

Wildfire Smoke and Your Mental Health

Prolonged stretches of poor air quality may be anxiety/stress inducing for some, especially if they suffer from respiratory conditions; are concerned about what they are breathing in or view wildfires as a direct result of climate change.

Having to remain indoors for prolonged periods due to poor air quality can socially isolate people. This can lead to loneliness, disrupting daily functioning and sleep patterns. Social isolation can also impact physical health, potentially exacerbating pre-existing health conditions such as high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease. The added risks for older adults /seniors when smoke prevents them from interacting with others or maintaining their regular routines can be a disruption in their focus, which can impede cognitive functioning and possibly lead to cognitive decline.

For individuals /communities who have directly been impacted by wildfires, smoky conditions regardless where the fire is burning, may induce heightened awareness, concern, anxiety and fear.

For many, a sense of loss or losing control may be common and a root cause for feelings induced by smoke and poor air quality. As practitioners/staff members, during prolonged smoky periods, you need to be patient with yourself and others. People may not cope like they usually do.

Key messages for your client/patients:

- 1) When you have no control over a stressful situation like a disaster or emergency, you still have control over how you understand and respond to it. Having a plan and being emotionally prepared for a disaster or emergency can help you stay calm, reduce stress and feel more in control.
- 2) Learning about and using healthy coping skills to overcome daily challenges in your life is an important step to maintaining good mental health. It's these same skills that will help you cope better during emergencies.
- 3) Having a strong social support network with healthy social connections are essential in life, but especially important during emergencies and disasters. When you have supportive people in your life, you can recover quicker and be better prepared to face future challenges. Get to know your neighbours and connect with your community. Introduce yourself and build relationships with people around you.

Tips you can offer:

- Ask people what strategies or skills they typically use to cope with stressful situations and remind them to use these skills. Encourage the use of healthy skills and strategies.
- Breathing techniques can be an effective tool to manage anxiety; take a slow deep breath in and then exhale slowly (repeat 10 times). It can help calm your nervous system and help you think more clearly.
Note: For people who are concerned about air quality or worried about inhaling particulate matter, this may cause them to become more anxious.
- It's important to remind people that smoky conditions are temporary, and eventually the sky and air quality will return to normal.
- Encourage people to be mindful, gently paying attention to their thoughts, feelings and body sensations. This can help them understand why they're feeling anxious or stressed. And it may help them to identify actions they can take to feel more in control.



- Encourage people to get enough sleep. Lack of sleep can contribute to people feeling overwhelmed, which in turn will make it harder to cope with smoky conditions.
- Encourage people to spend more time with friends and family indoors; engage in activities that they can do together whether it's making and sharing meals, playing games or watching TV.
- Although social and family connection is important for mental health; it's also important to recognize that everyone has different needs around the amount of time spent with others and plan for ways that meet these different individual and family/social needs. Too much time indoors together, especially with the stress of a smoky environment, can contribute to irritability and relational strain. The key is ensuring self-connection and individual self-care is in balance with social connection/community care.
- Finding a way to get people physically active with others indoors can help them feel better, and socializing with others can overcome feelings of isolation. It can also help take a person's mind off the smoke or what they can't do because of the poor air quality. For example, suggest they use the stairs in a well filtered building, find a local gym space to join others in group physical activities or participate in other fun indoor activities that keeps them moving like dancing.
- If climate change is a concern for people, encourage them to think about and take small actions (ones they can easily do) for the environment (e.g., carpooling or using alternative transport once a week).
- For parents and caregivers, it's important to model good coping skills. A child sees an adult's emotions through their words, facial expressions and actions. How a person responds to the stress of a disaster or emergency can affect how a child reacts. Modeling calm and constructive reactions to the event will help a child feel calm and cope better. Remind people that it's okay to have strong emotions. Encourage them to name them (e.g., "I feel frustrated." or "I feel sad.") And talk about how they feel and how they're going to cope (e.g., deep breathing, positive thinking) so that a child can learn how to do the same.

Helpful Resources

- Health Link 811
- Mental Health Helpline: 1-877-303-2642
- Employee and Family Assistance Program
- For children and teens, call the Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868

Addiction & Mental Health website:

<https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/amh/amh.aspx>

For information about responding to a disaster or emergency go to:

<https://myhealth.alberta.ca/Alberta/Pages/responding-to-disaster-emergency.aspx>

For information about recovery from a disaster or emergency go to:

<https://myhealth.alberta.ca/Alberta/Pages/recovery-after-disaster-emergency.aspx>

To download or order copies of Mental Health disaster resources go to:

<https://dol.datacm.com/>

Login ID: mentalhealthresources

Password: mh2016

