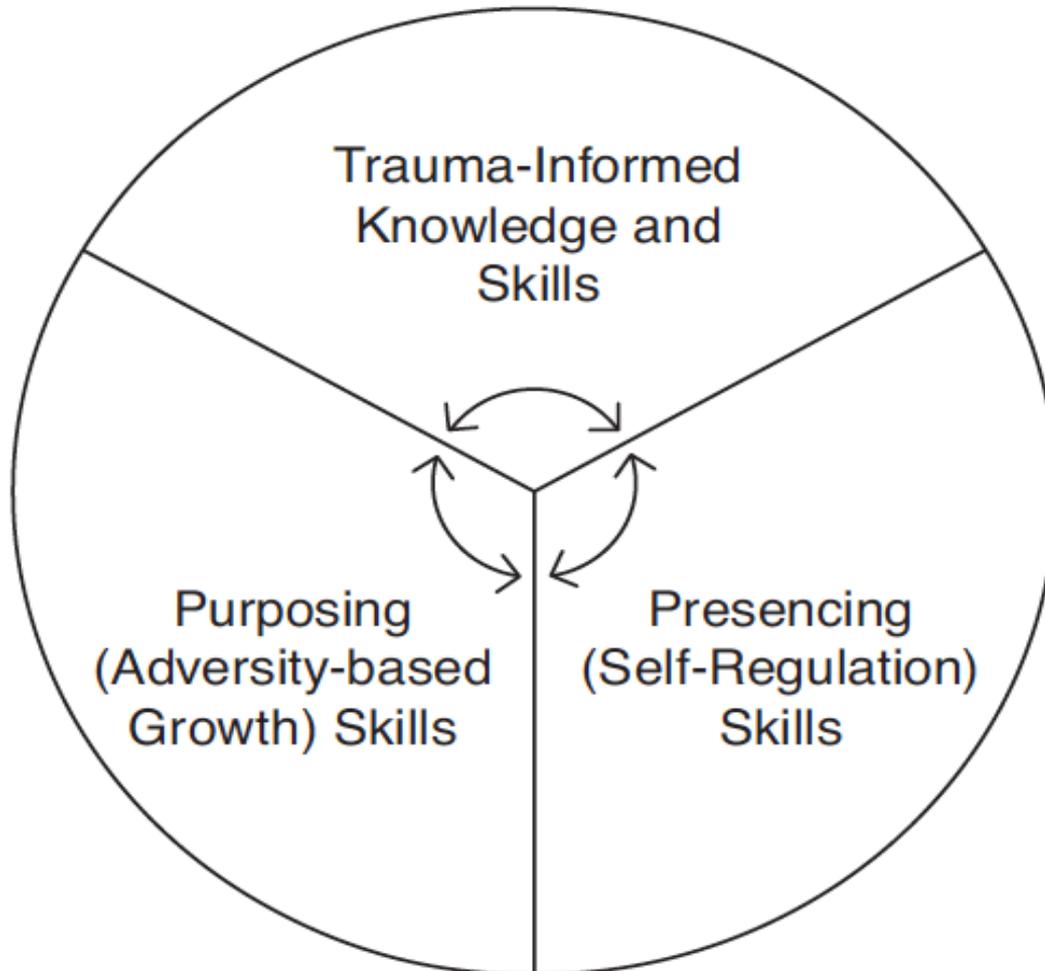
While reducing local GHG emissions and climate impacts.

Increasing physical resilience.

And often creating political pressure for change.

The Five Foundational Areas Required to  
Build Population Capacity for Transformational Resilience for the Climate Catastrophe

Foster Universal “Literacy” About Mental Wellness and Resilience:  
Help Everyone Become “Trauma and Resilience-Informed”



Fostering literacy helps:

Normalize mental health struggles,

Reduces fears of stigmatization,

Reduces stigmatization of others,

And builds the knowledge and skills needed to help people prevent and heal mental health struggles within themselves AND others.

# The Five Foundational Areas Required to Build Population Capacity for Transformational Resilience for the Climate Catastrophe

## Help Residents Regularly Engage in Specific Practices that Enhance Mental Wellness and Transformational Resilience



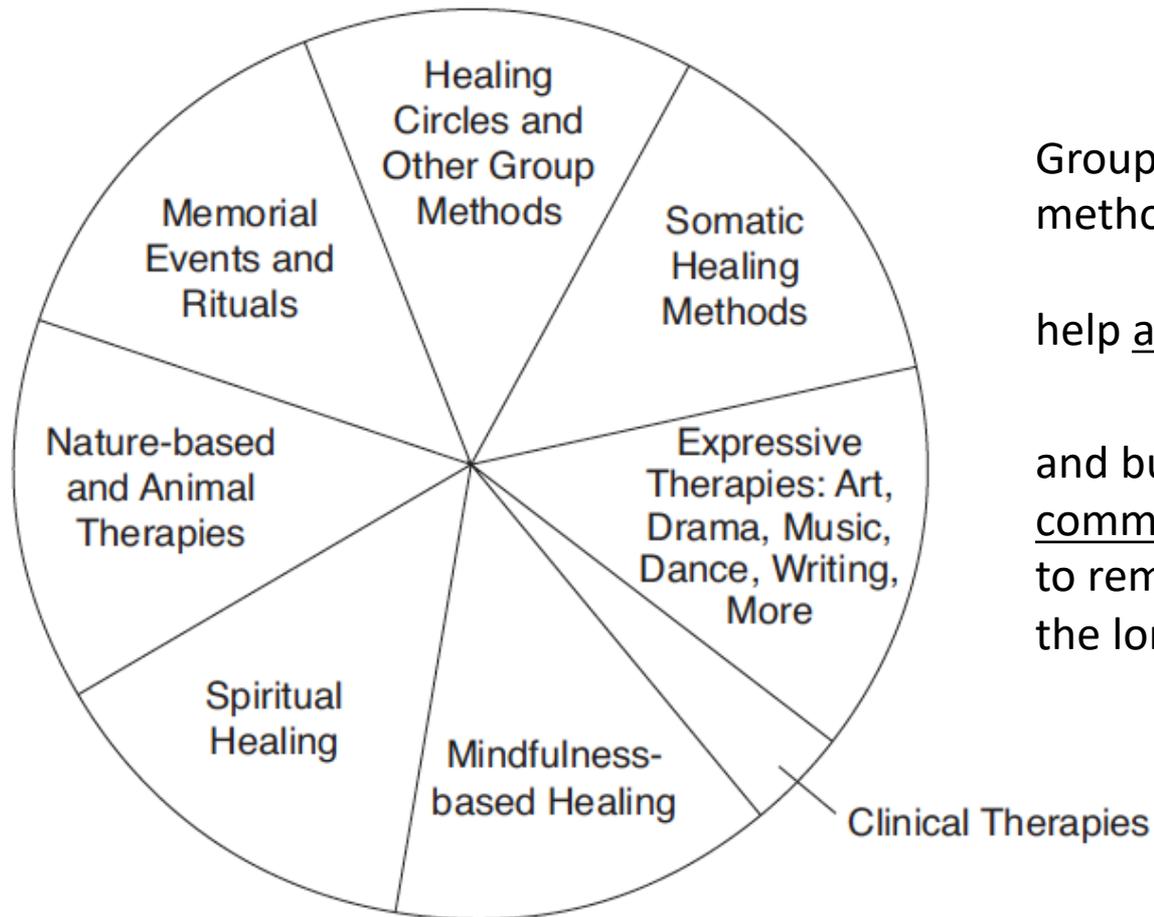
Active engagement releases trauma from the nervous system

Can build social connections,

And build the collective efficacy, purpose and courage needed to address the climate catastrophe.

# The Five Foundational Areas Required to Build Population Capacity for Transformational Resilience for the Climate Catastrophe

## Establish Ongoing Age and Culturally Appropriate Peer-Led Group and Community-Minded Opportunities to Heal Trauma



Group and community-minded healing methods can normalize struggles,

help avoid stigmatization,

and build the social connections and common purpose and courage needed to remain healthy and resilient during the long climate crisis

## A Few Examples of US “Resilience Coordination Networks”

- North Carolina SmartStart Healthy and Resilient Communities Initiative: Has 40 focused on “4 ACEs”: Adverse Child, Community, Climate, and Cultural Experiences.
- Virginia’s Trauma-Informed Community Networks has 32 “building resilience and preventing and mitigating the impacts of trauma in their communities.”
- Peace4Tarpon in Tarpon Springs, Florida
- Community Resilience Initiative, Walla Walla, Washington.
- San Francisco Neighborhood Empowerment Network (the NEN)
- Putnam County Community Resilience Coalition, New York (was youth focused).
- Over 200 associated with MARC: Mobilizing Action for Resilient Communities, (mostly focused on ACEs).

## Many Examples of International Initiatives

*“A Community-Based MHPSS approach puts individuals, communities and social systems at the centre of the intervention, in all phases of the response.”*

Inter-Agency Standing Committee:

*Community-based Approaches to MHPSS Programmes*

- Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Network (<https://MHPSS.net>)

- Only a few of these initiatives describe their work as a public health approach.
- Each is unique
- None address all five of the core foundational areas.
- Only a few are explicitly focused on the climate catastrophe.



But they show how

***Community is Medicine***



If those not focused on the climate catastrophe expand to address it,  
and thousands of new community initiatives are launched,

we **CAN** build universal capacity for transformational resilience!

# Building the “Social Infrastructure” in Communities *Now Everywhere*

is Vital to Prevent & Heal Climate Traumas & Address the Catastrophe!

## Although well-intentioned and helpful:

- Mental health services offered only after symptoms appear
- Programs focused only on single populations in isolation from others
  - Actions by single organizations on their own

Cannot build the population mental wellness and transformational resilience urgently needed for the decades-long climate catastrophe



## **With This Information In Hand**

For the past 3 years the ITRC has been facilitating a Community of Practice (CoP) on Resilience Coordinating Networks

People from throughout North America, many EU nations, Africa, and Asia have been involved

Two new CoPs will begin in 2024:

If interested contact us at: [tr@trig-cli.org](mailto:tr@trig-cli.org)



**In 2024 with CTIPP and other orgs. the ITRC will also launch a  
“Commissioning” program  
to help neighborhoods and communities form and operate  
Resilience Coordinating Networks!**

## We Also Realized New Policies are Needed to Fund and Support RCNs

The ITRC worked to introduce the landmark bi-partisan HR 3073 the

### *Community Mental Wellness and Resilience Act of 2023*

in the US House by original co-sponsors Representatives  
Paul Tonko (D-NY) and Brian Fitzpatrick (R-PA)  
and 9 other co-sponsors

and in the US Senate by Sen. Ed Markey (D-MA) and 3 co-sponsors.

The “CMWRA of 2023” is endorsed by a growing list of

**150 national, state, and local US organizations!**

# You are invited to the Sept. 21 virtual Congressional Briefing on the landmark bi-partisan

## Community Mental Wellness and Resilience Act of 2023

Co-Sponsored By:

the Congressional Social Work Caucus



**To register go to the ITRC website:**

<https://itrcoalition.org/current-events-and-news/>

**Similar Policies are Needed in at the**  
**Territorial, State, County, and Community Levels**  
**and in Other Nations!**

# Research Should Focus on *Strengths*, Not Deficits

## Key Question to Ask Yourself:

**What fosters and sustains wellness and resilience during adversities?**

- Building population mental wellness and resilience in communities involves actively engaging residents in **strengthening** existing “**Protective Factors**” and forming **additional ones** -- ***not*** trying to eliminate risk factors, fix deficits, or treat symptoms
- “Deficit-based” and “damage-centric” research should **be avoided**.
- Instead, a **Strength-Based Approach** (asset-based) should be used to assist RCNs to assesses current resources and potential new ones, engagement methods, and other supportive aspects of the community.

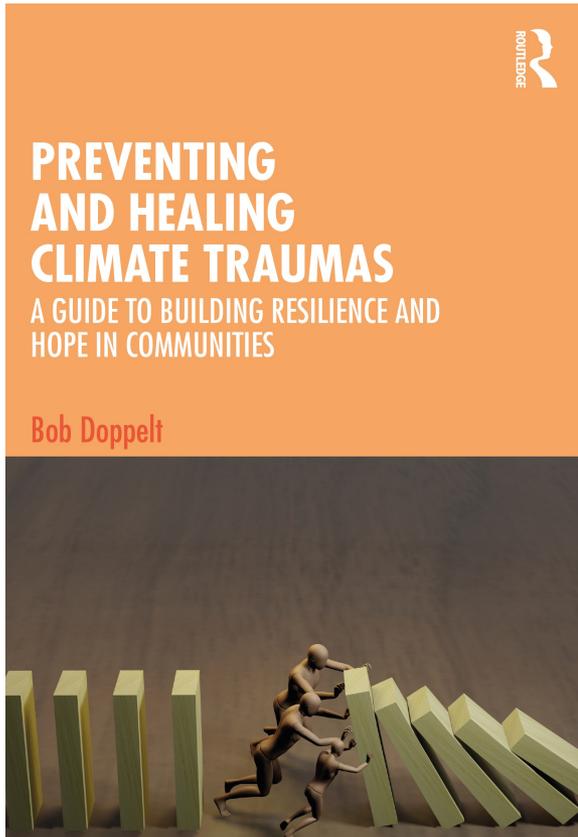
# Effective Research Requires a “With--not--For” Approach

- **Action Research** is most helpful to assist Resilience Coordinating Networks to learn and improve their programs.
- This type of research must always fully **integrate the community into the research goals and methods.**
- This means it must always be **done in partnership** with **all** the partners involved so the process involves **co-creation of goals & methods** and **buy-in of outcomes.**
- This requires demonstrating **meaningful commitment** and **reciprocal collaboration**—which is very different from the historically extractive research process (jumping in, getting what you need for your project, then jumping out).
- This means **consistently showing up** and developing **relationships** with members of the RCNs, not just short-term connections with the leaders or funders.

# To Avoid Harm, Build *Local Capacity* for Research

- Researchers in the past have often inflicted harm on marginalized groups, which makes them hesitant to engage.
- Overcoming these very rightful concerns requires establishing trust—one part of which means researchers should not gather data from communities they are not part of or welcome in.
- One way to address this is for researchers to think of themselves as teachers and facilitators and assist community members to conduct and lead the research.
- This eliminates power imbalances, reframes who is a researcher, gives residents agency over outcomes, and shows them they can do similar work in future.

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**Some Testimonials**

“The health of our planet is inherently connected to our well-being....Bob Doppelt’s new book offers an essential blueprint towards building a healthier future in the places where we live.”

**Antonis Kousoulis**, *director for England and Wales, Mental Health Foundation, UK*

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“This important new book from Bob Doppelt helps us mitigate the often invisible outcomes of global warming, including anxiety, depression, PTSD, and trauma... it can help us build the capacity to manage mental wellness, recover from current and forthcoming shocks, and ensure equitable outcomes.”

**Daniel P. Aldrich**, *director of the Security and Resilience Studies Program at Northeastern University, and author of Building Resilience and Black Wave*

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“Ultimately, the responsibility for preventing and healing climate trauma falls to family, friends, and neighbours, the three supportive social units of our lives...This new book by Bob Doppelt will serve us well.”

**Howard Lawrence**, *Abundant Community Edmonton coordinator, City of Edmonton, Canada*



# Transformational Changes are Required for the Climate Catastrophe

and RCNs show how

## Communities Are Medicine

by building the needed social connections, mutual supports, collective efficacy, and common purpose!

For more information contact the ITRC

Email: [tr@trig-cli.org](mailto:tr@trig-cli.org)

Website: <http://itrcoalition.org>