

FIRES: COPING AFTER A DISASTER

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The recent fires affected many in our community. We tend to think only those who lost homes are victims. But the truth is many more people may be traumatized by their experiences with the fires. No one who sees a disaster is untouched by it. A natural disaster, such as a fire, may stir up many thoughts and feelings. The traumatic event can affect the psychological functioning and coping ability of victims. Sometimes, you may not be aware you are impacted because trauma symptoms may surface days, weeks, or months after the event.

Initially, you may experience any or all of the feelings of:

- Shock
- Disbelief
- Denial
- Fear
- Anxiety
- Anger
- Helplessness
- Hopelessness
- Grief
- Guilt
- Feeling the experience is surreal
- Agitation
- Panic

You may have been traumatized by any of the following:

- Loss of your home
- Fire damage to property
- Friends or neighbors who lost their homes
- Fighting the fire to save your home and/or those of your neighbors
- Having the fire come near your home
- Having to evacuate and feeling afraid of what you'd return to
- Have a trauma (such as a fire or other event) in your past
- The smoky air causing respiratory problems
- Seeing the damage to your neighborhood, even if your home was spared

Afterwards you may feel:

- Sadness
- Grief
- Overwhelmed
- Confusion
- Despair
- A sense of unfairness
- Anger
- Fear
- Helplessness
- Anxiety
- Guilt
- Depression
- Numbness
- Outrage

These feelings are a normal response to a frightening, abnormal event. It is important to allow yourself to feel your emotions. Also encourage your family members and others whom you know were impacted to also feel theirs. Be aware that you can cycle through different feelings. Sometimes these cycles might take minutes, or they can take hours, days, or weeks. Other people may be "stuck" in one or more of the same feelings.

Traumatic events can layer on your psyche. If you've experienced other traumas in your life, those memories, feelings, and symptoms may resurface, so you're emotionally hit with a doubly whammy.

It's important to remember that everyone responds differently to a traumatic event based on each individual's coping ability, values, life experiences, personality, support systems, fears, expectations, and beliefs. You and other family members may experience the same feelings at the same times, or your feelings may be different from others you know who suffered through the disaster.

Symptoms of extreme stress or post-traumatic stress:

- Difficulty with focusing and concentrating
- Difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep
- Sleeping too much
- Not eating OR overeating
- Emotional and/or physical fatigue
- Irritability
- Tearfulness
- Hopelessness
- Jittery
- Headaches
- Feeling lost
- Overwhelmed
- Weight loss OR gain
- Survivor guilt
- Numbness
- Overly critical
- Forgetful
- Making “stupid” mistakes
- Shorter attention span
- Flashbacks
- Overly sensitive
- Denial
- Flashbacks
- Nightmares
- Intrusive thoughts
- Muscle tension
- Feeling unsafe or vulnerable
- Mood swings
- Changes in sexual functioning
- Preoccupation with the fires
- Feeling uncoordinated
- Depression
- Heartburn
- Helplessness

You may experience these reactions immediately after an event, or days, weeks, or even months later. The symptoms may last for a few days, a few weeks, or even longer. The symptoms and feelings of trauma may come in waves; reminders can trigger a new wave. Each day doesn't get progressively better. You can have a good day, than a bad day.

TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

- Give yourself time to recover.
- Remember that your traumatic stress symptoms are normal and will diminish with time.
- Make sure to get enough sleep. Take naps if necessary.
- Eat regular, healthy meals, even if you don't feel hungry.
- Exercise regularly. This will help discharge pent-up feelings and stress, leaving you feeling calmer.
- Allow time to be alone or to be with others as you need it. But don't isolate yourself.
- Avoid the use of drugs or alcohol to numb the pain or help you cope. It will only prolong or complicate your recovery.
- Maintain your basic routine, but allow yourself to take a break or relax when needed.
- Avoid excess caffeine.
- Do things you enjoy.
- Talk with people you trust.
- Set boundaries with others when you don't feel like talking.
- Journal your thoughts and feelings, especially if you're emotional, having trouble sleeping, or wake from disturbing dreams.
- Ask for help if you need it.
- Be kind to yourself, both mentally and physically.
- Communicate your feelings clearly.

Seek professional assistance if:

- Disturbing behaviors or emotions last more than four to six weeks.
- Disturbing behaviors or emotions make it difficult to function normally, whether at work, school, or in family life.
- You are concerned about your behaviors or emotions.

Some resources:

www.fema.gov/assistance 800-621-3362

www.liveandworkwell.com 866-280-1418