



ASHES TO RESILIENCE: A GUIDE TO WILDFIRE RECOVERY

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NewStories is a nonprofit organization based in Spokane which has done extensive work in communities devastated by wildfires and other climate disasters. Our “home region” is the western United States, where each year the fires are more extensive and start earlier in the calendar year with greater frequency in more locations. All indications are that these trends will continue. We’ve worked in many communities after wildfires now, helping people connect, grieve, dream, and take action. Our most extensive work was five years ago in Paradise, California, where we spent almost a year working in the community and eventually helping to start Regenerating Paradise.

The Camp Fire destroyed Paradise, a town of 27,000, and surrounding communities on November 8, 2018. In less than a day, most of the people of Paradise lost their homes and neighborhoods. Some lost their lives. Many lost their jobs and they all lost the old frameworks and structures of their lives. Everyone was completely overwhelmed.



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There's no easy way forward. Things are a mess now and they will be for some time. AND there are places to begin.

Regenerating Paradise and NewStories offer the ideas here, thinking they may be helpful to our friends around the world. We know your context is different than ours. We know the indigenous wisdom you have will offer great guidance.

Perhaps what is here will help as well.



Source: Regenerating Paradise

We want to acknowledge that this list, itself, can contribute to the overwhelm. *Please don't let it.* Glance at it now, take in what you can. Sometime soon, find a friend and talk these ideas over together. Maybe you can use this list to gather a small group from your old neighborhood or church or some other set of companions.

You are not alone! Reach out and connect with those around you. You must navigate this time together.



01 Help everyone be safe.

Get people sheltered and watered and fed. Forget old rivalries. There's more than enough work to be done. Everyone does what they can to care for all.

02 House people.

Use every ounce of creativity and political pressure you can muster to get people into temporary housing. Get on this immediately and think outside the box. Hardly anything is more important. And then turn your attention, immediately, to permanent replacement housing. This is an opportunity to get more creative. Housing everywhere is now unaffordable for many. We need to rethink all this, and the recovery from a disaster is the time to do it. Stabilize your own housing situation as quickly as possible. Housing is limited — do your best to find something!

03 Get money.

Money's needed. Money's available. Start it flowing.

- Anyone with insurance should contact their insurer immediately. Initiate a claim to access loss-of-use funds to navigate the next few weeks.
- Whether insured or not, get busy finding government agencies, community foundations, and/or nonprofits that offer immediate services.

Help each other set up Go Fund Me campaigns for emergency help. Make the goal high (\$50K) because you don't know how much you're going to need. Post it on Facebook and other social media. Let others support you because they really, really want to.

04 Recovering from a disaster is a marathon, not a sprint.

Slow down, be patient, pace yourself. This is going to take longer than you think.

05 Grieve and continually open space for grief.

“Grief is love’s older and wiser sibling,” says Stephen Jenkinson. “Loving and grief are joined at the hip.” You need to grieve what you love and have lost. Grieving will allow space to open to what is next. Disaster calls on us to simultaneously be the undertakers who help let go of what is gone and the midwives to help give birth to what will be.



Source: Regenerating Paradise

06 Get connected

Make a list of your primary circle of support — family, friends, organizations you’re familiar with. Connect and network immediately. Find a way to gather, to hug, to share your story, to eat together, to share resources and help each other figure out next steps.

07 Get sleep.

The sprint was when the fire was blazing. Now you need to be as resourceful as you can and that requires getting as much sleep as you need. Don't short your body's need for rest.

08 Get organized.

Make lists of your to-do's and work the lists. Don't carry the list in your head. Don't make lists in bed — do it before sleep or after you wake.

09 Get centered.

PTSD has either kicked in or will soon. Technically, your sympathetic response is on full blast and needs to be tempered by your parasympathetic. In other words, your left brain is working overtime and needs to be interrupted in order to hear the helpful, resourceful right brain. That's the key to your resilience. Try these techniques to stay functional:

- **Take a Break and Breathe:** Frequent, brief breaks from the overstimulation of news and reactivity for quiet, safe focus on breath and releasing physical tension will go a long way toward keeping you well. If comfortable, breathe only through your nose, which will stimulate the nerves connected to the amygdala, that part of the brain responsible for your fight or flight response. Breathing through your nose tells the amygdala that you're safe. Breathe slowly in, hold, slowly out, hold. Focus on the sensation of breathing, the sensation of the breath at the back of your nose. Greet pressing, urgent thoughts with the words, "All will be well. I will be well. All will be well." 5 minutes on the hour would do wonders, or 10 minutes every couple of hours. Twenty minutes twice a day will make you into a guru of self-care.



Get centered.

- **Interrupt Your Left with Your Right:** Engage your body to interrupt the lopsided, left-brain emergency reaction with persistent right-brain stimulation through physical sensation. Your left brain governs your right body and right brain governs your left.
 - Squeeze your left hand for two counts, then your right, going back and forth for a few minutes or as long as you wish.
 - Curl your feet one at a time — left, right, left, right...
 - In a conversation? Fold your arms over your chest and tap your sides — left, right, left, right...
 - Can't sleep? Squeeze or flex muscles back and forth while breathing through your nose, focusing on the sensation of breath at the back of the nose, and interrupt the brain chatter with “All will be well. I am well. All will be well.” If a thought comes up with urgency, tell it to let you sleep now and promise you'll get to it in the morning.
- **Remember Joy with Something Small and Rough:** Find a textured, natural object you can keep in your pocket, such as a small stone or chunk of wood. Now, hold it in your hand and recall a moment in which you experienced real joy. Where was it? What were the colors, the contours, the sounds, the temperature, the sensations? Remember how you felt. Put that memory into your object while slowly rubbing its rough surface. This is the physical memory of living that is essential to you, a place of safety and good that you can call up anytime you put your hand in your pocket.



10

Get steady, get in shape.

Just a couple of standing commitments—a weekly meeting or religious service, a gathering, a structure to your daily and weekly activity—will help you quickly find your way to a new normal. Exercise is essential—enough movement to deal with the stresses your psyche and body have endured. Make a habit of a daily walk, yoga, biking, whatever.

11

Moderate

Some compensate for immense stress by over-self-medicating. If this is you, be gentle with yourself. Try to develop the habit, like your left-right-left-right practice, of making another choice every other time you get the urge. It might prevent unnecessary harm to your body.

12

Tell your story.

When you go through trauma, you hold it in your body; your muscles retain a memory of the stress and grief. Experts in trauma say you need to externalize the trauma by telling what happened to you. So, tell your story as many times as you need to, and encourage others in your community to tell theirs at appropriate times, when there is time to listen fully and help process.

13

Everything changes.

There is no going back. Consider the opportunity here, the call to “grow into” the hard work of building the lives and communities we really want. A disaster can be an opportunity to come into relationship with each other and the land in a new, deeper way.

14 People respond differently.

Some are able to show up and do whatever they can. Others are overwhelmed by grief, uncertain and confused. Some say “no more” and leave. Still others come to help and may find a new home. Welcome it all. Meet people where they are at with respect.

15 Those who want to help sometimes don't.

Everyone's going to have ideas about what you should do and how you should do it. The expertise from state and federal agencies and external nonprofits is always well intended and is frequently blind to local conditions. It's OK to politely say, “No thank you.”

16 Own your own community recovery.

Your community, itself, needs to be in charge of its own recovery. This means dealing with issues of power and control both outside and inside the community. There's a lot of work to be done to recover and then to build for the future. Too frequently, jobs go to people from “away.” Those jobs need to go first to those who lost theirs. They'll need training and support. It will be slower than bringing in someone from the outside. But no matter how fast you try to do things immediately, this is going to take a long, long time. Do everything you can to keep jobs and money in your local economy. You'll meet internal and external resistance. That's okay—do it anyway.

17 Listen

Create time and spaces to really, really listen to each other. Get beneath the surface. Create space for each other's ideas.

18 Collaboration Is key.

After a disaster, everything seems diminished, everyone is depleted. Going it alone, whether as an individual or an organization, is a recipe for burnout. Collaborative projects rebuild a sense of community and do what the permaculturists call “stacking functions”: accomplishing several objectives with the same pool of energy and resources.



Source: Regenerating Paradise

19 Build back better.

There will be a strong pull from some quarters to return to the status quo, to make it just like it was before. Understandable though that is, the status quo resulted in where you are now. Instead, see this as an opportunity to rethink and redesign systems holistically, to use new approaches, new materials, new and improved ways of being and living. Advocate for building sustainably, fostering an equitable and inclusive community, a disaster-resilient town. Recovery from disaster can be an opportunity to do things better, whatever that means for your community and natural environment. Take it.

Reach out.



Reach out to NewStories and Regenerating Paradise at wildfires@newstories.org. We can help by sharing our stories, listening to yours, and helping you design and facilitate community gatherings to grieve, to dream and to act from a community base and perspective.

For a bit of inspiration, check out this [Message from the Future of Paradise](#). And for more help, conversation, compassion and a listening ear, reach out to us at NewStories

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