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**LAC DMH and DPH Health Advisory:  
Identifying and Managing the Mental Health  
Impacts of the Woolsey Fire on Residents  
and First Responders**

November 21, 2018

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*This message is intended for primary care, urgent care, emergency, family medicine, pediatric, internal medicine, and specialty providers. Please distribute as appropriate.*

### **Key Messages**

- **People suffer from a wide range of mental health problems during and long after emergencies like the Woolsey fire, dependent on their involvement and exposure to the emergency, past experiences, and pre-existing conditions.**
- **When a disaster strikes, it is common for people to worry about their safety and the safety of those close to them. They may display stress-related symptoms that affect how they act, think, and feel. See “Common Stress-Related Symptoms” below.**
- **People will be more likely to recover if they feel safe, connected, calm, and hopeful; have access to social, physical, and emotional support; and find ways to help themselves.**
- **Health care providers should consider the diagnoses of anxiety and mood disorders and stress related disorders (acute and post traumatic or PTSD) among persons impacted by the fire. See “Actions Requested” below.**

### **Situation**

The Woolsey fire started on November 8, 2018, impacting both Los Angeles and Ventura Counties. It has burned approximately 97,000 acres and is currently 98% contained. It is anticipated to be fully contained by November 22, 2018. The fire destroyed approximately 1,500 structures and damaged 341. There were 3 civilian fatalities and 3 firefighter injuries. Thousands of residents and their animals were impacted by mandatory evacuations, road closures, power outages, boil water notices, and poor air quality due to smoke and ash. Many areas have been repopulated, but not all are open for repopulation.

As recovery efforts begin, many are taking steps to get their lives back to normal, some with the coordination and support of several government and private entities. This is a stressful time for those impacted and their families. Past experiences of fires in other locations suggest that this recovery will take many months, and those impacted may benefit from professional mental health support during and after this time.

## **Actions Requested of Providers**

- Ask patients if they were involved in or impacted, directly or indirectly, by the fire.
- Screen for evidence of anxiety, depression, acute or post-traumatic stress disorder, and for substance abuse. Realize that pre-existing psychiatric conditions may be aggravated by a natural disaster or emergency.
- If you detect serious coping difficulties (like suicidal thoughts or thoughts of self-harm), call 9-1-1. For less imminent situations, encourage the patient to call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (800) 273-8255.
- For non-urgent mental health needs, help is available 24/7 at (800) 854-7771.

## **Mental Health and Emergencies**

During and after a disaster or emergency, people are more likely to suffer from a range of mental health problems. It is natural to experience different and strong emotions. Some people develop new mental disorders after an emergency, while others experience psychological distress. Those with pre-existing mental disorders often need more help than before.

The people affected by emergencies can be divided into three groups:

1. *Primary victims or survivors* – the individuals who have been directly impacted by the resulting damage and loss.
2. *Emergency responders* – firefighters, paramedics, police, public health, Red Cross, and other local emergency services.
3. *Vicarious observers* – friends, relatives, and others who get involved vicariously because they know someone or they see the tragedy on TV or hear about it on the radio. This group can be quite large.

They may display any of the common stress-related symptoms listed below, which can affect how they act, think, and feel.

Helping your patient identify and cope with their feelings and get help when needed will help them, their family, and their community recover.

## **Common Stress-Related Symptoms**

- Confusion, disorientation, being in a daze;
- Insomnia, nightmares;
- Repeated distressing memories, or dreams;
- Memory impairment;
- Multiple nonspecific physical complaints (headaches, trembling or shaking, palpitations, rapid breathing, feeling choked up, light headedness, dizziness, cold sweats, stomach distress, racing thoughts);
- Fear, anxiety, feeling overwhelmed;
- Guilt, crying, sadness, hopelessness;
- Irritability or anger outbursts;
- An exaggerated startle response, “jumpy”;
- Depression, changes in appetite, energy or activity levels;
- Chronic health problems get worse; and/or
- Increased use of alcohol, tobacco or other drugs

## Resources to Support Individuals and Families

### Helplines

- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: (800) 273-8255.** Note: if the patient has serious coping difficulties (like suicidal thoughts or thoughts of self-harm), **call 9-1-1.**
- **Disaster Distress Helpline: (800) 985-5990** or text “TalkWithUs” to **66746.** This national, multilingual, hotline provides immediate crisis counseling for people experiencing emotional distress related to any natural or human-caused disaster.
- **LA County Mental Health Access Hotline: (800) 854-7771** or text “LA” to **471471.** This 24/7 multilingual LA County hotline helps individuals find help or access local mental health services and enables disaster victims to receive screening, assessment, referrals, and crisis counseling over the telephone.
- **LA County Substance Abuse Service Helpline: (844) 804-7500** 24/7 toll-free. This call center helps individuals find substance use services across LA County and provides a brief substance use screening over the telephone. See brochure in English [publichealth.lacounty.gov/sapc/PatientPublic/Brochure.pdf](http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/sapc/PatientPublic/Brochure.pdf) and Spanish [publichealth.lacounty.gov/sapc/PatientPublic/BrochureSpanish.pdf](http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/sapc/PatientPublic/BrochureSpanish.pdf).

### Fact Sheets and Tools

- **LA County Fact Sheet: Mental Health and Stress after an Emergency in** English [publichealth.lacounty.gov/media/docs/MentalHealthandStress.pdf](http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/media/docs/MentalHealthandStress.pdf) and Spanish [publichealth.lacounty.gov/media/docs/MentalHealthandStressSpanish.pdf](http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/media/docs/MentalHealthandStressSpanish.pdf).
- **Helping Kids Cope Online Resources, Guide and App:** The National Child Traumatic Stress Network offers resources for helping children handle a wildfire disaster <http://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/disasters/wildfire-resources>. It offers tools like an activity guide for children and teens who face evacuation in a disaster. <http://www.nctsn.org/resources/simple-activities-children-and-adolescents> and the Help Kids Cope Phone App for Apple and Android phones.
- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Flyer: Coping with a Disaster or Traumatic Event.** English [https://emergency.cdc.gov/coping/pdf/Coping\\_with\\_Disaster.pdf](https://emergency.cdc.gov/coping/pdf/Coping_with_Disaster.pdf) Spanish [https://emergency.cdc.gov/es/coping/pdf/Coping\\_with\\_Disaster\\_ESP.pdf](https://emergency.cdc.gov/es/coping/pdf/Coping_with_Disaster_ESP.pdf)

### Woolsey Fire Resources and Information

- **LA County Recovers: Woolsey Fire Resources** [www.lacounty.gov/woolseyfire](http://www.lacounty.gov/woolseyfire)
- **Woolsey Fire Disaster Assistance Centers:** <https://www.lacounty.gov/woolseyfire-disaster-assistance-centers/>
- **Evacuation Area Map:** To assist the public in determining if their property is in an area that has been repopulated: <https://goo.gl/sUCR5v>
- **LA County Department of Public Health’s Fire Safety and Health Information:** <http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/media/FireSafety/>

This Health Advisory was sent by Dr. Curley Bonds II, Chief Deputy Director – Clinical Operations, Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health (DMH), and Dr. Muntu Davis, County Health Officer, Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (DPH).

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