

Coping with an Emergency or Disaster

The following tips are based on the literature and conversations with the Trauma Informed Care Team at IWK Health.

For Caregivers

Fires can lead to significant emotional and physical distress, even after safety is reached. The experience and challenge of evacuation, relocation, and rebuilding after a fire will have a significant impact. People will be processing the loss of homes and valued possessions, worrying about loved ones, neighbours, pets, wildlife and important community buildings and spaces. Individuals and families may go through several stages of emotions, including shock, anger, fear, and grief. After a fire, it will take time for communities to redevelop a sense of safety, security, and comfort. Daily life will be significantly disrupted for whole communities for a potentially long period of time. Ultimately, safety and security will be restored, and recovery will emerge as the focus shifts past danger and towards the future.

Specific populations, including but not limited to those listed below, may have unique concerns, and needs:

- Children, youth, and adults who have been directly impacted by the fire and been in the evacuation zones
- Children, youth, and adults who have previous experience with fire events
- Families with individuals with accessibility, mobility, or health issues
- Families which include first responder staff
- Families experiencing poverty or economic challenges and stress
- Those with past traumatic experiences and those who are feeling the cumulative impact of multiple losses, stressors, and difficult events
- Adults, children, and youth with anxiety or other mental health and addictions needs

Common Stress Reactions by Age

Children Under 5 years may:

- Cry more than usual
- Have changes to eating habits
- Complain about aches or pains
- Be confused easily
- Want to be held more
- Be afraid to be alone
- Have trouble talking (e.g., stuttering)

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Children 6-11 years may:

- Go back to doing things they did when younger (e.g., thumb sucking)
- Have changes in sleeping patterns (e.g., trouble falling or staying asleep, scared to sleep alone)
- Have trouble concentrating
- Complain of a headache or stomachache
- Need extra reassurance or connection, become distressed or frustrated, or have difficulty managing their emotions and behaviors. This may show up as withdrawing, becoming upset or angry, or reacting more strongly than usual.
- Ask about spiritual beliefs

Teens 12-18 years may:

- Have changes in sleeping patterns (e.g., too much or too little)
- Complain of aches and pains, headaches, or stomach problems
- Become withdrawn or quiet
- Act out or have aggressive behaviour
- Question their spiritual beliefs
- Feel guilty about being less impacted than others
- Teens may be more likely to confide in peers than adults
- Have trouble with existing medical problems (e.g., physical, mental, psychological, addiction)

(list taken from Alberta Health <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/assets/healthinfo/mh/hi-amh-prov-mhpiip-disaster-responding-children-teens.pdf>)

Helping your Child or Youth Cope

- Reassure your children that they are safe or that you have a plan for getting them to safety. Let them know that their loved ones, including friends and pets, are being helped.
- If you have to evacuate suddenly, tell your child briefly that you are there for them and will keep them safe.
- Spend time talking with your child. This will let your child know that it is OK to ask questions and to express their concerns. Issues may need to be discussed more than one time. You should remain flexible and open to answering repeated and new questions and providing clarifications. Keep discussion details age appropriate.

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- Don't make presumptions about how children or youth are feeling or thinking about a situation. If your child is not close to the affected community, they may not be aware of, or need to know, about this event. Checking in as things evolve let children know you are open to talking about difficult situations.
- Spend extra time with your children and stay connected. Play games, read together, cuddle, or just hang out.
- For younger children, try to follow conversations about the events with a favorite story or a family activity to help them feel more safe and calm.
- Where difficult conversations around loss are a necessity (e.g., lost pet), avoid providing unnecessary or graphic details to children and youth. Provide comfort and support.
- Remember, for some kids their response to scary or overwhelming events won't look like fear or grief, it might look like distraction, aggression, anxiety, helplessness, stomach aches, confusion, hyperactivity, impulsivity, etc. Help children/youth to regulate with exercises (e.g., breathing, grounding, yoga) or regulation items (e.g., colouring pages, fidgets, a ball), and choose positive coping strategies. If children are acting out, maintain usual routines, rules, and expectations.
- Gather your information from trusted news sources.
- Encourage everyone to take breaks from following media and social media coverage, especially in the evening to allow for healthy bedtime routines.
- Monitor adult conversations discussing emergencies and disasters in front of younger children. Be careful with your tone, as children will pick up on it. Be as calm as possible when discussing the events and use language that children can understand. Limit conversations about the economic impacts in front of children.
- Help support your children to get appropriate rest, connect with others, exercise, and eat healthy food recognizing that this can be difficult when/if displaced.
- Promote resilience and connection with friends and family.
- When the danger has passed, some children/youth may want to contribute to local community support and resiliency efforts and activities. This can help restore a sense of community, resiliency, purpose, and control.

(This list includes content from the NCTSN document 'Helping Children Impacted by Wildfires': https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources//parents_guidelines_for_helping_children_impacted_by_wildfires.pdf)

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Most children will be able to cope with the support and understanding of their caregivers, teachers, coaches, and community members. However, some may have difficulties that are continuing and may need further help from a school counselor or other mental health provider. Please support children and youth in accessing help as needed. See a resource list on the last page.

Things I Can Do for Myself

- Make sure you take good physical care of yourself, including eating well, sleeping well, getting exercise, and receiving proper medical care.
- Listen to each other. Parents and other caregivers should provide support for each other during this time.
- Put off major decisions. Avoid making any unnecessary life-altering decisions during this stressful post-wildfire period.
- Give yourself a break. Try not to overdo clean-up activities. These activities may include lifting heavy items or working for extended periods of time. Using moderation when doing such work can reduce injury.

For more information on common age-specific trauma reactions among children and youth:

- https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/age_related_reactions_to_traumatic_events.pdf

For great resources specific to fire events, see the following National Child Traumatic Stress Network's resources:

- <https://www.nctsn.org/resources/parent-guidelines-helping-children-impacted-arson-and-fires>
- <https://www.nctsn.org/resources/trinka-and-sam-big-fire> *this is a great workbook for small children and caregivers
- <https://www.nctsn.org/resources/taking-care-of-yourself>

For resources developed by the Trauma Informed Care Team at IWK Health for helping children and youth cope with traumatic events:

- <https://yourexperiencesmatter.com/resources/new-resources/>

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After a disaster or emergency, it takes time to grieve, adjust, rebuild, and recover. Many people recover on their own over time. Some people might need extra support to help them recover. It's important to know when to ask for help.

Caregivers are children's greatest resource. Sometimes your family might benefit from a little extra help. You may wish to speak to a healthcare provider or mental health professional if you are noticing that these experiences are having a persistent or severe impact on your child's functioning.

Need help now?

Emergency: 911

Nova Scotia Mental Health and Addictions Crisis Line: 1-888-429-8167*

Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868 or text CONNECT to 686868*

*These hotlines are toll-free. In an emergency you can also go to your closest emergency department.

Need mental health and addictions services?

IWK & NSH Mental Health and Addictions Central Intake: 1-855-922-1122*

*Self-referral