



First Nations Health Authority
Health through wellness

Recognizing and Addressing Trauma and Anxiety During Disasters

Disasters like wildfires affect individuals in many ways and may affect your emotional, spiritual, physical and mental well-being. The emotional effects may show up immediately or appear weeks to months later.

If you are feeling stressed or anxious this time of year, you are not alone. The fear of having to flee your home, and possibly leave animals and possessions behind can cause distress, fear and anxiety for you and your loved ones. Even the prospect of living with smoky skies during wildfire season can cause distress.

The risks of disasters, like wildfire season, can also trigger stressful thoughts and feelings related to loss of connection to land, home, and traditional foods and medicines. For some First Nations people it can trigger trauma associated with memories of being forcibly removed from home and sent to residential school, Indian hospitals or foster homes. We would like to offer some support.



Recognizing Anxiety and Trauma

Anxiety and trauma related to disasters affect people in different ways. Physical and emotional signs may include:

- Overwhelming feelings of fear, stress and emotional distress – a feeling of being unable to cope
- Acute anxiety, excessive worry and panic attacks
- Feeling down or depressed, angry, sad, confused, low mood
- Trouble breathing
- Trouble eating (including overeating or not eating enough)
- Trouble sleeping (including nightmares, over-sleeping or not sleeping enough)
- Irritability and agitation, feeling jumpy, tense or hypervigilant
- Avoidance or withdrawal – feeling or being unable to meet the demands of what needs to be done (e.g., preparing for evacuation)

Four Tips to Stay Well

It is important to understand that there is a natural grieving process following any loss and a disaster of any size can cause unusual or unwanted stress.

Below are four tips to help you stay mentally, emotionally, physically and spiritually well during wildfire season:

1. Prepare yourself, your family and loved ones

Having a clear emergency or safety plan and kit ready for your family and pets can ease your mind and allow you to focus on other needs. Even if your community has an emergency plan, it is still important to make a plan that addresses the specific needs of your family and household.

2. Take care of the basics

Stress takes a toll on our physical and mental health. Try to eat well and get enough sleep. Be kind to yourself. Give and accept support. Follow your daily routine if possible. Take a break from disaster news coverage and from thinking and talking about disaster events.

3. Ask for help

Whether it's with family, friends, an Elder, cultural supports, doctor, nurse or counsellor—talking helps. Crisis lines are available to listen and help anytime—not just during a crisis*. Those with moderate to severe symptoms that last more than two to four weeks should consult a family physician, if available. Otherwise, reach out to your nearest Mental Health and Substance Use Centre or community nurse.

4. Help others

Check in on Elders and children. Coping may be more difficult for Elders living alone and those who have mental health and wellness concerns, or those with few social supports. Reaching out to connect with them can be a big help.

Other simple actions that you may find helpful are to keep a journal, stay active (and exercise indoors if the air quality is poor), do volunteer work or participate in activities you enjoy (e.g., beading or sewing, singing and drumming).

***IF YOU ARE STRUGGLING RIGHT NOW, confidential, culturally safe support is available 24/7 through the KUU-US Indigenous Crisis Line at: 1-800-558-8717**

More support resources can be found at:

www.fnha.ca/wildfires

Gov.bc.ca/NaturalDisasterHealth.ca

Visit PreparedBC for resources to help you understand the hazards in your location and to create a family emergency plan:

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/emergency-preparedness-response-recovery/preparedbc>

Visit BC Centre for Disease Control for information on wildfire smoke and steps you can take to protect your health, both indoors and outdoors:

<http://www.bccdc.ca/health-info/prevention-public-health/wildfire-smoke>