Environmental Incident Decompression Reset

NEW YORK STATE | Office of Mental Health

New York State Trauma-Informed Network & Resource Center

ABOUT THIS TOOL

Audience
Field staff, park rangers, environmental scientists, conservation officers, inspectors

Description
This brief practice supports processing difficult field incidents (e.g., environmental damage, injured wildlife, enforcement conflicts).

When to Use

- Immediately after encountering a distressing environmental incident
- Following difficult interactions with the public or enforcement situations
- When emotions stick with you between field tasks or an event

WORKPLACE STRESS

Environmental and conservation workers come across situations that can be upsetting or frustrating such as:

- Environmental degradation (pollution, habitat destruction)
- Injured or deceased wildlife
- Illegal activity or enforcement conflict
- Long-term ecological loss (climate impact, biodiversity decline)
- Public interaction stress and resistance

These moments stay with you long after they happen and lead to:

- Ecological grief and moral injury
- Frustration and helplessness due to systemic or large-scale issues
- Build-up of emotions across fieldwork
- Difficulty focusing and making decisions

THE PRACTICE

Step 1

Before jumping straight into the next task, pause for a moment.

Take three slow breaths, breathing in through your nose and breathing out slowly. Allow your shoulders to relax and your body to settle.

Step 2

Acknowledge What You Just Experienced

- Take a moment to name what happened.
- You might think or write: *I just encountered...*

Examples

- A damaged habitat area
- Injured wildlife
- Illegal dumping or pollution
- A difficult interaction with the public

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THE PRACTICE

Step 3

Notice Your Reaction

It's normal for environmental incidents to activate strong reactions.

Ask yourself: What am I feeling right now?

Common responses might include:

- Frustration
- Sadness
- Anger
- Disappointment
- Concern for the environment

Step 4

Return to What Is Within Your Role

Environmental problems can feel overwhelming because they are often larger than any one person's role.

Remind yourself: What part of this situation is within my responsibility or authority?

Examples might include:

- Documenting the issue
- Reporting the incident
- Protecting the immediate area
- Educating visitors or the public

Resources:
Find additional wellness information on the NYS Trauma Informed Network and Resource Center at traumainformedny.org

Looking to go deeper?

Explore BREATH-BODY-MIND™ (BBM) for weekly breathwork practice, expert tips, and a welcoming community.
Check out the website here for additional details.

Source:
This tool was informed by research on ecological grief and environmental distress, as well as evidence on emotional processing and breathing-based stress regulation.

Step 5

Reset Your Focus

Before moving on, identify your next clear task.

This might be:

- Completing documentation
- Continuing field monitoring
- Checking equipment or conditions
- Moving to the next site

WHY THIS HELPS

Environmental work often involves seeing problems that may take years or decades to address. Feeling frustration or sadness in those moments is a natural response to caring about the places and environments you are protecting.

Taking a moment to decompress can help you continue the work with clarity and focus.

WHY THIS WORKS

This short reset can provides an immediate, in-the-moment intervention to prevent stress from piling up by helping you pause, work through the moment, and refocus before continuing your work.