

## Wildfires

*Wildfires* are usually triggered by lightning or accidents and often go unnoticed at first. They can spread quickly and are especially destructive if they occur near forests, rural areas, remote mountain sites, and other woodland settings where people live. While not reported as often as floods, tornadoes, or severe storms, they, too, can cause emotional distress in people living in affected areas.

In 2020, 58,950 wildfires were reported in the United States. They destroyed over ten thousand structures, including thousands of homes, and burned about 10.1 million acres of land.<sup>1</sup>

Feelings such as overwhelming anxiety, constant worrying, trouble sleeping, and other depression-like symptoms are common responses before, during, and after wildfires. Other signs of emotional distress related to wildfires include

- Having thoughts, memories, or nightmares related to the wildfire that you can't seem to get out of your head
- Worrying a lot of the time
- Feeling guilty but not sure why
- Excessive absences from work or school

These are just a few warning signs of disaster-related distress. If you or someone you know shows any of these symptoms for two weeks or more, whether you know they are in relation to a wildfire or if it is unclear how they started, contact your employee assistance program (EAP), a mental health professional, or some other support service.

### Who is at risk for emotional distress?

People living in communities in Arizona, California, Colorado, Utah, and other states where wildfires often occur may be vulnerable to emotional distress. People who have struggled to recover from experiences with past wildfires also may experience distress. Other people at risk for emotional distress due to wildfires include the following:

- **Children and teens**—After a wildfire, young people may worry that another one will happen again, especially if they witnessed the fire and the loss of their home. Some children may become withdrawn, while others may become agitated and irritable and display outbursts of anger.
- **Older adults**—Older adults are more likely to need social support to reduce the effects of stress and move forward on the path of recovery. They also may have limited physical mobility and lack independence.
- **First responders and recovery workers**—These individuals may experience prolonged separation from loved ones (depending on the severity of the wildfire) and show signs of mental fatigue.

Once warnings and evacuation orders are issued, the risk for emotional distress becomes greater:

- You or your loved ones may feel unprepared, isolated, overwhelmed, or confused. Uncertainty about where to go during a wildfire, how to keep you and your loved ones safe, how to care for your pets, or whether you will be able to continue taking any medications can cause emotional distress.
- You may lose contact with a loved one in an impacted area.
- If you are relocated or lost your house to a wildfire, being in an unfamiliar environment can be difficult, especially for people with limited physical mobility, economic means, or knowledge of the

English language.

Returning to a home, business, school, or place of worship impacted by a wildfire may cause additional distress, especially if there is structural damage. A temporary or permanent loss of employment may also occur.

Remember, too, that the anniversary of a disaster or tragic event can renew feelings of fear, anxiety, and sadness in disaster survivors. Certain smells or sounds, such as smoke or sirens, can also trigger emotional distress. These and other environmental sensations can take people right back to the event or cause them to fear that it's about to happen again. These *trigger events* can happen at any time.

People can experience a wide range of emotions before and after a disaster or traumatic event. There's no right or wrong way to feel. However, it's important to find healthy ways to cope when these events happen.

## Reference

1. Insurance Information Institute (III). (2021). *Facts + statistics: Wildfires*. Retrieved July 26, 2021, from <https://www.iii.org>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). (Updated 2021, July 1). *Types of disasters: Wildfires*. Retrieved July 26, 2021, from <https://www.samhsa.gov>

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Content ID: 66534