Supporting Yourself and Others following the Tai Po Fires

Supporting Yourself

What is a normal response to trauma?

It is normal to feel distressed following a traumatic incident. This distress may take the following forms:


Thinking a lot about what happened (rumination)


Remembering particular images, sounds, physical sensations or smells connected with the incident


It may even feel like the event is actually happening again (flashbacks)


You may find it difficult to sleep, or when you do sleep, you might dream about what happened

These can all feel very unpleasant but do not necessarily mean you have post-traumatic stress disorder – in fact, they are a normal response to a distressing event. For most people, these experiences will lessen over time without the need for support from a mental health professional.

What can you do in the short-term?

Seek support from friends and family

Sometimes people are reluctant to do reach out for help, because they find it embarrassing to talk about their struggles, or because they don't want to burden others with their problems. Ask yourself – if someone I knew was struggling, would I want them to share it with me? For most people, the answer is yes! It can be hard to apply this to ourselves, but opening up to someone you trust is likely to help.

Try not to avoid or distract:

It can be tempting to try to avoid thinking about what happened by distracting yourself. This is an understandable response and can help in the short-term if things feel overwhelming. However, thinking about what is happening is the mind's way of processing it, so in the longer term, avoiding those thoughts can be counter-productive.

Try to re-establish your regular routine as soon as possible:

Try and get sufficient sleep, eat regularly and drink enough water. When we are in shock, we often forget the fundamentals. Do not demand too much of yourself. You may need to gradually introduce tasks which seem difficult.

Limit Media Exposure:

Constantly watching or reading about the fire can heighten stress. Limit your exposure to distressing news and take breaks from social media.

Connect with Community:

Make time to go to a place where you feel safe - a park, a community centre, or a place of worship. You don't even need to talk if you don't want to; just being there in the presence of others can be helpful.

Coping From A Distance

Even from a distance, tragic events can deeply impact us. Your feelings are valid. Here are some ways to cope:

- **Acknowledge Your Feelings:** It's normal to feel sadness, anxiety, or anger, even if you weren't there. You are reacting to a tragedy in your community.

- **Curate Your News Intake:** Set a strict time limit (e.g., 10 minutes, twice a day) to check news updates. Avoid endlessly scrolling through graphic videos and images.

- **Talk It Out:** Share your feelings with a friend or family member. Simply saying, "This news has really been affecting me," can be a relief.

- **Focus on What You Can Control:** In the face of uncertainty, focusing on small, manageable actions can help. Channel your empathy into a positive action. This could be donating to a verified relief fund, sending a message of support to affected communities, or simply being extra kind to those around you.

- **Re-engage with Your Routine:** Anchor yourself in your daily life. Try to stick to familiar routines. Keeping regular eating, sleeping, and exercise habits can help ground you during turbulent times. Small daily routines can provide structure and reduce anxiety.

- **Seek Professional Support if Needed:** If feelings of distress persist and interfere with your daily life, reaching out to a helpline or professional is a sign of strength.

What if things don't improve?

For a minority of people, these experiences last for longer, and they might benefit from more support. If things don't start to improve within about four weeks, you are experiencing overwhelming emotions, or are using drugs or alcohol as a way of coping, then it may be advisable to seek professional help.

Psychological therapists can support by offering evidence based treatments such as trauma-focussed CBT and EMDR. These approaches can help people with PTSD to overcome ongoing symptoms.

Finally, many of us are aware of the risk of post-traumatic stress disorder, but less well-known is the concept of post-traumatic growth. This refers to the positive psychological change that some people experience after a life crisis or traumatic event. This is not a denial of distress – instead, the experience of adversity can unintentionally yield changes in understanding oneself, others, and the world. It is a recognition that a crisis can become a catalyst for positive transformation such as an increased appreciation for life, stronger relationships, a greater sense of personal strength, new possibilities, and spiritual change

Supporting Others

You may have family, friends, co-workers or neighbours who are impacted by the fire and may be wondering how best to support them.

Here are a few ways that you can support them:

- Invite them to a safe, calm and quiet space where they can talk openly without disruption. Be mindful of their preference for talking. They may not feel comfortable opening up at that moment, but checking in lets them know that you are there if they change their mind.
- Listen intently without interrupting and without judgement.
- Ask open-ended questions that invite them to share.
- After listening, offer practical support by asking them what would be helpful to them (don't assume you know what they need).
- Provide flexibility. In times of distress, relieve any pressures where possible.
- Encourage them to connect with others in their support network: friends, family, places of worship or mental health services (see resources and services section)
- If they are experiencing flashbacks of the event and feel panicky you can try a grounding or breathing exercise. If this happens regularly you should encourage them to seek professional support.

Try to avoid:

- Asking specific questions as this may be inadvertently triggering
- Minimising their feelings or experience. Everyone experiences different reactions to traumatic events, so it's important to validate their emotions.
- Going into solution mode. It can be normal to want to help and fix things, but often people just need someone to listen.

Supporting Children

Following a traumatic event, it is normal for children to experience difficulties. They may have been impacted directly, or indirectly such as seeing the event in the news. Each child will react differently, but these are some common reactions that you may noticed in your child:

Images of the event suddenly popping up in their mind

Becoming clingier with parents, grandparents or helpers

Feeling angry or easily upset

Physical Complaints (headaches, stomach aches)

Sleep problems

Difficulty concentrating

Not wanting to think about or talk about it

Nightmares

Avoiding going to places that remind them of the traumatic event

How can you support your child?

- Encouraging your child to talk about the difficult experience and/or any distressing thoughts they may be having is helpful and prevents them from keeping it inside. It also reassures them that it is okay to talk about the event.
- Talking about it also prevents children from filling in the blanks with their imagination which can be distressing.
- Avoid watching the news or exposing your child to distressing images related to the event.

Other practical ways to support your child:

- **Routine:** Making new routines or re-establishing new routines around personal care, school and mealtimes helps make the day more predictable and less frightening. This could include a regular sporting activity or bedtime stories.
- **Sleep Hygiene:** Good quality sleep is essential. Encourage your child to keep to regular bedtimes. Turn off screens one hour before bedtime.
- **Exercise:** Doing exercise and sports can help release 'Feel Good' chemicals in the brain to improve mood.
- **Relaxation:** Your child may benefit from doing breathing exercises if they are feeling overwhelmed or anxious.

Resources & Services

Clinical Care

In direct response to this tragedy, our team of counselors and clinical psychologists is offering pro-bono therapy sessions to anyone impacted by the fire. This support is available in English, Cantonese and Mandarin, ensuring we can provide compassionate care to our diverse community during this difficult time.

Crisis Care and Emotional Support Hotlines

Samaritans:

- 24-Hour Emotional Support Hotline & Suicide Prevention - 2389 2222
- English Emotional Support Hotline - 2389 2223
- ChatPoint（Online Chat Service） https://chatpoint.org.hk/
- Here to Hear (Peer Hotline) 2389 2227 or Whatsapp 5779 7356

Shall We Talk Hotline: 51645040
Shall We Talk "Mood Call" Mental Health Support Hotline: 18111
Open Up (Whatsapp / SMS): 9101 2012
Social Welfare Department Hotline: 2343225
Caritas Family Crisis Support Hotline: 18288
Hospital Authority Mental Health Hotline: 2466 7350
Free Services for Domestic Workers - HELP for Domestic Workers:
Telephone: +852 2523 4020 WhatsApp: +852 5936 3780 Email: info@helpfordomesticworkers.org