

# How to deal with a NATURAL DISASTER



## WHOM IS THIS DOCUMENT MEANT FOR

This document is meant to whom experienced a natural disaster and to all those who might somehow intervene or relate with people affected by it.

This document is organized in two main aspects: the first one refers to the (children and teenagers, adults and elderly people) and the second one to the Community.

For each one of the aspects are presented the usual responses for this type of events and recommendations about what can be done to help face the situation experienced.

# EXPERIENCING A NATURAL DISASTER

Experiencing a natural disaster, namely a fire, can affect our health and psychological well being.

It is normal to have an intense amount of emotions and reactions, some of which quickly disappear, and others persist for a while. We can feel sad and devastated with what happened, anxious and with fear and having difficulty in accepting the reality. We can feel vulnerable or very angry with ourselves or with others that we see as responsible for what happened.

It is important to understand that, even though each person reacts differently (there is no "right" or "wrong" way to react), some reactions are normal and usual considering those events.

Normally, the intense emotional reactions occurring from the event start dropping and fade away after a few weeks. For such, it is important to know which are the usual reactions and some strategies that efficiently allow dealing with feelings, thoughts and behaviors resulting of the event



01

## LYFE CYCLE

- Children and teenagers
- Adults
- Elderly people



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## COMMUNITY



01

# LYFE CYCLE

## CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS

- For the parents or caregivers of children and teenagers
- How can parents or caregivers of children and teenagers help?

## ADULTS

- What can we do?

## ELDERLY PEOPLE

Children react and recover from the impact of a natural disaster, namely forest fires, in many different ways, depending of their age, meanings attributed to the fire, previous experiences with natural disasters/fires or with other traumatic events, their life circumstances and their capacity to deal with adversity.

## FOR CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS

When we live a situation of horror and desperation caused by a natural disaster, like a fire, we can feel very bad and distressed. And that is normal.

**Each one of us is going to react differently, but we can feel:**

- Sad, anxious and worried with what may happen after. Wanting to cry or hit someone.
- Irritated and angry with what happened, with the people that surround us or even ourselves.
- Afraid. Fear that there will be another fire or that someone will disappear, fear of being separated from our family and friends or fear of something else that is not related to the fire.
- Not willing to leave our parents, siblings, friends or teachers for a second. Or, on the other hand, wanting to be alone, away from everyone.
- Confused because the routines of our day-to-day life have been temporarily altered (for example, time to eat, study or go to sleep) or because we can no longer play where we used to play or with some friends.
- Sick (for example: headaches or stomach pain).

- Difficulty in paying attention and focusing on class or studies.
- Difficulty falling in asleep or having a rested sleep (we may have nightmares too).

### What can we do to feel better?

- Talk about what happened and what our fears and concerns are. Those who take care of us, our parents or teachers, can help us to understand what happened and how we feel.
- Accepting that we are feeling things that we do not usually feel (after all a fire is an abnormal and unexpected event) and that these feelings are painful. But knowing that in time (it may take weeks or months), we will feel progressively better, the situation will also improve and we will return to our usual routines, schedules and tasks.
- Understanding that some of the changes we notice in the way we think, feel, or do things are the way we find at the moment to deal with a very difficult situation.
- Keep talking and meet with family and friends to play and do activities together and things we like.
- Remembering that we are not responsible or guilty for what happened around us, to our parents, family, friends or acquaintances.
- Asking for help. If after some time we do not feel better, we can talk to our parents and seek the help of a psychologist or other health professional.

## FOR THE PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

Children and teenagers may react to a fire in different ways. Parents and caregivers should be sensitive to the specific characteristics of each children / teenager and the way each one handles the situation.

### Some usual reactions are:

- Fear and concern for their safety and the safety of others (including family members and pets).
  - Fear of being separated from their family.
  - Becoming more dependent on parents, siblings or teachers.
  - Concern about the possibility of a new fire.
  - Getting more agitated and cry easily.
  - Difficulty concentrating and paying attention.
  - Isolation from others.
  - Getting angry and "making a tantrum".
  - Becoming aggressive with parents, siblings, or friends.
  - Increased physical complaints, such as headache or stomach pain.
  - Changes in school performance.
  - Focusing on the fire for most of their day or for a continued period of time, for example, talk repeatedly about the situation or play it back in their play (it is only natural that this should happen in the beginning).
  - Being anxious whenever something reminds them of the fire (for example, the smell of burning, sound of sirens, hot wind or smoke).
  - Difficulty sleeping or having nightmares.
  - Appetite changes (eating less or eating more).
  - Loss of interest in usual activities (even playing with friends).
- Go back to past, more childish, behaviors (for example, speaking as a baby, bed-wetting or tantrums).





# CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS

FOR THE PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS | LIFE CYCLE

In the case of teenagers, in addition to previous reactions, it may still be possible to observe an increase in risk behaviors, such as substance abuse or alcohol abuse, self-mutilation or involvement in dangerous activities.

The way children and teenagers respond to the situation, it is also influenced by how parents and caregivers deal with the event. Children and teenagers turn to adults for information, comfort and help. Therefore, parents, caregivers and teachers should remain calm, respond to all questions that arise and best meet the requests of children and teenagers.

## HOW CAN PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS HELP?

Children and teenagers deal better with natural disasters when they understand what is happening. Parents or caregivers should spend some time talking about the fire with the children or teenagers, letting them know that they can ask questions and share their concerns and as well letting them know that their reactions (what they are thinking and feeling) are normal.

The issue may arise more than once and parents or caregivers should be patient and remain available to answer all questions, showing interest in the opinions and ideas of the children / teenager on the subject. Without overloading the children with information, they should let them know what is happening in the family, at school, in the community. For younger children, to make them feel more secure and calm after talking about the fire, parents or caregivers can read their favorite story or do a quiet family activity.

Keep the children or teenagers close to you and whenever you go out tell them where you are going and when you will return.

## Other suggestions for parents and caregivers:

- Offer to answer questions about fires: how they get started, how they spread, how firefighters fight and extinguish them.
- Do not criticize children and teenagers for their behavioral changes, such as being more dependent on parents, reproducing the fire situation in the games or asking lots of questions. "Bad behavior" may be a sign that the child is frightened or worried. Encourage the children that feeling sad, scared and worried about the situation is normal.
- Be aware of how you talk about the fire in the presence of children and teenagers, as they may misunderstand what they hear and get unnecessarily scared.
- Limit exposure to the media (television, internet, radio, newspapers), protecting children and teenagers from too many images and unnecessary descriptions.
- Ensure children and teenagers that they are safe. It may be necessary to repeat this frequently, even after the fire has already been extinguished. Spend extra time doing activities together and saying several times how much they are loved.
- Talk to children and teenagers about the community recovery process. Ensure them that the government is working to restore electricity, phone lines, water and that the families that have been displaced will be helped.

- Seek to maintain usual daily activities (for example, keeping meal time and bed time, going shopping, etc.). In the midst of the confusion and chaos of natural disasters, children and teenagers feel safer if, within possible, routines are maintained.
- Provide enjoyable experiences and games that help relieve tension.
- Maintain the usual family rules of good behavior and respect for others. The role of children and teenagers in household chores should be maintained, even though it may be necessary to remind them more often than usual.
- Encourage children and teenagers to help. Children and teenagers recover faster and better when they have the opportunity to help others. Give them small tasks or ways to contribute and then provide activities that have nothing to do with the fire.
- Be very patient when children and teenagers return to school. They may be more distracted and need extra help with homework for a while.
- Provide extra support at bed time, since children may be more anxious to separate from their parents at that time. Spend more time talking, cuddling or telling stories.
- Keep having hope. Even in the most difficult situations, a positive outlook on the future can help children and teenagers overcome difficult times.

Children and teenagers whose parents or caregivers are firefighters may need special support and attention. Parents and caregivers should ensure them that parents or caregivers are trained and prepared to do the hard work of fighting a fire and that in doing so they contribute to increasing the well-being and safety of all.

## IMPORTANT

If a few weeks after the fire, you continue to be preoccupied with the feelings and behaviors of the children or teenagers, seek help from Primary Health Care (Center or Health Unit) or from other organizations of the society.

Experiencing an event such as a fire and its consequences can be extremely stressful. We may feel desperate, "go down" and lose control.

### **Shock and denial are normal immediate responses, after which there are other usual responses:**

- Feelings can become very intense and sometimes unpredictable. We may feel more irritable than usual and have sudden mood swings. We may feel particularly anxious or nervous, scared, distressed or even very sad.
- Our patterns of thinking and behavior are affected. We may have lived and repeated memories of the fire. These memories can occur at any time and lead to physical reactions (for example, heart racing or sweating). We may feel difficulties concentrating or making decisions. We may sleep and eat worse.
- Interpersonal relationships can become tense. We may argue with family members or friends or, on the contrary, isolate ourselves and feel unable to act or take the necessary steps to respond to the needs of the moments.
- Physical signs, such as headaches or nausea may also appear. And also, difficulty sleeping.

## WHAT CAN WE DO?

- Accept that intense emotions are part of the normal and universal response to the emotional impact and stress caused by the fire. It may seem better to ignore or avoid experiencing painful emotions, but they exist whether we pay attention to them or not. However painful they may be, for intense feelings to pass and diminish, it is necessary to give space to express them, alone or with another adult or a specialized professional, as the case of psychologists or other health professional.
- Give ourselves time to adjust and mourn for the losses we had, material, emotional or the loss of a loved one.
- Ask for the support and help of family members and friends as well as professionals or social support groups and organizations if needed. Isolation is not healthy. It is important to make an effort to get socially and progressively involved in the usual activities with family members and friends, especially activities that have nothing to do with the fire.
- Sleeping well, eating well, exercising (even if it's the last thing we want) is also important for health and psychological well being, as well as doing activities to help us relax.
- Sharing emotions with other fire victims.
- Return to routine and usual activities (or establish new routines).
- Minimize our exposure to media reports (television, internet, radio, newspapers) about the devastating impact of the fire. It is important to keep us in-

- › formed, but overexposure to the news of the fire can cause even more stress and suffering.
- › Avoid alcohol and psychoactive substances. Suppressing feelings for a few hours will not help deal with the situation or lessen the suffering it has caused.

Postpone important decisions by avoiding making life changing decisions during the post fire period (for example, changing jobs or selling the house), trying to maintain some stability.

## ELDERLY PEOPLE

- › Elderly people, in addition to what has been previously said for adults, may also, after a fire, become very confused and disoriented, fear being placed in a nursing home, being isolated, or apathetic or angry. Elderly people may take longer to recover from shock and return to normal.
- › It is very important that they are supported by a good social support network (family members, neighbors, friends, organizations). Otherwise, their mental health and stability may decline rapidly and lead to hospitalizations or long term problems.
- › Family members and caregivers should help the elderly person return to their normal routines and be available to talk as often as necessary about what happened.



# CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS

LIFE CYCLE

## IMPORTANT

If, after a few weeks, intense emotional responses to the fire persist, and affect your ability to work, do day-to-day activities and being with family members and friends, seek help from Health Care Primary Care (Center or Health Unit) or society organizations.



COMMUNITY



When a community is hit by a natural disaster like a fire, even those who were not directly victims of the situation (with loss of assets or loved ones) may feel psychologically affected and have intense emotional reactions similar to those who lived directly the situation. For example, we may feel devastated by the situation, in shock, anxious or sad.

When a natural disaster happens, the community tends to respond immediately and spontaneously and, then, progressively organized, to help the people who were most affected.

**Before in the event of the fire we want to know what we can do, how we can be useful. Some suggestions:**

- Organize logistical support for the people in the community.
- Do not criticize, but encourage continuing and improving the support (it is important to remember that the community that organizes itself to help, is also a victim of the catastrophe!).
- Participate in community manifestations of pain and regret. Religious manifestations or feelings (through flowers or symbolic objects, for example) are important to comfort some affected community members, with an expression of the feelings of all.
- Request information from the institutions that coordinate the help response on how we can contribute, not interfering with the teams of professionals involved.
- Take care of ourselves! When we take care of ourselves we are also taking care of our community.

## IMPORTANT

It is important to know that communities become stronger after going through adverse situations. As difficult and devastating as the situation is, most people can return to their routines and normalize their lives.

