



Psychological Impact of Wildfires for Burn and Trauma Survivors

About the Authors

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James Bosch has spent the past decade working with children, individuals, couples and families. He knows that in the face of fear and wounding, we all struggle and feel alone. He became a therapist to accompany others on their journey back to wholeness. As a burn survivor, he brings a rich background and training in the healing from physical and emotional trauma.

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Wildfires are stressful for any adult and bring up feelings of fear, helplessness, anger, grief and loss (these are just a sample of the many feelings). Our body has built in responses that help us respond to danger and put us into action for survival. Yet when someone has already experienced a traumatic event, especially but not limited to a burn due to fire, old trauma and unresolved trauma can be activated. Wildfires have so many of the triggers associated with a traumatic event.

- Smell of smoke
- Sounds and lights of sirens
- Distressing news reports
- Uncertainty and confusion
- Stress responses of family and friends
- Fear of loss of life and property
- Actual loss of loved ones or property
- Displacement and chaos associated with evacuation
- Financial uncertainty

Trauma survivors can easily have flashbacks of their previous trauma. Nightmares, trouble sleeping and mood disturbances are common. Often there is a "numbing out" or disassociation that creates an avoidance to action and makes it difficult to connect or be reached emotionally by others.

The symptoms can be very subtle such as irritation and getting in fights with others, difficulty sleeping, poor self-care or reliance on drugs or alcohol to cope. There is often just a general sense of heightened alert and anxiety. Many of these symptoms can present strictly physically, having difficulty breathing, feeling sick and run down all the time, stomach issues and bowel issues.

What can you do?

The number one task is **to create a sense of safety in your body and what parts of your world you can control.** The world around you may seem out of control and this can be real and part perception. It is not helpful to pretend everything is fine or think, "you are overreacting." There are real threats associated with wildfires and there were real threats to your world in your previous trauma.

Being a previous trauma survivor is a double edge sword. On one hand you have the experience of surviving to reference. Trauma survivors are often extremely resilient people because of the post-traumatic growth or lessons they have learned about themselves and the world from their early trauma. Trauma can open some people up to more meaningful directions in their lives. The other side of this is when there is unfinished or still unprocessed trauma, this trauma can be reactivated by the above-mentioned triggers.

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Here is a list of ways to cope with this trauma re-activation.

1. **Awareness and Acceptance.** Just becoming aware that you are triggered and that it is related to trauma can help you accept that your responses are normal and you are not overreacting.
2. **Peer support.** Attending support groups and talking to others that are going through the same things can greatly normalize your feelings and create a sense of hope and that you are not alone in your experience.
3. Immediate tools that you can use to defuse you from your thoughts of fear and doom and promote **mindfulness**, bringing you back to the present moment. There are many resources and phone apps to help train in mindfulness practices.
4. **Breath.** Regulating your breath helps reset your nervous system and calm your body and thoughts. Find a breathing technique that fits for you.
5. **Self-talk.** Telling yourself you are safe now and talking to yourself with compassion and self-acceptance can help with the fear mindset.
6. **Body soothing techniques** such as tapping, yoga, exercise, meditations, art, dance etc. Help move your body out of its need to fight, fight or flee responses.
7. **Therapy** such as Cognitive Behavior Therapy, Talk Therapy, Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing and Somatic Therapies.
8. **Bodywork** such as massage, acupuncture, acupressure, etc.
9. **Proper diet and rest.**
10. **Attending to your spiritual life** and reaching out your inner guides and resources.

Children also respond to wildfires in different ways. In the aftermath of a wildfire, it is normal for children to experience behavioral, emotional, or adjustment reactions. These responses can range from mild, short-term symptoms that subside on their own to long-lasting difficulties that may benefit from professional support. The severity of a child's reactions to the wildfire depends not only on how close they were physically to the fire, but also on the emotional impact of the accumulated losses that they have experienced. Of course, the loss of a family member, a beloved pet, or a home will have a major impact on their recovery. Other potential factors include the child's age, developmental stage, temperament, previous life experiences, extent to which their neighborhood or school was affected, exposure to media coverage of the fire, and access to support systems.

For more information about how children may deal with wildfires and ways that you can support them, check out our free resource guide: [Children & Recovery from Wildfires: Helping children and families respond to the psychological impact of wildfires.](#)

However you choose to cope with your trauma responses, **it is important to focus more on the solutions rather than the problems.** It can be as simple as creating a daily routine, turning off the television and not obsessively checking the news, reaching out to people you trust, or volunteering to help and focus on others.