

FEATURE

Trauma, Care, and Solidarity: Addressing the Emotional Toll of Chronic Drought

Faith Kearns



Some effects of drought—like this parched California hillside—are easy enough to spot. But not all the effects of chronic drought are visible to the naked eye. By uprooting communities, disrupting life and livelihood, and shaking up our sense of self and safety, drought and other natural disasters can be a source of profound emotional trauma. Source: Faith Kearns

RESIDENTS OF WESTERN STATES ARE NO STRANGERS to drought. Arizona, for example, has been in some form of drought for close to [30 years](#). California faced severe drought between 2012 and 2016, and it finds itself in yet another dry span. Now, the roughly 40 million people living in the Colorado River Basin—spanning from Wyoming through to Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, Nevada, Arizona, and California—are in a state of interconnected limbo as chronic drought, climate change, and over-allocation are forcing long-needed and painful decisions about their water future.

Against this backdrop, many other societal challenges remain: economic uncertainty, social unrest, and the COVID-19 pandemic, just to name a few. These multi-layered and compounding stressors affect every person in the region and beyond, not to mention water professionals themselves who are both living through

and attempting to help better address ongoing disasters.

There is [increasing evidence](#) from around the world that water insecurity can lead to a variety of mental health challenges including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety. Taking these challenges seriously means working in new ways focused on understanding trauma, as well as offering care and solidarity.

Feelings About Water

There is a persistent myth that people don't care about water issues enough, or that they are even apathetic. Experience and evidence show otherwise. In fact, people's strong feelings about water dictate everything from how they think about their yards to what they drink.

For example, according to Canadian water scholar [Sarah Wolfe](#), "Human emotions are complicated, so

talking about them is never easy. But given the many and multiplying stresses on our drinking-water systems, it's time to stop ignoring how powerful and universal emotions such as disgust both help and hinder our water decisions." She argues that people's feelings of disgust related to drinking recycled water—a potential solution to water scarcity—are something to take seriously, not something to fend off with a focus on rationality and more information. Many people might prefer facts over feelings, but the feelings are there, nonetheless.

Disgust is far from the only feeling related to water issues, of course. In fact, there is a host of powerful emotions stemming from water-related disasters. From drought to floods to debris flows, residents of the western U.S. are on the frontlines of a plethora of scary and traumatic events. So, while mental health and disasters like drought have not often been linked, it is becoming increasingly clear that water insecurity is a source of stress for many people. Water professionals must take steps to address this challenge.

Trauma-Aware Approaches to Drought

"Just understanding that there is a psychological impact from disasters is valuable," says [Maryam Kia-Keating](#), an associate professor of clinical psychology at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her work focuses on coping and resilience in the context of adverse childhood experiences, trauma, and stress, particularly for vulnerable and understudied populations and in the wake of disasters.

Kia-Keating says research shows traumatic events like disasters can shake loose people's sense of basic safety. She has advice for professionals working with people in disaster situations, noting "it can be easy to overlook psychological effects of disasters, especially in the early stages, when basic needs obviously take precedence." However, [she warns](#), "neglecting psychosocial well-being is shortsighted. There is a lot of empirical evidence demonstrating its impact on health and resilience, both initially and over the long term."

However, it is also important to acknowledge that trauma and the way it is experienced is not monolithic and, therefore, approaches must be culturally responsive. Even the word trauma can be difficult, says [Theopia Jackson](#), the program director for Humanistic and Clinical Psychology at Saybrook University. "Part of the challenge with the 'trauma bucket' is that it has become a catchall phrase that means different things to different people. It can lead people to think of completely opposite things, either a permanent state of being traumatized or as a thing that happened one time and is over now." Jackson says that thinking about "complex trauma" might help us understand how different people

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experience the same disaster in different ways.

"If someone has lived a typical life where they've had some ups and downs but they've been able to bounce back, enduring a disaster is one experience. But someone who's been bombarded with other significant challenges may have a very different response," says Jackson.

She notes that many communities of color and socioeconomically diverse communities "have their own 'network of care' that they're practicing in plain sight but out of view of the dominant culture. Professionals don't always see these networks, because we have essentially said, 'you have to come into my office, during a time that works for me, to get to the resources I have to give you.' So what if instead, we go to them and say, 'who's already helping? How do we help them help more?' The real question for me is, 'How can I lighten your load and not add to it?'"

Pragmatic Support in California's Central Valley

California's last long drought hit the agricultural community in the state hard. Perhaps none were so hard hit as Hmong and other farmers of Southeast Asian descent who lease small plots of land in areas with declining groundwater levels, shallow wells, and outdated irrigation systems. The community had a brush with a mental health crisis. Wells went dry, pumping costs increased, and there were reports of a spike in calls to a suicide hotline as farmers faced fears of losing their livelihoods. For many small farmers, farming is part of who they are, despite the hardships. And the list of difficulties can be long: not owning the land they farm, decreasing acres of land to lease, and language and cultural barriers. Still, many of these small farmers persist.

[Ruth Dahlquist-Willard](#) is a small farms advisor with the University of California Cooperative Extension program in the heart of California's Central Valley. She works with mostly immigrant and first-generation farmers, of which there are thousands in her county alone. Dahlquist-Willard and [Michael Yang](#), a Hmong



To address the “complex trauma” of drought, water professionals must listen to the communities they serve and learn what they can do to lighten their load. Here, Michael Yang (University of California, Agriculture and Natural Resources), meets with a Hmong farmer to plan a new irrigation system. Such a pragmatic approach is crucial to providing care and building solidarity. Source: Ruth Dahlquist-Willard.

agricultural assistant also with Cooperative Extension who offers a lifeline to small farmers throughout the region, received calls from farmers whose wells were drying up. They jumped into action by drawing on their relationships and asking the community how they could best offer support.

By listening to the farmers, they found many could save money on their energy bills by switching rate plans for their irrigation pumping practices and offered technical assistance to help them do so. The team also found that a state grant program to help farmers upgrade their irrigation equipment could be a resource. “We then held multilingual workshops to inform the growers of the grant process and get them started on their applications, and offered one-on-one assistance for completing the application,” Dahlquist-Willard explains.

Growers who received assistance reduced the water and energy used by their irrigation equipment, which helped their bottom lines. “Southeast Asian farmers are tenacious and creative—they have already overcome incredible odds in adapting to a new culture and environment,” says Dahlquist-Willard.

Moving Forward with Care and Solidarity

Drought and water scarcity in the western U.S. are only predicted to deepen with a changing climate. This will likely exacerbate the challenging and profound uncertainties that so many of us live with every day.

Water professionals must extend care and build solidarity to address the mental health impacts of drought and related conditions. This begins with listening to what communities need and offering them pragmatic support—just as Dahlquist-Willard and her team did. Doing so is one way to meet communities in their own context of care and, as Jackson suggested, to “lighten the load” for them. An approach that responds to trauma with care and solidarity will be crucial for water professionals and their institutions moving forward. Indeed, understanding and addressing the effects of complex traumas people face today—including disasters like droughts—can help lighten the load tomorrow. ■

*Note: Portions of this piece are adapted from *Getting to the Heart of Science Communication: A Guide to Effective Engagement* (2021) by Faith Kearns.*

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