

Managing Mental Health through Natural Disasters

Wildfires

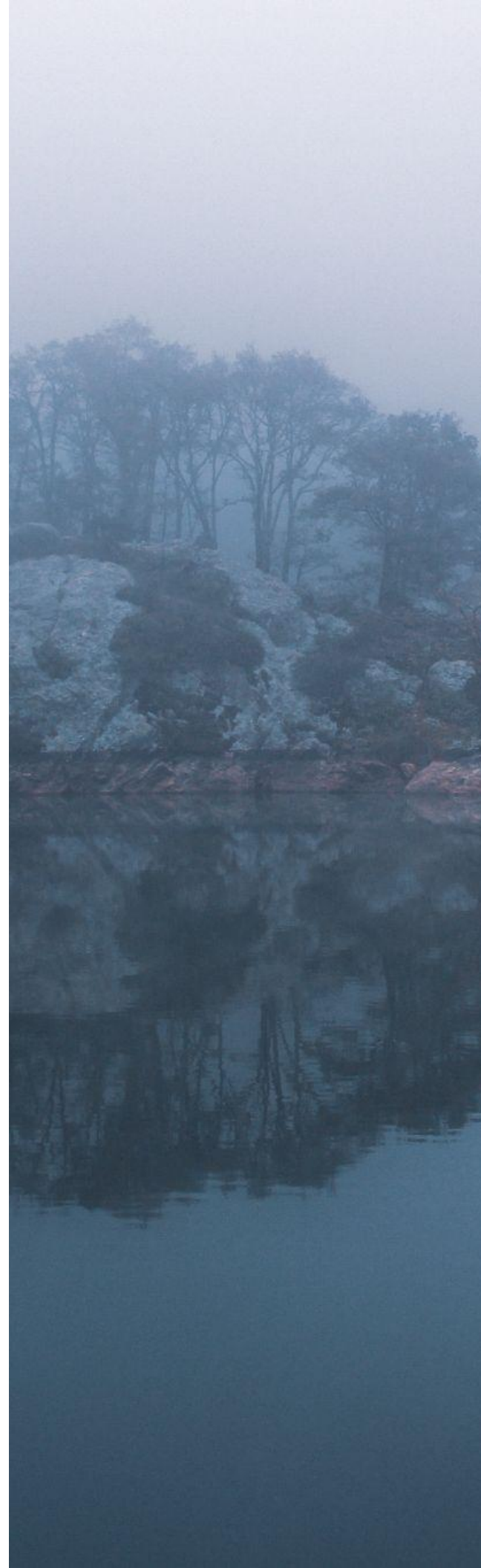
Natural disasters can be traumatic and even the threat of their occurrence can take an emotional toll. Regardless of whether you've living in anticipation of a wildfire or living through the aftermath, it can be extremely stressful.

Managing worry and anticipation

Wildfires, in particular, are worrying because the factors that influence their strength and direction can change at any moment. For those who have survived past wildfires, breathing smoke, seeing ash, and hearing sirens can act as emotional triggers.

If you live in an area that may be in danger, there are some things you can do to help manage the stress and anxiety that may come as a result.

- **Be prepared.** Having a plan of action and emergency kits for yourself and your family can reduce worry and keep the focus on actions within your control.
- **Stay informed, but limit sensational or repetitive news coverage.** Overexposure can lead to increased stress.
- **Maintain daily routines.** The predictability of your daily rhythms can be soothing and keeps you engaged and occupied.
- **Engage in mindfulness activities and self-care.** If prayer or meditation is part of your life, or if you find release and relaxation in, yoga, exercise, movies, or music, make plenty of time for these.
- **Connect with others, especially those who may be feeling the same things as you are.**
- **Find volunteer opportunities in your community.** It can help you feel productive and be a source of healing and hope.



Recovering

Shock and denial are typical responses immediately following an event, although, reactions do vary. There is no one standard reaction to such extreme stress.

Here are some things you may experience in varying intensities:

- Your feelings become intense and unpredictable. You may experience symptoms of anxiety or depression, or they may have worsened.
- You might have repeated and vivid memories of the event that can lead to physical reactions such as rapid heartbeat or sweating, or irritability and mood swings.
- You may feel unfocused, have difficulty concentrating or making decisions.
- Physical symptoms may accompany the extreme stress. For example, headaches, nausea, and chest pain. Sleeping and eating patterns also may be disrupted.

Consider these tips to help restore your wellbeing over time:

- **Give yourself time to adjust.** This is extremely stressful and will take time.
- **Allow yourself to mourn the losses you have experienced.**
- **Limit the amount of news you take in whether it's from social media, television, newspapers, or magazines.**
- **Find out about local support groups that are available.** Ask for support from people who care about you. Or, if those closest to you are also struggling to cope with impacts from the wildfire, reach out for professional support and encourage them to do the same.
- **Engage in activities that feel good to you.**
- **Eat well-balanced meals, move your body at least once a day, and try to rest.** Avoid alcohol and drugs because they can suppress your feelings rather than help you process them, and they can also intensify your emotional or physical pain.
- **Establish or reestablish routines.** Schedule some breaks to distract yourself from thinking about the fire and give yourself permission to do things you enjoy.

If you're a parent or caregiver:

- **Encourage younger family members to talk and express their thoughts and feelings.** Allow them to express themselves over time as they make sense of how they feel.
- **Reassure them that they are safe.** Sticking to a child's daily routine where possible helps boost feelings of security and safety.
- **Role model how you're taking care of yourself,** and coach kids through things they can do to take care of themselves.
- **Engage them in fun, stress-relieving activities.** Play with them, draw, and watch something entertaining together. Give them permission to find moments of joy.



If you're experiencing distress as a result of the fires, or any of life's struggles, you aren't alone. Spring Health can help you manage difficult feelings or just give you someone to talk to.

[Sign up](#) or [sign in](#) at benefits.springhealth.com to speak with your Care Navigator, a licensed clinician who can answer your questions, help you find the right therapist, schedule same-week appointments, and check-in with you regularly along the way.