



HEALTH ADVISORY: Managing stress after a disaster

SITUATION:

Due to the traumatic events of the October firestorm, many Sonoma County residents are experiencing stress reactions consistent with an exposure to a disaster. These effects may continue in the months and years to come during the extended process of recovery, reconstruction, and restoration.

Signs and symptoms of traumatic stress may present themselves in a variety of ways. Nearly everyone will experience a range of reactions after a traumatic event. Although most people recover from initial symptoms over time without any specific interventions, due to the scope and magnitude of the disaster many individuals may be at risk for psychological and social impairments requiring more intensive clinical evaluation and care. Those who experience symptoms that interfere with daily life such as sleep disturbance, loss of pleasure in activities, severe anxiety, hypervigilance, and nightmares may have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Symptoms of PTSD usually begin early, within 3 months of the traumatic incident, but sometimes begin years afterward.

Sonoma County Department of Health Services is encouraging all health care providers in the community to be aware of the mental health needs of their patients and to support them by providing stress management education, problem solving, advocacy, and referral for more intensive clinical evaluation and care as needed. In addition, the Department suggests encouraging patients to adopt or maintain self-care habits to support their physical and mental health during this time.

ACTIONS REQUESTED:

Clinicians should be alert to the various needs of the traumatized person:

1. Listen and encourage patients to talk about their reactions when they feel ready.
2. Validate the emotional reactions of the person. They are a normal person responding normally to an abnormal event.
3. Reassure them that having unfamiliar emotional and somatic reactions to a catastrophic event is common and that it is not unusual for them to last as long as a year or more.
4. De-emphasize clinical, diagnostic, and pathological language.
5. Communicate person to person rather than “expert” to survivor using straightforward terms.
6. Screen for persons at-risk for serious psychological or social impairment and provide referrals for additional mental health evaluation and care.
7. Post signage for patients and staff from the North Bay Suicide Prevention Hotline for Sonoma County.
8. Emphasize the importance of self-care habits such as stress management, healthy eating, physical activity, getting enough sleep, getting a flu shot, and making safe choices to prevent accidents. Go here for a document that provides a summary and additional resources:

<http://stg.sonomacounty.ca.gov/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=2147552028>

Resources

Mental Health Services for Survivors of Disasters

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1489840/>

Psychosocial Treatment of Disaster Related Mental Health Problems

https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/pages/handouts-pdf/Psychosocial_Treatment.pdf

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/index.shtml>

Publications and Resources on Disaster Preparedness, Response, and Recovery

<https://www.samhsa.gov/disaster-preparedness/publications-resources>

North Bay Suicide Prevention Hotline for Sonoma County

<http://www.sonoma-county.org/health/topics/suicideprevention.asp>

