

Mental Health and Wildfires

Booklet D

from the *Understanding Health Impacts of Wildfires in Urban Areas* series

Other booklets in this series:

A. Health Impacts of Wildfires in Urban Areas
B. During the Fire: Smoke, Air Quality, and Protecting Yourself
C. After the Fire: Lead and other Fire Contaminants in and around your Home
D. Mental Health and Wildfires
E. Further Reading

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Series Note: This series addresses some of the health concerns from wildfires that reach urban areas. These fires are also called Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) fires. Since the general public may not use the term WUI, we use "wildfires that reach urban areas" or, more briefly, "fires" to refer to large, catastrophic fires that may also burn buildings, cars, and other non-natural sources.

Key point!

Look for these "Key points" throughout this handout for the most important summaries.

Quick Overview:

Mental Health Impacts of Wildfires

What you need to know to protect yourself!

How do wildfires and smoke affect our mental well-being?

- **Mental health is affected in many ways**. People often experience symptoms like anxiety, stress, depression, trouble sleeping, and mood changes, including not feeling like themselves.
- **Smoke can play a role in your mental health**; tiny, harmful particles in wildfire smoke may reach the brain, potentially causing damage that affects how you feel and think.

Is it normal to still feel emotional "ups and downs" long after the fire is out?

- **Yes. Recovery is a long-term process**. After a crisis, communities often feel a strong bond, but that can fade as the hard work of rebuilding begins. Stressors like property damage, insurance, job loss, and changes in school or social circles can add to mental pressure long after the fire.

What are the best ways to protect my mental health during and after a fire?

- **Protect your body:** Practical strategies include reducing smoke exposure, maintaining a routine, connecting with others, limiting media, and prioritizing basics like staying hydrated, eating well, sleeping well, and being safe.
- **Protect your mind:** Seek help early. You don't have to wait for a crisis to talk to someone; reaching out to community support or a therapist early on can help you process your experiences. See resources on page 12.
- **Protect your connections.** Pay attention and notice what you are feeling, ask for what you need, and stay connected to supportive people.

Do fires affect mental health?



Yes. Fire survivors have reported **increased mental health-related impacts** and/or **symptoms (with asterisks*)**, and more medical visits for these concerns, including:

- **PTSD, or post-traumatic stress disorder**, which can include nightmares*, flashbacks*, irritability/anger*, negative thoughts*, avoidance*
- **Anxiety,** worrying*, panic attacks*
- **Depression,** sadness*, hopelessness*
- **Insomnia***, poor sleep*, or exhaustion*
- **Substance Use*:** alcohol, smoking, weed
- **Environment- or community-related distress**, over-fixating on big unknowns with limited control*
- **Suicidality:** self-harm*
- **Other**: inability to concentrate*, body tension*, over- or under-eating*

Children or adolescents may also experience:

- Behavior or adjustment issues, including irritability, anger, or regression
- Disruption of family support, family stress, or changes
- Learning issues, trouble learning, concentration, or delayed language development
- Children may also lack the skills to express or communicate their emotions

Additionally:

- People can respond to wildfires in many different ways. Some emotions or reactions appear right away, while others appear later.
- Long-term, repeated exposure to wildfire smoke may also raise the risk of dementia in older adults and other brain conditions.

Who is most at risk?

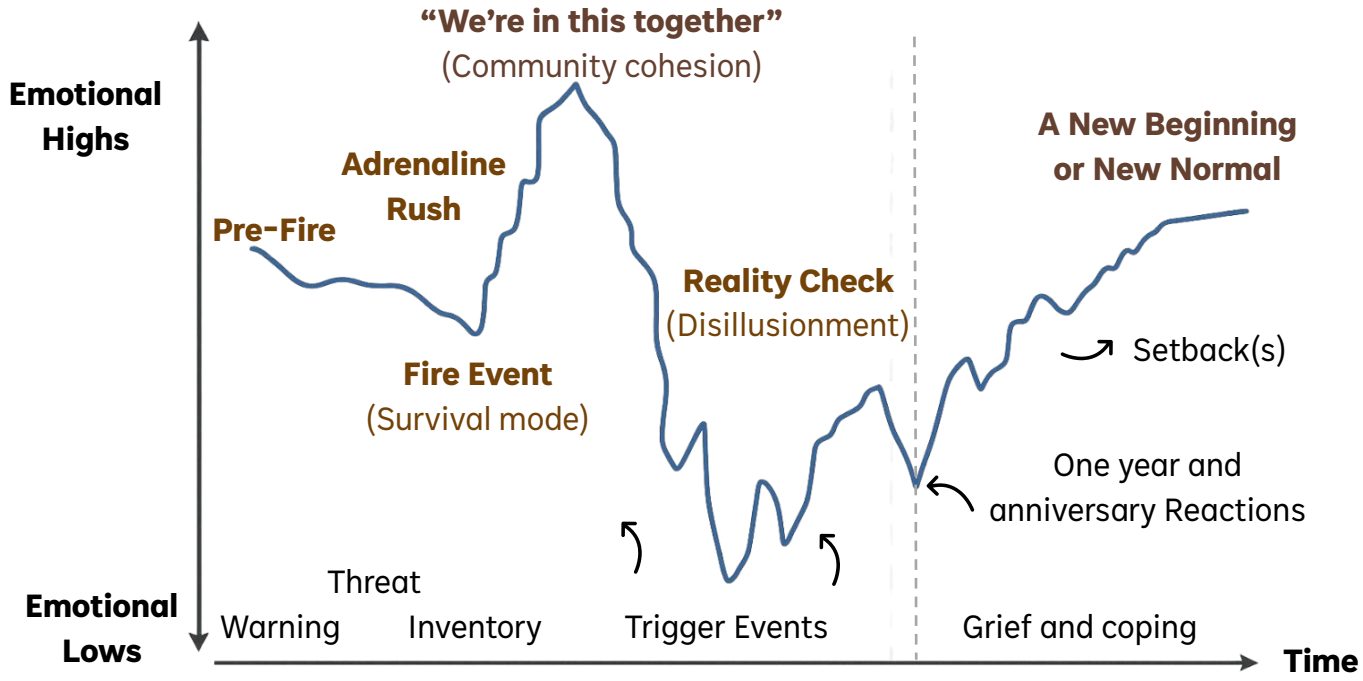
Anyone can experience mental health impacts even if they were not directly in the fire zone. Some people may need extra support or face more impacts, especially:

- People with **direct loss, exposure, or injuries:** Lost homes, loved ones, housing changes, or health changes.
- People with previous **Health Issues**: People already sick or dealing with mental health challenges.
- People with **past traumas** (or previous fires)
- **Racial or ethnic minorities**: People facing barriers in access to resources and care, economic barriers, and higher exposures or impacts.
- People with **fewer resources, including** unstable housing, job loss, limited transportation, or less access to services.
- **Workers**, such as firefighters, cleanup crews, caretakers, therapists, or other helpers.
- **Women, youth** (including children and adolescents), or **older adults**
- **People in several of these groups** may face increased stress and barriers to support.

1. To P, et al. The impact of wildfires on mental health: a scoping review. Behavioral Sciences. 2021. 2. Jung YS, et al. Fine particulate matter from 2020 California wildfires and mental health–related emergency department visits. JAMA Network Open. 2025. 3. Casey JA, et al. The 2025 Los Angeles Wildfires and Outpatient Acute Healthcare Utilization. medRxiv. 2025 4. Elser H, et al. Wildfire smoke exposure and incident dementia. JAMA Neurology. 2025 5. Adu Mk et al. Children's psychological reactions to wildfires: a review of recent literature. Current Psychiatry Reports. 2023. 6. Heanoy EZ, et al. Impact of natural disasters on mental health: Evidence and implications. In Healthcare 2024. 7. Li A, et al. Vulnerability and recovery: long-term mental and physical health trajectories following climate-related disasters. Social Science & Medicine. 2023

Community emotions after a fire

The figure below illustrates potential emotional highs and lows within the community following a disaster, such as a large fire. This may not exactly match an individual's emotional journey, but it serves as an example of common community-wide emotional fluctuations.



What may be helpful to understand from this figure:

- Recovery is not a straight line. People and communities may feel strong, exhausted, discouraged, and hopeful at different points; expect ups and downs long after the disaster. Emotional recovery is an ongoing, long-term journey.
- Emotions and timelines can vary widely across people, losses, and situations.
- Secondary stressors (related to living life, such as housing impacts) can create high levels of continuing stress and effort in emotional adjustment.
- Fire anniversaries, smoky days, evacuation alerts, insurance deadlines, rebuilding delays, or other triggers can bring feelings back.
- Additional stressors and factors can compound. Examples:
  - A child losing their home and their school
  - A person may be dealing with wildfire damage, housing problems, insurance claims, family illness, and another fire season approaching... plus more.

Key point:

It is normal for emotions to fluctuate, or constantly change, *long after* the disaster. Mental health recovery is often a long-term process.

Adapted from Zunin & Myers 'Six stages of psychological response to a disaster' as cited in Training Manual for Mental Health and Human Service Workers in Major Disasters, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2000)

Fires affect mental health and well-being in many ways

Wildfires can significantly affect many aspects of life, affecting people's environment, relationships, finances, sense of normalcy, well-being, and mental health (see figure below).

***Additionally*, fire smoke may also impact brain health.** Exposure to smoke can allow toxic particles to enter the body, resulting in increased toxic stress and inflammation. Some of these small particles may even reach the brain, potentially causing damage with repeated or long-term exposure and affecting brain *and mental health.*

How fires can affect mental health and well-being in many ways

Ecological (physical, natural surroundings):	**Living and working conditions**:	**Social, health, & community**:	**Individual**:
Loss of nature and disaster damage. Smoke events and the changing ability to go outside safely.	Evacuation, housing stability, and safety. Changes in school or employment.	Community or family losses, stress, or isolation. Changes in routines, recreation, social dynamics, social networks, and connections. Too much or too little communication including media exposure.	Sleeping problems, food insecurity, changes in physical activity, or other lifestyle factors. Dealing with insurance challenges after a fire. Potential health or mental health issues resulting from smoke or trauma.

Key point:

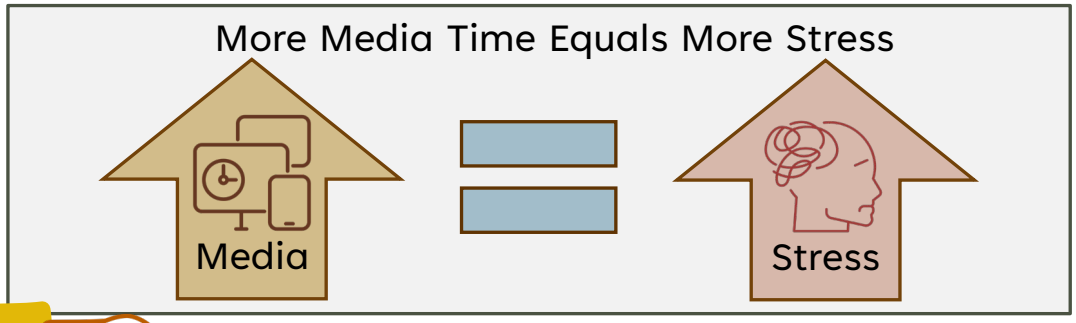
Fires can cause significant losses, constant changes for those affected, and community disruptions that impact mental health. Additionally, smoke exposure may have adverse effects on the brain and mental well-being!

Figure Modified from: Eisenman DP, et al The mental health and well-being effects of wildfire smoke: a scoping review. BMC public health. 2022 Dec 5;22(1):2274. **With additions from**: To P, et al. The impact of wildfires on mental health: a scoping review. Behavioral Sciences. 2021 Sep 21;11(9):126.

Can news and social media increase stress?

Yes. Too much news, social media, or repeated disaster footage can increase stress after disasters. Studies have shown that the more hours of media exposure (screens, news, podcasts, radio, social media, etc.), the more stress symptoms people have. Stress is worse when information is conflicting or confusing.

This is particularly true for children. **To minimize confusion, limit media use, rely on trusted sources, and actively discuss with loved ones.**



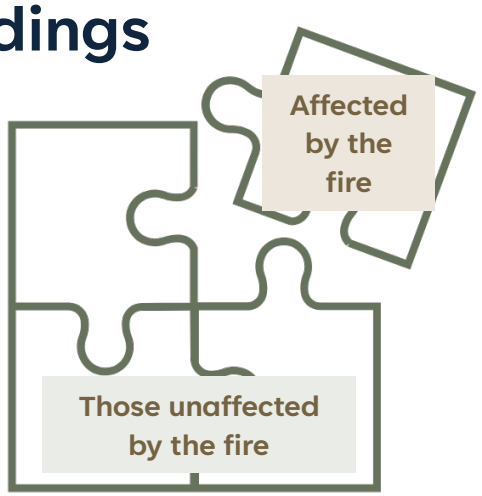
Key point:

To minimize stress and confusion, limit media use after obtaining essential information, rely on trusted news sources, and actively discuss, debrief, and decompress with loved ones to build connection. Limit children's media exposure to reduce their stress.

Recognize that your feelings and needs may differ from your surroundings

- Many people feel pressure to "carry on" and "move on"
- Media and daily life can move quickly
- The continuing need to support oneself and family, pay for housing, healthcare, food, etc.
- Different cultures, religions, or personalities may have customs that prioritize the needs of others over one's own.

Self-care may seem unimportant, selfish, or time-consuming, but it is critical to reduce burnout and maintain balance.



Key point:

The media, daily life, and people who weren't affected may move on before you feel ready. Recovery from a disaster can take a long time. Notice what you are feeling, ask for what you need, and stay connected to supportive communities or resources (see page 12 for potential resources).

Holman, et al. Media exposure to collective trauma, mental health, and functioning: does it matter what you see?. Clinical Psychological Science. 2020 Jan;8(1):111-24.
Garfin, et al. The Collective Trauma and Chronic Stress of COVID-19. The Social Science of the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Call to Action for Researchers. 2023 Dec 8:259.
Garfin, et al. It matters what you see: Graphic media images of war and terror may amplify distress. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. 2024 Jul 16;121(29):e2318465121.
Garfin, et al. Media exposure, risk perceptions, and fear: Americans' behavioral responses to the Ebola public health crisis. International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction. 2022 Jul 1;77:103059.

During a fire:

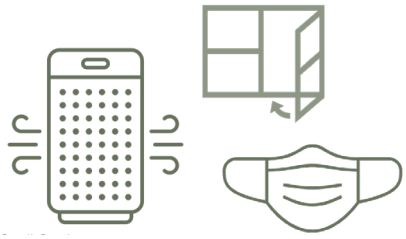
What can I do to protect my mental health in the short term?



Prioritize basic needs: food, water, shelter, safety, and healthcare



Steady routine
Keep small routines when possible to create stability during uncertainty.



Reduce smoke exposure or evacuate
Reduces health risks



Limit/reduce endless media
Reduces stress



Talking openly about what is known/unknown with others
Reduce confusion, support understanding



Acknowledge and identify feelings *(even constantly changing, or numb feelings)*
Supports processing, self-awareness, relationships, and communicating needs



Recognize that many responses are normal, but know when to seek help (and seek help early).
It's normal to be okay and not okay later.

After a fire:

What can I do to protect my mental health in the long term?

All of the strategies on the previous page, *PLUS*:



Communicating stories and experiences
It helps you process, grow, and understand yourself and your experiences, while grounding you in the present moment to function. Find the ears and groups who will listen and from whom you can also learn.



Community and social support
Receiving and providing support. Social, family, peer, neighbor, faith, or related connections. Everyone's recovery path is different, with setbacks and better days.



Look for positives, what you can look forward to, and practice gratitude when it feels possible
"This situation is hard, but I'm grateful for my family, who welcomed me into their home. I look forward to seeing my teachers when school opens again."



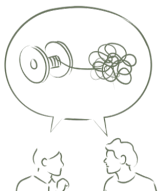
Exercise
Moving your body improves mental health



Nature (when it's safe)
Outdoors, gardens, ocean/lakes, trees



Mindfulness & Spirituality
Being present, instilling peace



Therapy
When you need it or to manage your mental health proactively before you need support.



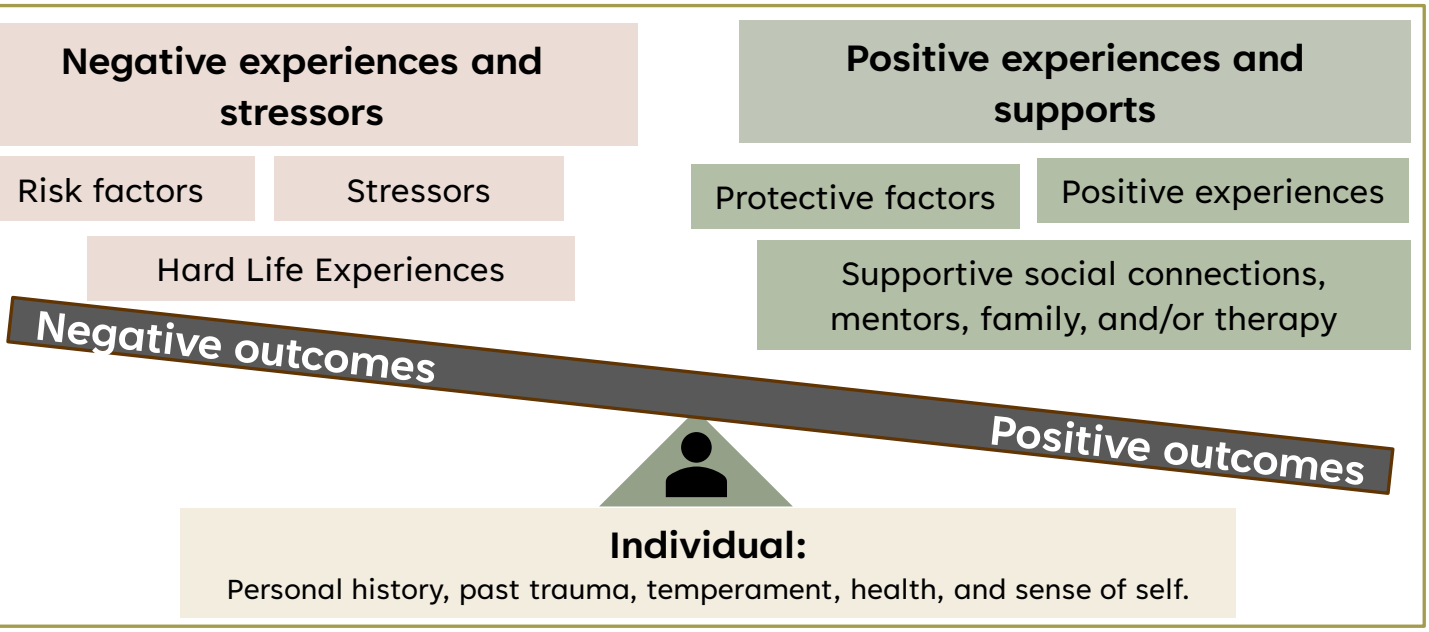
Using your hands and being creative
Cook, journal, draw, touch, garden, pet animals, play, bounce a basketball, etc.

Learning Activity:

Thinking about post-fire resilience

RESILIENCE IS:	RESILIENCE DOES NOT MEAN:
• Willpower, adaptability, tenacity, grit, growth, learning, and more • Ability to withstand, deal with, or persevere through hard things • Dedication and willpower to move forward • Adjusting, learning, asking for help, and building skills and growing after challenges	• Things are easy or stress-free. *Resilience takes effort, support, and the ability to navigate real challenges. Support is a part of maintaining resilience.* • You are done learning, reacting, or feeling! *Resilience is an ongoing, active journey through life's ups and downs.*

Think of resilience like a balance scale—it tips toward positive outcomes, even when someone has faced many challenges and stressors. This depends on many factors in one's life, as well as on one's ability to persevere through hard things and be resilient.



Discussion Questions:

- How might a wildfire affect this scale?
- What could support positive outcomes during and after a fire?
- Consider different groups (youth, older adults, and others in your community). How could these groups be supported through a wildfire?

Question: When should I seek mental health support?
Answer: Sooner than you think!

As soon as you recognize a change in yourself or your surroundings that may be affecting your well-being, it is a great time to connect with supportive communities and mental health supports.

Types and levels of Mental Health Supports:

- **Preventative** (after-school programs, social support meant to strengthen protective factors)
- **Treatment** (therapy, support groups, medication)
- **Urgent/Crisis** (ensuring safety)

Setting expectations… things that can take time when seeking help:

- Recognizing that you might need support, asking for and seeking help can be new, difficult, or uncomfortable.
- Figuring out insurance, if you have it, and who is in your network, co-pays
- Sharing your basic information with call lines
- Finding the right therapist: what is important in a provider for YOU

Unsure where to start?
Call 988, nationwide mental health support (which connects to all forms of local support), currently for LA: https://didihirsch.org/

If you have insurance, the back of your insurance card will typically have a mental health line:



Member Services:	1-855-270-2327 (TTY/TDD 1-855-576-1620)
Mental Health:	1-877-344-2858 (TTY/TDD 1-800-735-2929)
Nurse Advice Line:	1-800-249-3619 (TTY/ TDD 1-800-854-7784)
Health Education:	1-855-856-6943

Providers can call for:
* Pre-authorizations: <crosswalk #>
Pharmacy info: 1-888-648-6765
* *Pre-authorization is required for all non-emergent hospital admissions.*

Submit Medical Claims to:
<crosswalk PPG>
<crosswalk ATT:>
<crosswalk Address:>
<crosswalk Address:>

www.lacarecovered.org

Further Mental Health Resources

Resources for Children and Supportive Conversations:

- **Parenting, teaching, and caregiving for children- Wildfire resources**:
  - "Supporting Children, Strengthening Communities: Professional Skills for Talking About Wildfires Together" with Dr. Melissa Brymer https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FTwZj5kvbTg
    - Communication handout: https://d3kdbh1wduemv1.cloudfront.net/attVnm39LDeYME657.pdf?cache=1736380069
  - Addressing the Wildfires: A resource guide for Caregivers and Educators https://ugc.production.linktr.ee/6bfe8bf5-5438-46a2-9db7-5988260d3960_Wildfire-Resources-for-Caregivers-and-Educators.pdf
  - Parent Guidelines for Helping Children Impacted by Wildfires: https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/parents_guidelines_for_helping_children_impacted_by_wildfires.pdf

- **Service/resources links**:
  - Wildfire resources (more children's resource links, no-cost therapists, etc.): https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ttP8nT6ueNz_aUFJv2ebVVFljkmecOra/edit?tab=t.0
  - Eaton/EFRU Local Mental Health Supports: https://www.efru.la/mental-health

Resources to get connected to mental health care:

Disaster Mental Health Support and Connections
https://www.calhope.org/

CalHOPE

Los Angeles County Mental health resources for those affected by the fire (text lines, in-person support, etc)
https://dmh.lacounty.gov/our-services/disaster-services/disaster-mh-resources/

LOS ANGELES COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF MENTAL HEALTH
hope. recovery. wellbeing.