

“Just In Time” Training & Resource Alert

Greater Los Angeles Wildfires

January 8, 2025

Overview

As of 9 A.M. local time, tens of thousands of Southern California residents are under mandatory evacuation orders as multiple out-of-control wildfires burn in the greater Los Angeles area. At least two people were killed and dozens others injured in the Palisades fire, as the fires engulfed homes, businesses and highways. Heavy smoke is posing a significant health risk to residents. Two additional fires, Eaton fire and Hurst fire, also sparked yesterday, posing additional risk to the area and causing additional evacuations.

It is believed that the fires were caused by a combination of dry conditions and powerful winds. Officials warn that wind will remain hazardous throughout the day, and wildfire conditions are likely to continue. About 280,000 customers across Southern California are without power, and at least 18 school districts across Los Angeles County have reported closures.

Media

Note: Crisis counselors are advised to limit their exposure to media surrounding these and other major wildfires, only obtaining key information about the events as needed and as other details may emerge that might inform an accurate understanding of each incident, as media surrounding disasters may contain words, images, sounds, etc., that may be distressing.

- [CNN Live Updates: Wildfires in Los Angeles County](#)

Wildfires

Among disasters, wildfires are often isolated within largely rural areas of states and do not attract the same level of media attention as other disasters. However, all wildfires have the potential to result in emotional distress in those that experience them. Because the Los Angeles wildfires are occurring in a large metropolitan area, the risk for distress among a sizable population is much greater. As wildfires are often triggered by lightning or accidents and often go unnoticed initially, they can spread quickly and are especially destructive if they occur in dense forests, populated rural areas, remote mountain sites, and other woodland settings where people live. Due to this quick onset, people who live in affected areas may be told to evacuate quickly, and are forced to leave their homes during very stressful, dangerous circumstances.

For emergency responders, wildfire containment is extremely hazardous and physically demanding work. Wildfires may necessitate the deployment of thousands of responders, including those newly trained and not used to the rigors of this work. In light of these circumstances, wildfires have the potential for increased emotional distress for residents and responders in the affected areas, as well as family members and loved ones of those directly impacted.

Presenting Issues - Callers/texters impacted by wildfire events may present issues of:

- Feeling overwhelmed and confused by evacuation orders, other directives from emergency officials

- Heightened anxiety or concern regarding relatives / loved ones in the affected areas
- Activation of emotional distress in relation to past traumatic experiences with wildfires, house fires, or other disasters; traumatic experiences can be related to evacuations, losing property or pets, traumatic grief associated with a death from a wildfire, etc.
- Emergency responder, rescue & recovery worker distress (fatigue & other physical concerns that may result in emotional distress; prolonged separation from family and support systems, vicarious trauma, etc.)
- For children and adolescents, there may be changes in behavior, including increased irritability, increased temper tantrums and disruptive behavior; adolescents becoming angry and more withdrawn; physical complaints (not due to the wildfire smoke and ash) including headaches and stomachaches, and a decline in school and work performance
- Wondering how one might be able to help (volunteering, donations, etc.)

Symptoms - General symptoms of distress related to wildfires, including during long term recovery, may include:

- Difficulty concentrating and performing necessary tasks at home, school, or work, including engaging in emergency preparedness (e.g., trouble making decisions)
- Difficulty adjusting to a 'new normal': new living situation (including living with relatives) or temporary shelter; new school; loss of employment or change in job; loss of local institutions such as places of worship or parks; disruption in community life
- Persistent anxiety
- Feeling angry, abandoned
- Uncertainty about the future
- Worsening of pre-existing mental health concerns
- Hyper-vigilance, nightmares, or flashbacks to traumatic experiences associated with the fire (i.e. being trapped, having to evacuate quickly)
- Disruptions in school or work performance
- Feelings of hopelessness, fear
- Excessive substance use or abuse
- Changes in eating or sleeping habits

Just In Time Training

It is normal for people to experience emotional distress during and after wildfires, including trauma and grief. Although many contacts you may be receiving from the affected areas will be requests for specific resources, please remember that we want to utilize the four steps of DDH Just In Time training with each contact, and avoid rushing to provide referrals. Use these steps to guide your conversations from beginning to end:

- **Engage** with them (establishing rapport and a compassionate presence; ask for their name and state yours; let them know that you are glad to support them).
- **Explore** their presenting concerns (ask about coping, reinforce healthy behaviors, look for distress reactions, identify social supports).
- **Connect** them with additional referrals for follow-up care and support as needed/appropriate based on their presenting/identified concerns.
- **Conclude** by summarizing any "plans" you've helped them think through, action steps to take, etc., and reminding them when appropriate to call/text back if they/loved ones should ever need to reach out again.

Use four standard elements of supportive crisis counseling:

- **Utilize Active Engagement**
 - Important in establishing a trusting relationship with the contact
 - Being present, patient, kind, and compassionate with the contact
 - Example: "I am following what you are saying"
- **Validate Emotions**

- Telling one’s “story” is important for many survivors, but can be retraumatizing for some; allow survivors to share their story if they initiate, but refrain from prompting them to do so, or telling them they ‘need’ to do so, including if they are revisiting graphic details
- Acknowledge the person’s experience as their own
- Validate their emotions and reactions
- Example: “It seems like your experience was quite scary.”
- **Normalize Reactions**
 - Let the contact know that their distress is likely a normal reaction to an abnormal event
 - Their reactions are expected, as they are common in people who have been exposed to these events
 - They are not alone; others may be experiencing similar reactions
 - Example: “I’ve worked with many people who have described similar experiences,” or “We know from our work with these events that most people will experience some of these same distress reactions for a period of time.”
- **Provide Psycho-Education and Coping Information**
 - Once a person’s experiences have been validated, provide education and helpful information
 - Educate about common reactions to stress
 - Provide information about breathing techniques and other coping skills like walking, stretching, and talking to others who understand and accept how they feel
 - Example: “After a disaster occurs, it may take time and more than one attempt to get through to some of the resources we’ve discussed, as a lot of people are reaching out for support. This is normal, and I encourage you to keep trying until you get through. If you start to feel anxious again while you’re on hold, you can try the breathing exercises we talked about.”

Disaster-Specific Resources

Educate the caller/texter that it may take more than one attempt to get through to local resources, as many others may be reaching out to the same resources, at the same time (see psycho-education example above). They may encounter longer-than-usual wait times, but if they stay on hold or try again later, eventually they should get through. As part of your provision of psycho-education, it can be helpful to remind them of this, urge as much patience as possible, and to keep reaching out.

California Disaster Resources

- Los Angeles Fire Department (Palisades fire evacuation information): <https://lafd.org/news/palisades-fire-0>
- [California Governor's Office of Emergency Services](#)
- [United Ways in California](#)
- Cal Fire Updates: Up-to-date information on wildfires in California <https://www.fire.ca.gov/>
- [Caltrans QuickMap](#) - This resource can be used when California individuals need to identify the best route for an evacuation

Wildfire Safety Information and Tips

- APA: [Tips for managing your distress related to wildfires](#) and [Recovering from Wildfires](#)
- SAMHSA: [Wildfires](#)
- NCTSN: [PFA: When Terrible Things Happen](#) and [Wildfire Resources](#)
- Ready.gov: [Wildfires](#) and [Ready Kids: Wildfires](#)
- CDC: [Wildfires](#)
- American Red Cross: [Wildfire Safety](#)
- MotherToBaby: [DDH Referral Link](#) (This link can be used for any contacts who have questions related to wildfire effects on pregnant or breastfeeding individuals) and [Pregnancy and Natural Disasters](#)

- Piplo Productions: [Once I Was Very Very Scared - YouTube](#) (This story helps children and adults to understand how stress can affect children and ways to help them cope)
- Trinka and Sam: [The Big Fire](#)

General State and Federal Disaster Resources

- USA.gov: [State Emergency Management Agency Locator](#)
- American Red Cross: [Find Your Local Red Cross](#)
- United Way: [United Ways in the United States](#)
- InciWeb: Incident Information System that provides a comprehensive overview of each wildfire <https://inciweb.nwccg.gov/>
- Tool for finding open pharmacies in areas impacted by disaster: [RxOpen](#)
- [Disaster Recovery Center \(DRC\) Locator](#)
- Disasterassistance.gov: [Find Assistance](#)
- [FEMA App](#): Weather alerts, locate emergency shelters, and view resources
- Text SHELTER + your ZIP code to 43362 (4FEMA) to find the nearest shelter in your area (example: shelter 12345).

Deaf and Hard of Hearing Resources

- State Resources
 - [California Deaf Access Program](#)
 - National Association of the Deaf: [State Agencies for Deaf and Hard of Hearing](#)
- Disaster Safety Information
 - Community Emergency Response Volunteers of the Monterey Peninsula (CERV): [Emergency and Disaster Readiness Video Resources in ASL](#) (General Tips and Resources, for any disaster)
 - NCTSN: [Age-Related Reactions to a Traumatic Event](#) and
 - CDC: [Disaster American Sign Language Videos](#)
 - FEMA: [Registering for Federal Disaster Assistance](#)
 - NWS Albuquerque: [Wildfire Hazards and Safety Tips in American Sign Language \(with Roger Robb\)](#)
 - Arizona Emergency Information Network: [Wildfire](#) and [During a Wildfire \(ASL\)](#)
 - Piplo Productions: [ASL Once I was Very Very Scared video](#) (This story helps children and adults to understand how stress can affect children and ways to help them cope)
 - Trinka and Sam: [The Big Fire](#)

Spanish Language Resources

- DDH One Page Summary in Spanish: [Spanish Disaster Distress Helpline One Page Summary](#)
- SAMHSA DDH information en Español: [Línea de Ayuda para los Afectados por Catástrofes](#)
- American Red Cross: [Tormentas eléctricas](#)
- Ready.gov: [Incendios forestales | Ready.gov](#)
- CDC: [Incendios forestales](#)
- NCTSN: [Guía para Padres con Hijos Que Han Sido Afectados por Incendios](#) y [Los Incendios y su Cobertura en las Noticias: Recomendaciones para los Padres](#)
- Piplo Productions: [Una Vez Tuve Mucho Mucho Miedo - YouTube](#)
- Trinka y Juan: [El Gran Fuego](#)

General Behavioral Health Referral Resources

For callers and texters from anywhere in the U.S. who may be presenting with distress or other mental health concerns related to this disaster:

- **[2-1-1](#) (Information on local disaster-specific and general social services)**

General, non-behavioral health-related disaster I&R or other general requests for information and resources should be referred to the caller/texter’s local 2-1-1 call center. Use the above link to determine where their nearest center is, based on the caller/texter’s ZIP code, and from their visit the 2-1-1 center’s own website if needed to find a specific local number.

- Avoid directing callers/texters to simply call 2-1-1, as they may not be routed to their actual local center.
- However, if a local number can’t be located via the aforementioned means, direct the caller/texter to call 2-1-1.
- Sample script: “Your local 2-1-1 info center should be able to help you with questions about most local social services available in your area. Here is the local number for the closest 2-1-1 to you.”
- [988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](#)
 - When a caller/texter has expressed suicidal/homicidal ideation or other crisis behavioral health concerns, after providing crisis assessment & intervention as needed, for follow-up care and support educate and refer the caller/texter to their nearest 988 Lifeline-networked crisis contact center by using the website locator based on their ZIP code and then visit the center’s website to find their specific local crisis number.
 - Avoid directing the caller/texter to simply call 988, as they may not be routed to their actual local 988 Lifeline-networked center.
 - However, if a local number can’t be located via the aforementioned means, direct the caller/texter to call 988 *or* educate them about the 988 Chat option, available via the main Lifeline website: [988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline Chat](#)
 - Sample script: “(Name of) your local crisis center can provide additional support, including follow-up care on what we have talked about. Here is the number for your local center.
- [SAMHSA's National Helpline / Treatment Referral Locator](#)
 SAMHSA’s National Helpline is a free, confidential, 24/7, 365-day-a-year treatment referral and information service (in English and Spanish) for individuals and families facing mental health and/or substance use disorders.
 - 1-800-662-HELP (4357) / TTY: 1-800-487-4889 Utilize the Helpline/Treatment Referral Locator when you cannot locate a local 2-1-1 and/or Lifeline-networked crisis center located near from where the caller/texter is located.
 - You can provide the website as a resource for the caller/texter and then they can look up resources on their own from there, but recognize that not all caller/texters may have access to the web, or may be experiencing a level of distress that might affect their ability to locate services on their own. In these circumstances, offer to visit the website yourself and, using the caller/texter’s ZIP code, help them to locate specific services based on their needs/presenting issues.
- [Strength After](#)
 Strength After is an initiative of the DDH that offers a platform for disaster survivors and responders to share stories of hope and strength during recovery after natural and human-caused disasters.
 - When people are struggling with distress or other mental health concerns like depression or anxiety after a disaster, it can help to hear from others who have gone through similar experiences regarding what helped them to find ‘strength after’, in moving forward on the path of recovery.
 - Counselors are encouraged to refer contacts to ‘Strength After’ to read stories of other disaster survivors, and/or share their own stories of recovery when they are ready.

Communications

If any DDH caller/texter identifies themselves as press, including seeking information about the DDH, quotes, comments, etc. in general or in relation to a disaster, instruct them to email ddh@vibrant.org and they will promptly receive a reply

to their inquiry (Vibrant Emotional Health DDH staff constantly monitor emails received, and will coordinate media/press inquiries accordingly, including in conjunction with the SAMHSA Office of Communications). If any DDH caller/texter is a provider seeking more information about the DDH, instruct them to email ddh@vibrant.org.

Self-Care

As caregivers and responders, DDH counselors expose themselves to stories of trauma related to distress, and can experience feelings of stress together with the disaster survivors they are helping. We encourage you to find healthy coping methods, such as engaging in regular self-care routines, using your support network to talk about troubling images and stories received through the DDH, and engaging in healthy coping during/after work to process emotions and relieve stress. The [988 Lifeline Wellness team](#) has curated a list of [self-care resources](#) designed to help mitigate the effects of answering DDH contacts related to disaster trauma. This [Self-Care in the Moment](#) worksheet also provides activities for immediate stress management. For some extra support during moments of stress, visit the Vibrant Emotional Health [Safe Space](#) website.