



RESOURCE GUIDE

Considerations for Assisting Wildfire Survivors

Wildfires can significantly impact emotional health, both for those directly affected by the fire and for people witnessing the devastation from afar. During and after a wildfire, it is normal for people to experience trauma, especially when wildfires cause loss of life or property. Even the most prepared residents will experience varying levels of stress when a wildfire impacts their home and neighborhood.

Survivors' reactions after stressful experiences are quite complicated, and although reactions range from mild to severe, even the most acute responses are natural reactions to manage trauma. People making contact with wildfire survivors should also understand how best to support and interact with individuals during distress and upheaval.



Resources to Share with Survivors

Resource:	Description	Contact Information
SAMHSA Disaster Distress Helpline	A national hotline dedicated to providing year-round disaster crisis counseling. Multilingual, toll-free 24/7 support.	Call 1-800-985-5990 or text TalkWithUs to 66746
Washington 211	No cost connection to critical health and human services in your community.	Call 211
After the blaze, coping with fire brain	Article about physical and cognitive impacts of wildfire.	Link (https://www.washingtonpost.com/wellness/2023/08/20/maui-wildfires-smoke-trauma-cognitive-deficits/)
Trauma and Emotional Health Learning Series	A webinar series for residents, neighborhood and community leaders, and decision makers geared toward developing an understanding for how wildfire survivors are impacted by the trauma caused by wildfire and how that influences all their other post-fire recovery experiences.	Link (https://www.fireadaptedwashington.org/toolkit/trauma-emotional-health/)
After the Fire Resident Recovery Guide	Page 34 of this guidebook for residents provides resources for survivors of wildfire and outlines initial steps toward healing.	Link (https://www.flipsnack.com/E5D75C99E8C/template-resident-recovery-guide/full-view.html)

Steps to Interacting with Survivors

2. Prepare to identify and encounter post-traumatic stress symptoms

It is extremely common for survivors to experience both physical and mental health crises after a wildfire.

4. Don't remove anything from the property

While some survivors may want to get rid of everything, others do not want to get rid of anything.

6. Be ready for this to be a long process.

It takes people a long time to cope with what they have experienced and begin making decisions on how to move forward. Don't expect solutions to happen over night.

8. Be aware of triggers

As people begin to heal, many things can cause trauma to resurface in everyday life. Use notification systems to alert residents of any public burning, construction, or road work that may trigger survivors.

1. Let Survivors Tell Their Story

People need to be able to express their emotions through sharing their experience many times over.

3. Don't Take Pictures

Unless expressly given permission through a signed photo release.

5. Get signed permission to enter a property

It is recommended that if you enter a property as a volunteer, you obtain signed permission and release of liability. It is further recommended that you sign a non-disclosure agreement.

7. People can be re-traumatized

The healing process is complex, even after a disaster has ended, survivors can experience re-traumatization.

Common Responses to Trauma

ADULTS

- Intense and sometimes unpredictable feelings, such as, irritability, mood swings, anxiety, and depression.
- Flashbacks: repeated and vivid memories of the event that lead to physical reactions such as rapid heartbeat or sweating.
- Confusion or difficulty making decisions.
- Sleep or eating issues.
- Fear that the emotional event will be repeated.
- Change in interpersonal relationship skills, such as an increase in conflict or a more withdrawn and avoidant personality.
- Physical symptoms such as headaches, nausea, and chest pain.

CHILDREN

- **Preschoolers:** thumb sucking, bedwetting, clinging to parents, sleep disturbances, loss of appetite, fear of the dark, regression in behavior, and withdrawal from friends and routines.
- **Elementary school children:** irritability, aggressiveness, clinginess, nightmares, school avoidance, poor concentration, and withdrawal from activities and friends.
- **Adolescents:** sleeping and eating disturbances, agitation, increase in conflicts, physical complaints, delinquent behavior, and poor concentration.
- **Other symptoms:** re-experiencing the event during play or dreams; anticipating or feeling that a wildfire is happening again; avoiding reminders of the wildfire; and general numbness to emotional topics

When interacting with young survivors of wildfire...

Remain calm and reassuring. Acknowledge the loss or destruction, but to the extent possible to do so, assure children that life will return to normal.

Acknowledge and normalize their feelings. Allow children to discuss their feelings and concerns, and address any questions they may have regarding the event.

Listen and empathize. Let them know that their reactions are normal and expected.

Encourage children to talk about wildfire-related events. Children need an opportunity to discuss their experiences in a safe, accepting environment.