

Mental Health & Resilience After the Marshall Fire

Sunday, March 6, 2022 4pm MT -- Online

www.mentalhealthwildernessfirstaid.ca/co-strong.html

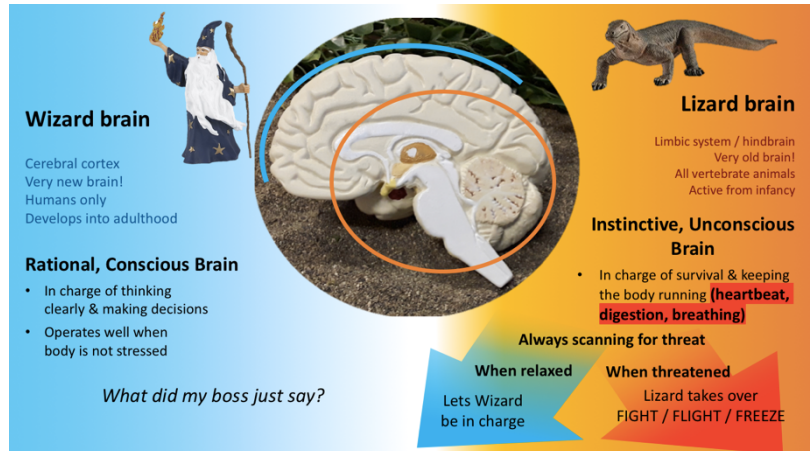
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How does our brain work in times of stress and trauma?

- Our brains are our good friends, and they are always doing the best they can to help us through difficult situations.
- Wizard brain makes rational decisions, and lizard brain makes instinctive decisions for survival – for example putting us in to “fight / flight / freeze” mode.
- Lizard brain is subconscious, so its decisions don’t always seem to “make sense,” in retrospect. But it wasn’t really “us” that decided -- Lizard brain decided. Can we bring some gentleness & understanding to how we have made choices under stress?



Trauma response may be thought of as a “**sticky fight/flight/freeze**” response, that lasts beyond the actual event.

Possible symptoms of “sticky fight / flight / freeze”

- Trouble concentrating / remembering
- Eating or sleeping changes
- Intrusive thoughts, flashback memories, nightmares
- Sensitive to certain sounds, smells, colours, etc.
- Jumpiness
- Numbness
- Anxiety, panic attacks, guilt or shame
- Uncontrollable crying spells
- Irritable, angry

- Avoidance (of places, reminders, people, thoughts, activities, etc.)
- Everyone experiences trauma individually.
- It is not always predictable, and it is not a competition.
- “Everything else is still happening” – traumas can pile up!

When will I feel better?

Healing after a trauma can take longer than anybody wants it to. There is a story about an old woman and a pot ...

Once upon a time, there was a woman whose heart was heavy. She went to seek out the counsel of a wise woman who lived in a cabin in the woods, looking for a remedy that could help ease her pain. The wise woman listened to her story and instructed her in how to brew a remedy for her heart. So she wearily went out in to the woods and gardens around the cabin and sought out each plant and herb, and prepared them carefully over the next few days, drying some and soaking others, and combining each in certain amounts and at the right time. When she was ready, she returned to the wise woman with everything she had gathered in a large pot. Together they warmed the pot on the stove until it was bubbling.

“Now what?” asked the woman with the heavy heart.

“Now you stir the pot,” answered the wise woman.

So the other took up a large wooden spoon and started to stir the pot. “When will it be ready?” she asked, eager to taste the remedy.

“You must stir the pot for a year and a day,” said the wise woman.

“A year and a day!” cried the woman, despairing. “Haven’t I done all that the recipe required? Haven’t I collected all the right plants, prepared them carefully in the correct amounts and brought them here? Surely there is something I can do to hasten this remedy. Could I stir faster?”

“You are doing everything properly, dear one,” said the wise woman. “Now, you must simply stir the pot for a year and a day. There is no way to hurry the remedy.”

Activities to promote healing and resilience.

- Understand and normalize my natural brain and body response. Trouble concentrating, other trauma symptoms, shaking, etc.
- Allow yourself to not get everything done in the way that you used to.
- **Rhythmic, repetitive, relational** activities help naturally heal the part of the brain that is affected by trauma. Walking, skiing, skateboarding, swimming, paddleboarding, biking etc. You can also try recitation, math, prayer, music, playing catch, or tapping.
- **Tapping:** a powerful way to help regulate the nervous system energy in our body. Try gently tapping your collarbone, sternum, or the side of your eye while breathing deeply. Or, “pat” your body all over and help “brush off” your nervous system energy.
- **Social connection:** “Connection is the correction”! Try journaling, checking in with others, joining any kind of group.

How can we support children who have been affected?

- Children can be affected by traumatic experiences, even if they're too young to "remember".
- In addition to other trauma symptoms, children may experience **trouble concentrating at school**, anxiety, clinginess, aggression, nightmares, or **regressive behaviour** (e.g. return to bedwetting). **Trauma in children is sometimes missed** as it can look like ADHD, learning disorders, deliberate defiance, or other mental health issues.
- Grownups can help children process their experiences and access their inner resilience.
 - Set an example: "It's okay not to be okay", we can talk about our feelings.
 - Teach them about their lizard & wizard brain!
 - Support **play**: the natural healing language of children. Encourage "**relational, rhythmic, repetitive**" activities, especially.
 - Help them **look for the helpers**.

Play is the language of children.

- Children process, understand, & heal through repetitive play. Your child's play may contain themes of:
 - Danger, despair, hiding, or running
 - Being rescued or rescuing
 - Superheroes and supervillains
 - Death and/or resurrection
 - "Regressive play", e.g. earlier developmental stages, "playing baby,"
 - Wanting to be rocked, cuddled, soothed
- As long as they are not really hurting anyone, **play**, even play with serious themes, can be healing for children.
- Some counsellors specialize in "play therapy", for working with children who have experienced trauma.
- Encourage children to play! Play with them, allow them to explore themes. Try **relational, rhythmic, repetitive** activities together.
 - Playdates, get outside, change location
 - Rocking, patting
 - Singing, drumming, music, dancing
 - Walking, paddling, bicycling
 - Tapping
 - Playing catch or ball ... or tossing your socks.

"Look for the helpers"

- Help children be involved & remember small ways they were/are empowered to do something – anything.
- Two things can be true at the same time: This was terrible and scary, AND we can look for helpers and be helpers as best we can.

Resources

Colorado Wildfire Mental Health Support

<https://www.mhpcolorado.org/cowildfiresupport/>

Mental Health Partners is offering counseling services, crisis support, and resource navigation in the aftermath of the Boulder County Marshall Fire. To access support, Call MHP Cares (Marshall Fire Response) line at **(303) 413-6282**

Survivor to Survivor Forum

Tuesday, March 15, 2022 7:00 p.m. PT

<https://uphelp.org/events/survivor-to-survivor-forum-19/>

Boulder County Crisis Counseling – open, offered via Jewish Family Service

<https://www.jewishfamilyservice.org/bcc>

Provider information available at:

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1YzwAQsqkzM-tDMa39uKM1AHOEW_D9au7HT1II-flrjc/edit#gid=0

Counseling services are available to Boulder county residents until December 31, 2022, or until all funding allocated for this purpose is expended, whichever comes first.

For more information about this program, call 720.248.4686.

Let's Talk Colorado

<https://letstalkco.org/>

Boulder County – information on longer term recovery and resources

<https://www.bouldercounty.org/disasters/wildfires/marshall/>

Recommended books:

For children:

A Terrible Thing Happened, by Margaret Holmes

Please Explain Anxiety to Me!: Simple biology and solutions for children and parents, by Laurie Zelinger, Ph.D. and Jordan Zelinger, M.S. Ed.

For youth:

The PTSD Workbook for Teens, by Libbi Palmer, PSYD

For grownups:

Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers, by Robert M. Sapolsky