



**RESPONDING TO THE FIRE EMERGENCY<sup>i</sup>**  
Wellness Area  
Serra Hall, 300  
619-260-4655

*Why Do I Feel This Way?*  
*The emotional impact of the Fires*

Disasters can make us all feel vulnerable, whether we are impacted directly or indirectly. Events such as wildfires can seem to have no rhyme or reason as to how they start and the damage they can inflict upon people's lives and property. Many factors can contribute to the stress we experience as a result of such events:

- **Loss.** The loss associated with wildfires may take years to fully assess. Life as we knew it, especially for those who live in the fire zone, may never be the same. People's homes and entire communities may have been destroyed, and life-as-usual may be disrupted for an indefinite period of time. We may experience the loss directly or indirectly.
- **Lack of control.** Part of what makes all disasters so unnerving is they reveal our limitations as human beings. Despite our best human efforts, natural disasters can and do escape our ability to control them and the damage they can do. Innocent people can get hurt, property is destroyed, beautiful areas are ruined leaving us feeling helpless.
- **Abrupt change of reality.** A previously safe and enjoyable area is now unsafe.
- **Fear of additional destruction.** We don't know what will happen next, so we are in a state of constant alert.
- **Uncertainty.** We don't know when this fire will be contained, or if others loom on the horizon; and if we are relocated, we don't know when we can return, and what may be facing us when we do. If we are assisting others, the indefinite nature of this event can also be stressful.
- **Trauma associated with seeing so much destruction so close at hand.** Seeing the tremendous destructive power of fire and the possibility of being in harm's way can be very disturbing.
- **Memories of prior traumas, disasters, or emergencies return.** Even as we cope with current disasters, thoughts and feelings about prior ones can return.
- **Media coverage.** When we view and review the damage repeatedly, we can all be impacted by the disaster.
- **Emotional overload.** We might be feeling like we can't catch our breath between disasters.

## *Possible reactions*

The uncertainty and distress experienced as a result of the devastating fires can elicit a range of emotions and physical symptoms. Many of us may experience strong feelings such as helplessness, anxiety, and fear, while others may find ourselves feeling numb and shock. At times like these, it is important to remember that different people react and cope in different ways. A person's natural temperament, social support, prior life experiences, coping skills, and the degree of exposure to the events combine to determine that individual's specific reaction. Acknowledging these reactions can help shorten recovery time and prevent complications of the natural healing process. Here is a list of possible reactions:

- Distractibility/poor concentration
- Difficulties with memory
- Increased reactivity to small issues and events
- Increased startle response
- Worry and anxiety, feelings of panic
- Sadness and depression
- Changes in sleeping and eating patterns
- Increased isolation or irritability
- Decreased energy and motivation
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs
- Numbness and shock
- Intrusive memories of prior traumas or nightmares
- Difficulties breathing, flare up of asthma or other respiratory problems
- Aches and pains such as headaches
- Weakness, dizziness, and fatigue
- Heart palpitations
- Perspiration or chills

## *How to help yourself and others*

- **Reduce the input.** High levels of anxiety made worse by watching TV, listening to the radio, and reading news can be lowered by limiting your exposure to the sights and sounds of the disaster. Try watching TV reports at the beginning of the hour when they summarize the news and do this only as needed.
- **Focus on the positive.** Think about the courage and commitment of the responders—firefighters, police, state officials, Red Cross and other voluntary agency staff, and thousands of spontaneous volunteers. The outpouring of support for those directly impacted has been tremendous.
- **Recognize your own feelings.** Knowing that some of the physical and emotional problems you might be experiencing are stress related helps to reduce their effect on you. It also helps to know that this is a shared experience and a normal reaction to an abnormal and frightening event.
- **Talk to others about your feelings.** Understand that many others may share these feelings about what you are experiencing.
- **Accept help from others.** If you need help putting your feelings in perspective, talk to someone you can trust—a member of the USD Wellness Area staff or Residence Life staff, someone from University Ministry, a professor or other university staff member. In this kind of situation your coping skills may be stretched.
- **Deal with your stress.** Deep breathing, yoga, or meditation can help release stress. Exercise (if air quality allows it), can also be a helpful way to manage stress. Visit the USD Counseling Center's Website (<http://www.sandiego.edu/usdcc/>) to find downloadable audio recordings of easy-to-use, 10 minute relaxation exercises.
- **Address problems one step at a time.** Set small, realistic goals to tackle obstacles, and take one day at a time.

- **Keep your life in balance.** Try to get the rest you need, and keep your work hours in check.
- **Listen to your body.** Be aware of the impact the poor air quality may be having on you, and secure medical consultation as needed.
- **Acknowledge that you may be operating below your normal level for a while.** Structure your time. Schedule breaks for yourself. Redefine your priorities and focus your energy on them
- **Get involved in something meaningful; reach out to others.** Offer to listen to others who might need to talk. If you feel so moved, offer to volunteer time, money or necessities to those who have lost homes. The Red Cross can offer suggestions about what is most needed.
- **Do something you enjoy and stay connected.** Whenever possible, take a few minutes to enjoy the people and nature around you.
- **Give yourself time to recover.**

### *Key contacts and resources*

All of the services listed below are available—contact each office for information, and check each office’s Website. Emergency services after regular working hours are also available at all times by contacting Public Safety Dispatch at (619-260-2222).

#### For Students

- **USD Counseling Center:** 619-260-4655
- **USD Student Health Center:** 619-260-4595
- **USD Center for Health and Wellness Promotion:** 619-260-4618
- **USD Disability Services:** 619-260-4655
- **USD University Ministry:** 619-260-4735
- **USD Public Safety:** 619-260-7777 (for emergencies call 619-260-2222)
- **San Diego emergency services:** 911

#### For Faculty and Staff:

- **Employee Assistance Program, Horizon Health,** 800-342-8111
- **Community based mental health professional.** (Kaiser, Blue Cross Provider)

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<sup>1</sup> Information adapted in part from American Red Cross and Arizona State University materials; used with permission.