

Coping with Loss Due to Fire

Experiencing loss due to natural disaster can be a devastating blow. If the loss includes people or pets, the grief can feel overwhelming. We want to honor that grief, but also recognize that other losses can be felt deeply too, such as the damage or destruction of one's neighborhood or home. While you may take comfort in the thought that it's "just things" that can be replaced, the reality is that our homes are much more than that. They're our place of safety and refuge. Each room holds objects and memories that are part of who we are – photos, heirlooms, important documents, clothing, furniture, and more. Losing all of this at once can feel like we've lost ourselves. It will take time to navigate through this challenge. As you do, learning about loss and coping may help you weather this difficult time.

Reactions to the loss: The experience of grief

Everyone reacts in their own way. There is no "right" way to feel or act after a major loss. That said, people also respond in many of the same ways.

For most of us, the first reaction is shock. At this point, the mind can't fully understand what has happened, and people may feel like they are having a nightmare they'll wake up from. People in shock feel numb, dazed, or in denial. Shock serves a purpose. It protects us from having to absorb the emotional impact of the event right away. It buys us time.

Once the reality sets in, people move beyond shock. Emotions may come and go and vary in intensity. Anxiety is common. Some may feel anger. There is likely to be a deep sorrow, perhaps even depression, and sense of hopelessness. There may also be relief if no one was injured or that some items could be saved.

As we work to process the loss, it's common to feel physically drained, yet struggle to sleep. Some find that they've lost interest in eating or may neglect personal hygiene. After a major loss, you may feel confused, disorganized, and have difficulty making simple decisions. Thoughts can get stuck on the "what ifs" and "if onlys." Feeling nervous and tearful is normal. Anger and bitterness can surface too. It may be general and unfocused or directed at ourselves or others who we feel have failed us. Our deepest beliefs can come into question.

At some point, we begin coming to terms with the loss and blend it into who we are. Accepting the loss does not mean moving on; it means we're able to begin letting go of the hurt, sadness, and anger, and find balance again. Slowly, positive feelings come to light and we're once again able to experience hope and joy, if only a little at first. We begin to make new plans, and our focus turns more and more to the future.

Keep in mind that the grief we feel after loss doesn't follow specific steps or an orderly process. You may feel strong and capable one day and overwhelmed the next. Be patient and good to yourself as you work through this.

Self-care after loss

It is difficult to take care of yourself in the middle of a crisis, especially when your attention is on basics like food, clothing, and shelter. But, this is a time when self-care is especially important for personal resilience, healing, and finding one's balance. Here are some self-care strategies you might consider:

Mental and emotional self-care strategies

- Focus on things you have control over, and work toward letting go of the rest.
- Lower your expectations of what you can get done and place fewer demands on yourself.
- Get your facts about the event from a reliable, objective source. Don't rely on rumors or social media.
- Talk about what happened and your feelings with people you trust. Writing about your thoughts and feelings may also help.
- Give yourself permission to take a break from thinking about what has happened or what might happen next. Activities that engage your mind and body can help you stay focused on the here and now.
- Try not to lose sight of the positive parts of your life, and the things you are grateful for. Remember how you've managed challenges in the past. Intentionally bringing these to mind can help you feel more balanced and in control.
- Reach out to and spend time with loved ones and other supportive people who care about you.
- Be careful not to take out your hurt and anger on others. This will make it harder for them to be supportive and can create negative feelings for you.
- Lean into your spirituality or religion if it brings you comfort and perspective.

Physical self-care strategies

- Get enough sleep to feel well rested. It can help to go to bed and get up at regular hours.
- Make an effort to eat well-balanced meals at regular times of day.
- Stay away from mood-altering substances, such as alcohol or drugs.
- Get some type of exercise each day. Even five minutes of movement can reduce stress and help you sleep better (if it's done at least two hours before bedtime).
- Nurture yourself by spending time each day doing something calming, such as deep breathing, meditation, progressive relaxation, or other activities you enjoy.

Tips for helping children cope

Give honest information about the damages, including the safety of loved ones or animals, at a level your children can understand. Allow them to feel and express grief over what they've lost.

Answer any questions your children have, keeping in mind their age and emotional maturity. It's also okay to admit you don't have an answer, which shows you're communicating openly and honestly.

Encourage them to talk with you about their thoughts and feelings, but don't force them to share. It may take longer for some kids to open up than others.

Reassure your children that your family is safe. Communicate that you will also be careful when you aren't with them, especially when revisiting your home or neighborhood.

Determine the appropriateness of letting your child return to the site if authorities permit it. Use what you know about how they manage stress and emotions to guide you. Help them understand your decision.

If you do return, set the stage for what to expect before bringing them back to the area. You might share pictures or describe what they may see, smell, or feel to prepare them.

Share positive memories of home with your children and encourage them to do the same. Remind them that their happy memories can exist alongside sadness or loss, and that they can look back on these experiences anytime.

Be extra patient with your children and loved ones. Give them signs of reassurance such as hugs and affection. Also be patient with yourself and understanding of your own needs.

Reference: Brymer, M., et. al. (2020). *Preparing children after a wildfire damages your community*. National Center for Child Traumatic Stress. <https://www.nctsn.org/resources/preparing-children-after-a-wildfire-damages-your-community>