

## Wildfire Smoke and Your Mental Health

Prolonged stretches of poor air quality can be anxiety/stress inducing for some, especially for people who 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, and disrupt daily functioning and sleep patterns. Social isolation can also impact physical health, potentially worsening 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 impact cognitive functioning and possibly lead to cognitive decline.

For individuals and 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. During prolonged smoky periods, you need to be patient with yourself and others. People may not cope like they usually do.

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.

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.

### Helpful Tips:

- Use healthy approaches and skills you typically rely on to cope with stressful situations.
- 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. If you are concerned about air quality or worried about inhaling particulate matter, be sure to practice this technique indoors or in public buildings with good ventilation systems.
- Keep in mind that smoky conditions are temporary, and eventually the sky and air quality will return to normal.
- Be mindful, gently paying attention to your thoughts, feelings and body sensations. This can help you understand why you're feeling anxious or stressed. And it may help you to identify actions you can take to feel more in control.
- Be sure to rest and try to get enough sleep. Lack of sleep can make you feel overwhelmed, which in turn will make it harder to cope with smoky conditions.
- Spend more time with friends and family indoors; engage in activities that you 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; keep in mind that everyone has different needs around the amount of time spent with others. It's important to plan for ways that meet these different individual and family/social needs. Spending too much time indoors together, especially with the stress of a smoky environment, can contribute to irritability and relational strain. The key is ensuring your self-connection and individual self-care is in balance with your social connections/community care.
- Finding a way to get physically active with others indoors can help you feel better, and socializing with others can help you overcome feelings of isolation. It can also help to take your mind off the smoke or what you can't do because of the poor air quality. For example, 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 keep you moving like dancing.
- If climate change is a concern for you, think about small actions (ones you can easily do) for the environment (e.g., carpooling or using alternative transport once a week).
- For parents and caregivers, try to model good coping skills. Your child sees your emotions through your words, facial expressions and actions. How you respond to the stress of a disaster or emergency can affect how your child reacts. Modeling calm and constructive reactions to the event will help your child feel calmer and cope better. It's okay to have strong emotions. Name them (e.g., "I feel frustrated." or "I feel sad."). Talk about how you feel and how you're going to cope (e.g., deep breathing, positive thinking) so your child learns how to do the same.
- Having a strong social support network with healthy social connections is 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.

### 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>

