

Wildfire Health Community Advisory Board

MEETING #4: MENTAL AND SOCIAL HEALTH

10.14.25

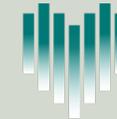
Led by Dr. Katherine McNamara, Dr. Savanna Carson, and Dr. Arleen Brown

Guest speaker: Dr. Dana Garfin

Please request before sharing slides.

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Spiegel Family Fund



LA FIRE HEALTH STUDY



UCLA
CTSI

UCLA Health



Recap from last meeting (session #3):

Blood Lead Levels, Soil and Dust Contaminants

1. Toxic heavy metals have been found in soil and in dust following the fires.
2. Lead (or other contaminants) in dust and soil are a health risk:
 1. If they are present at high levels **AND**
 2. If there is a chance of eating or breathing in a significant amount of soil and disturbed dust (particularly for children, pregnant persons, or other vulnerable populations)
3. In general, and **especially if levels were low, routine wet wipe cleaning is a great option for reducing contaminants in your home.** If levels were high, consider professional remediation and other measures.
4. Lead is only **one** of the contaminants that may be present in dust, soil, or ash from the fires. Testing is still happening, we're still learning, and protecting yourself as much as possible is always best practice.
5. If you have concerns, the best way to understand your or your family's lead exposure is to get your **Blood Lead Levels tested (free testing available).**



Recap meeting #3: What we heard from you!

Resources are important to share broadly, not everyone is aware
(free blood lead level testing and soil testing, education)

Looking back, some exposures likely could have been prevented or reduced with education and better use of PPE; however, personal priorities at that time also made this difficult (i.e., stay-and-defend protecting the home from fires, sifting through ashes, going back very quickly after fires ended, but not before the smoke cleared)

Understanding environmental testing and what it means is an issue for many people, as they are overwhelmed... and often lack clear explanations.

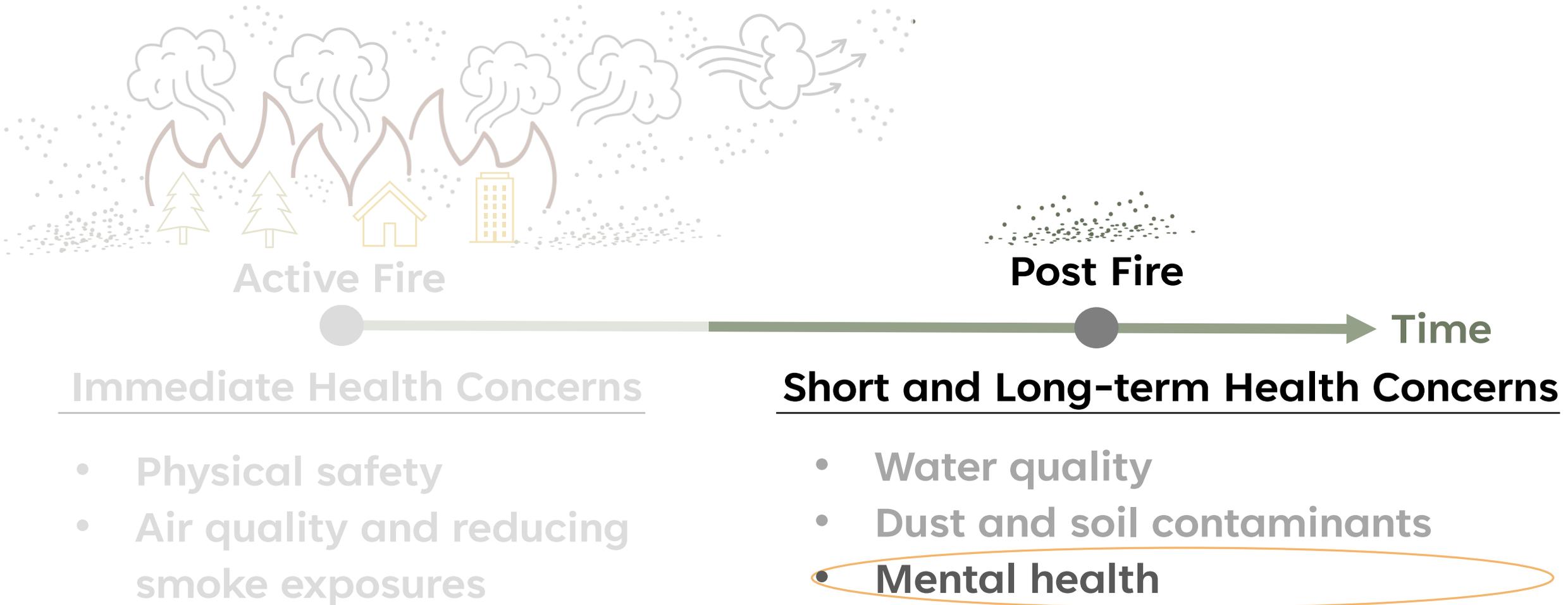
Additionally:

- Limited worker protections yet high exposures.
- Practical and effective information on soil remediation and gardening is needed.

Today's Topic:
**Social and Mental
Health**

Thinking Through Health and Fire Impacts

General timeline of priority health concerns, length of time when information or research is shared, and what the public may focus on over time.



Post-fire exposures we're covering today

Session #4: Learning & Discussion Objectives

- 1. Wildfires and Mental Health: What we know**
- 2. Resilience: Strategies for mental health**
- 3. Discussion**
- 4. Mental Health Resources and how to seek help**

NOTE:

The goal of this session is to provide education on current evidence of wildfire and Mental health, not to offer counseling or mental health support, for which further resources are provided.

Wildfires and Mental Health: What we know

Wildfires & Mental Health: Overview

Fire survivors have shown **increased mental health impacts** and/or **symptoms**, including:

- **PTSD**, or post-traumatic stress disorder, **which can include nightmares, flashbacks, irritability/anger, negative thoughts, avoidance**
- **Anxiety**, **worrying, panic attacks**
- **Depression**, **sadness, hopelessness**
- **Insomnia**, **poor sleep, or excessive exhaustion**
- **Substance use**, **alcohol, smoking, weed**
- **Environment- or community-related distress**, **over-fixating on big unknowns with limited control**
- **Suicidality**: **self-harm**
- **Other**: **inability to concentrate, body tension, over/under eating**

In children or adolescents, in addition to the above, this can also mean:

- Behavior or adjustment issues, including irritability/anger or regression
- Disruption of family support, family stress, or changes
- Learning issues, cognitive deficiencies, or delayed language development

- Increases in urgent care and ED visits for mental health (neuropsychiatric visits) occur after fires/smoke.
- Ongoing research will help us understand whether long-term *repeated* exposure to wildfire smoke also raises the risk of dementia and other brain/neurologic conditions.

Who is at risk for mental health impacts after wildfires

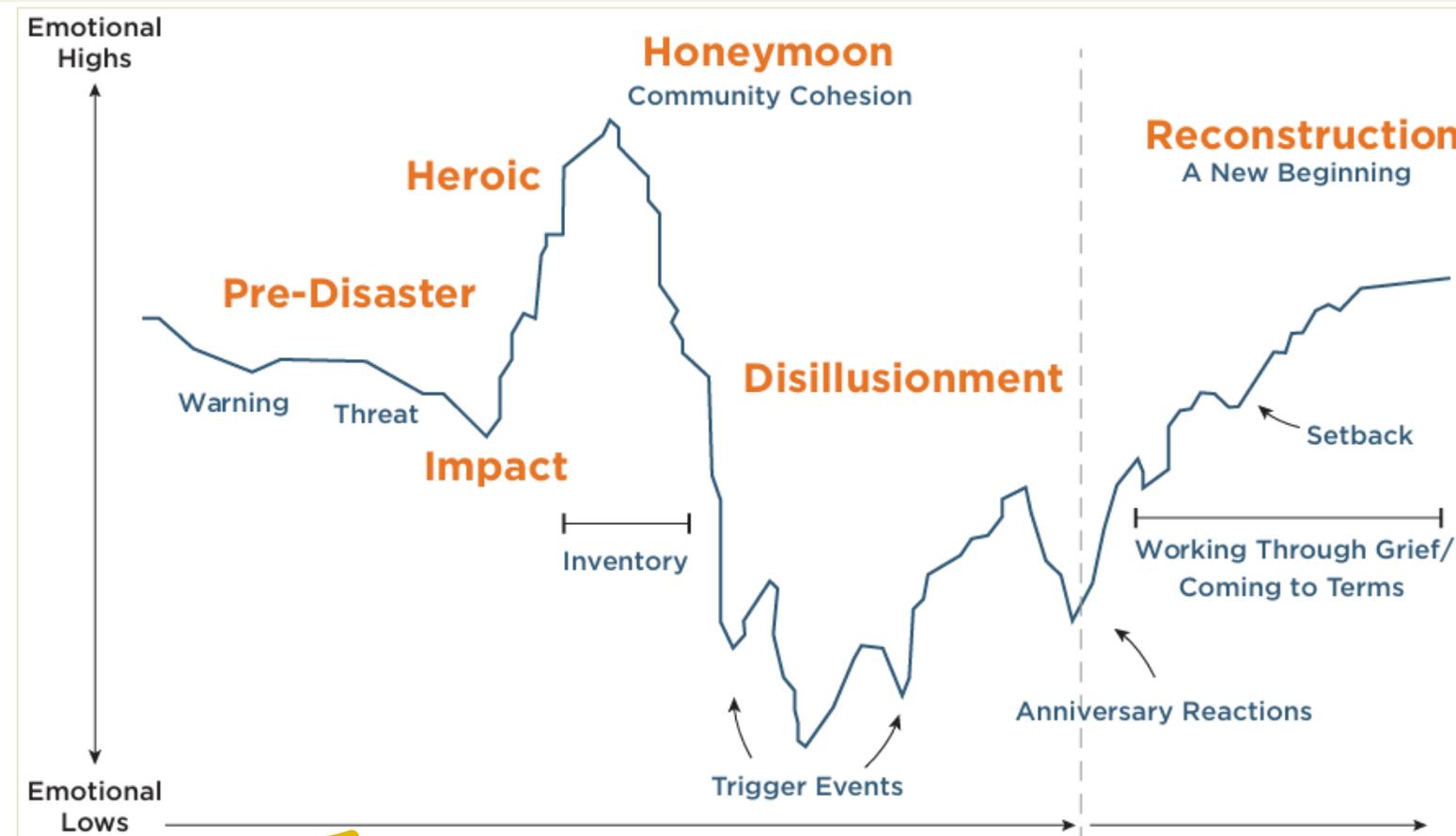
Everyone who experienced the disaster (even indirectly)



But especially those who have/are:

- Direct exposure, injuries, or loss (close/loved ones, housing/relocation, social/community resources, etc.)
- Pre-existing mental health or physical health conditions
- Previous/prior traumas
- Ethnic minorities
- Lower socioeconomic status and education, or persons with limited resources, including pre-fire housing insecurity, unemployment, poverty, etc.
- First-responders
- Women, youth/children/adolescents, older adults

Waxing and Waning: Emotional Phases Following a Disaster



- Emotions are not linear; expect ups and downs *long after* the disaster. Recovery is a long-term journey.
- Phases and timelines can differ for different people and for different types of disasters.
- Secondary stressors (*often related to living life following the disaster*) can create high levels of continuing stress and effort in adjustment.
- Additional stressors and factors can compound. Examples:
 - A hurricane followed by another hurricane
 - A wildfire, housing, and dealing with FEMA, plus worrying about immigration enforcement (ICE), and approaching another fire season...

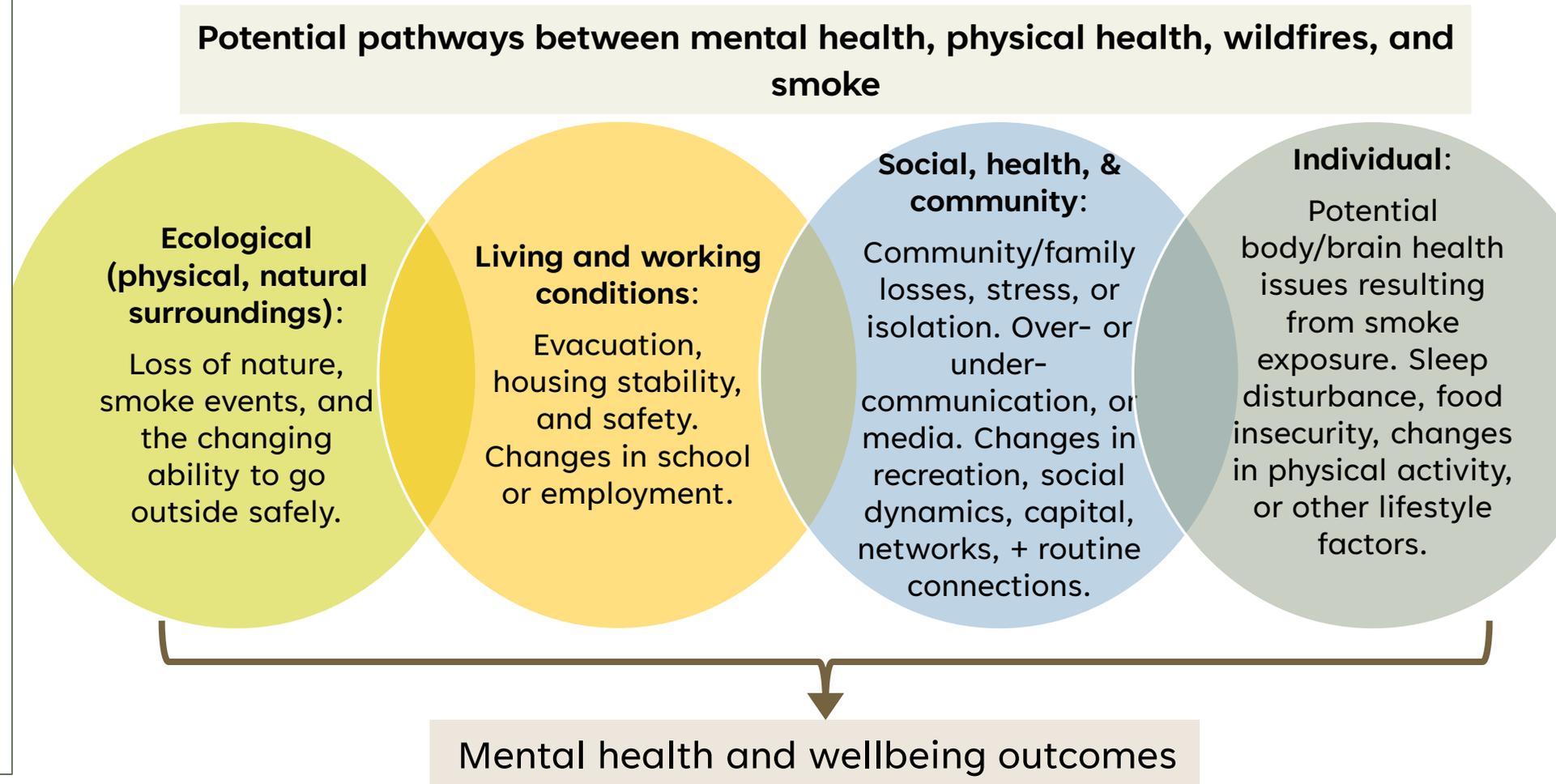
Key point:

It is normal for emotions to fluctuate, or wax and wane, *long after* the disaster. Disaster recovery is often a long-term process.

Pathways between wildfire smoke, mental health, and well-being

Key point:

Multitude of losses,
Constant change,
Community upheaval,
Plus
Smoke and brain connection



You didn't ask for this...

Smoke may also contribute to Brain Health impacts

Exposure to smoke can lead to toxic particles entering the body, resulting in increased toxic stress and inflammation.

Some small particles may even reach the brain and cause damage in repeated or long-term exposure.

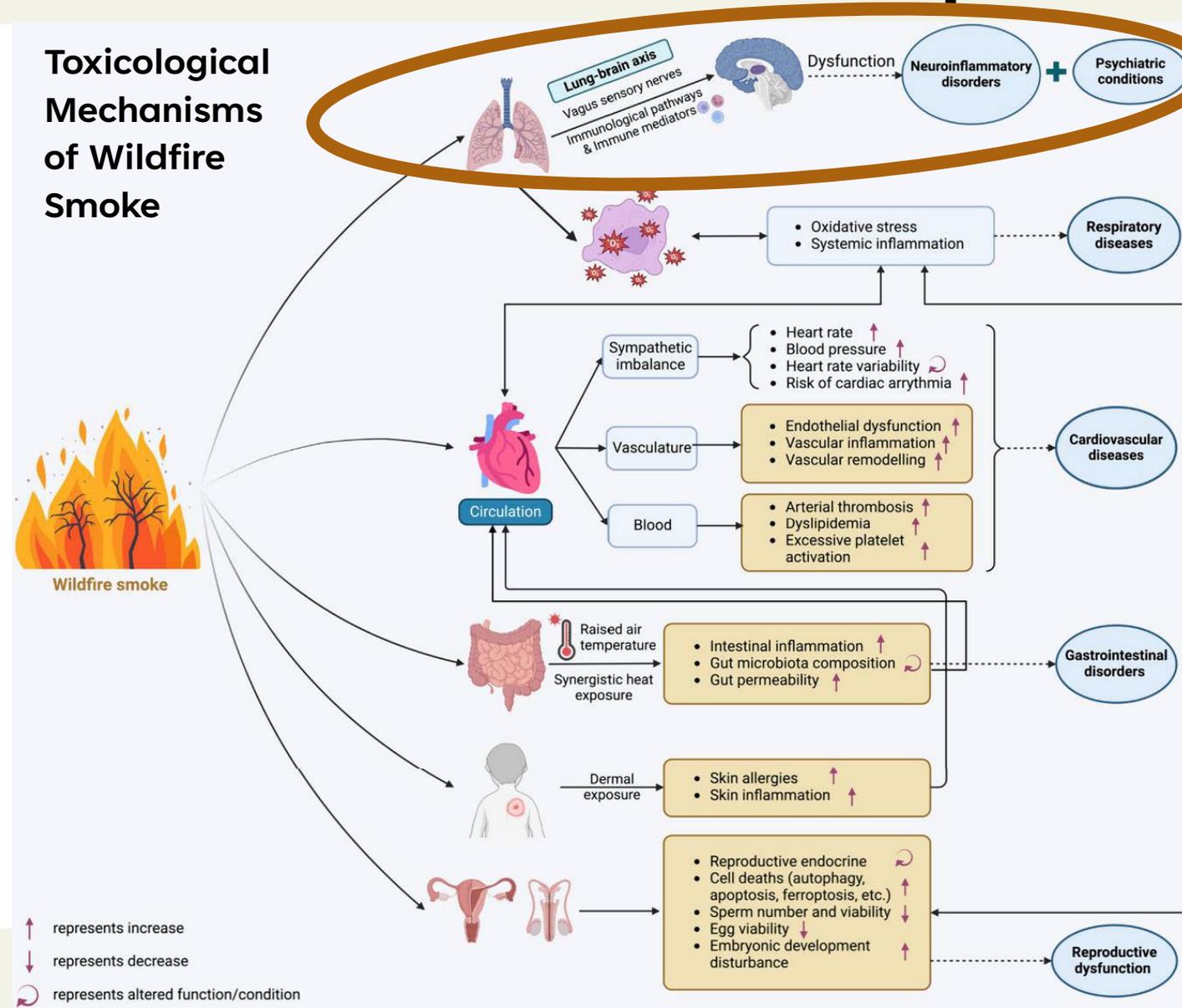


Figure: Lei Y, Lei TH, Lu C, Zhang X, Wang F. Wildfire smoke: health effects, mechanisms, and mitigation. Environmental Science & Technology. 2024 Nov 8;58(48):21097-119.

Social Health Impacts in recent headlines... *which can affect mental and physical health*

Unemployment

- 11,000 Workers Filed for Unemployment due to the fires¹
- Low wage workers hit the hardest (50% higher increase in filing with a high school diploma or less)

Food insecurity

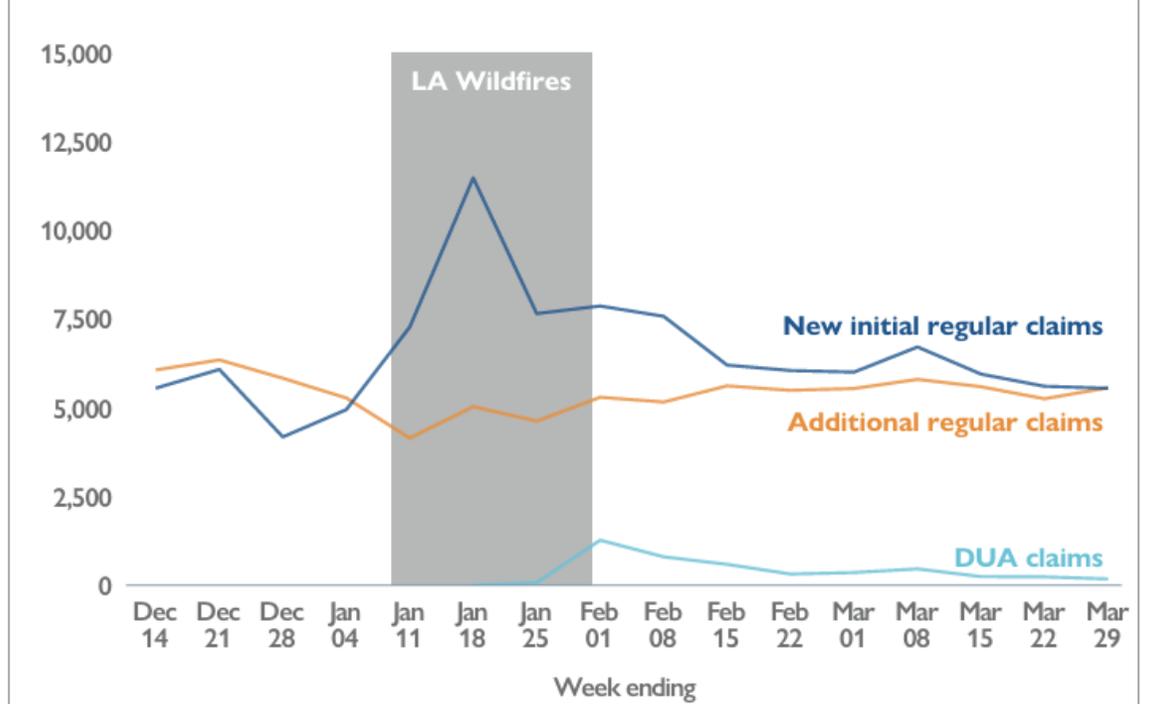
Schools (lost learning time)²

Housing (rent, evacuation, etc.)

Community-based organizations faced new challenges in supporting communities after fires³

Time, effort, and stress in dealing with insurance, FEMA, rebuilding, changing headlines, and potential environmental hazards (*no one headline*)

FIGURE 2: Initial regular claims, additional claims, and DUA claims by week in LA, Dec 2024 - March 2025



School Disruptions from the LA Fires Hit Latino, Disadvantaged and English-Language Learners Hardest, Experts Find

California fires' disparate impacts on students offer lessons for how schools should prepare for climate disasters across the nation.

By Liza Gross 
March 14, 2025

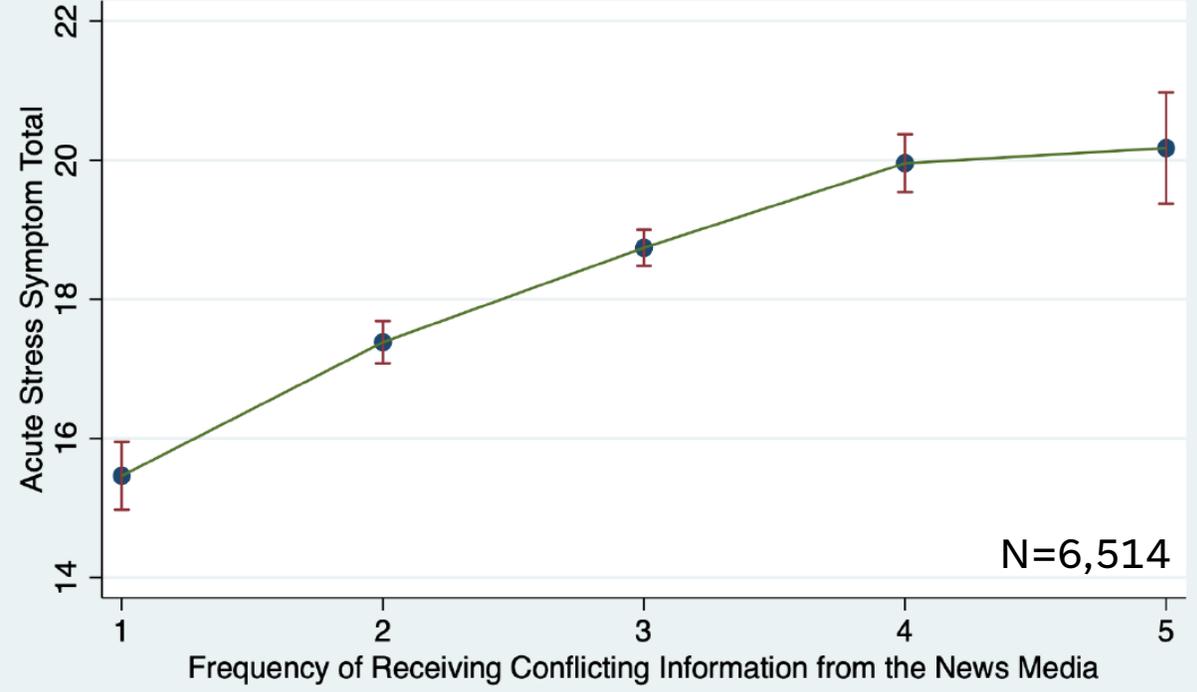
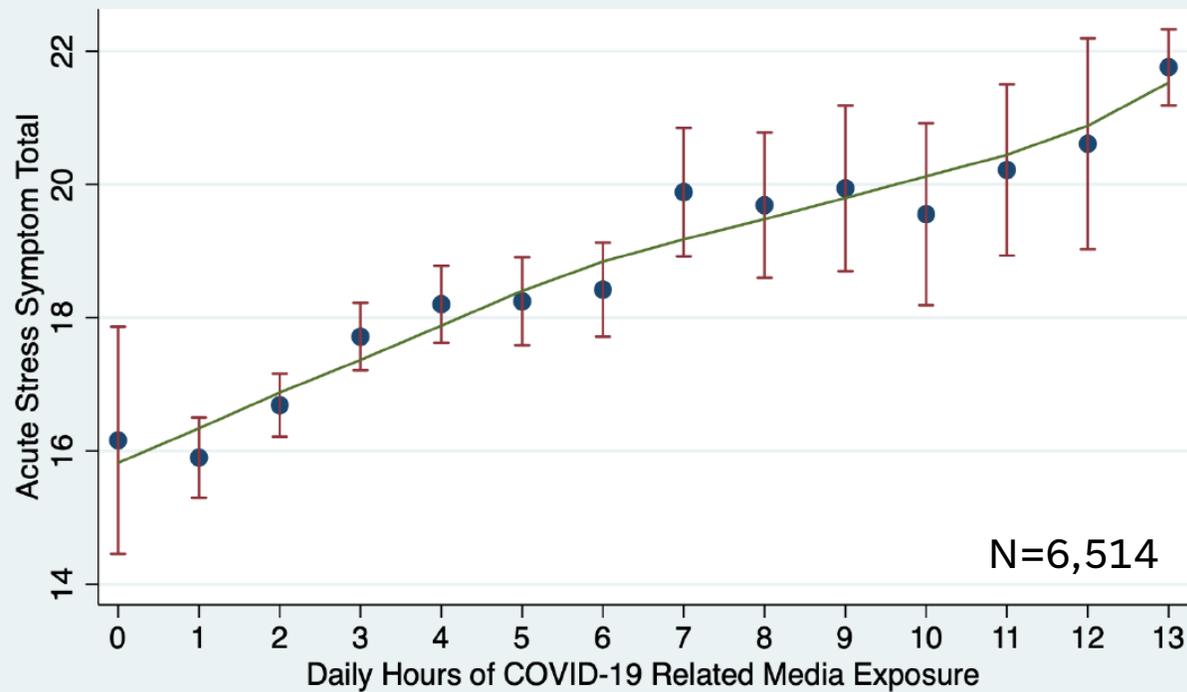
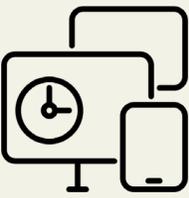
1. Lapinski, P., et al. Unemployment Insurance Claims After the LA Wildfires. California Policy Lab. (2025). <https://capolicylab.org/unemployment-insurance-claims-after-the-la-wildfires/>

2. <https://insideclimatenews.org/news/14032025/latino-disadvantaged-students-hit-hardest-after-los-angeles-fires/>

3. <https://cnmsocal.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/CNM.LAwildfires-SurveyFindings.pdf>

Media exposure can increase stress

Screens, news, podcasts, radio, social media, etc.



Key points:

● Acute Stress Symptom Total

● Acute Stress Symptom Total

- While staying informed is important, **excessive media/screen time can increase stress, especially with conflicting information.**
- **This is particularly true for children.**
- To minimize confusion, **limit media use, rely on trusted sources, and actively discuss with loved ones.**

Preliminary Results:

Mental Health Research from the LA Fires

USC Dornsife "LABarometer" Wildfire Survey

- April 2025, studied the effects on L.A.'s housing-insecure residents.
- Key finding: For those who were displaced, psychological distress was twice as common among housing-insecure individuals compared to their housing-secure peers.

Purdue REBUILD Survey

- Key findings (figure on right): Mental health ties to fire damage, debris removal.

Current/future research and surveys:

- Dept of Angels, UCLA...

Purdue: The REBUILD Survey

Mental Health Impacts

Months after the fires, respondents reported that they experienced anxiety, stress, or depression related to concerns about fire-damage to... (n= 1,073).

Response	Palisades Fire (%)	Eaton Fire (%)
Outdoor air	75.4	84.0
Soil	72.9	84.9
Indoor air	68.7	74.6
Natural places like parks, hiking spots	70.4	77.3
Drinking water	51.2	60.3

More than three of every four households were concerned that debris removal operation pollution would affect the safety of schools. Most households **disagreed** that debris removal operations around schools is safe: Palisades Fire (77.8%) and Eaton Fire (79.7%) (n= 1,073).

Response	Palisades Fire (%)	Eaton Fire (%)
Strongly disagree	54.7	52.8
Somewhat disagree	23.1	26.9
Neither agree or disagree	13.4	12.1
Somewhat agree	6.2	6.6
Strongly agree	2.5	1.6

USC Dornsife: https://dornsife.usc.edu/cesr/wp-content/uploads/sites/54/2025/04/LABWildfire_FinalReport.pdf
 Purdue: The REBUILD Survey: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=red>
 Dept of Angels: <https://www.deptofangels.org/news/six-months-later-recovery-in-crisis>

Resilience

(an active process)

Resilience =

Willpower, Adaptability, Tenacity, Grit, Growing, Learning...



RESILIENCE IS:

- Ability to withstand, deal with, or persevere after hard things
- Dedication and willpower to move forward
- Adjusting, learning, asking for help, and building skills
- Learning new skills and growing after challenges

RESILIENCE DOES NOT MEAN:

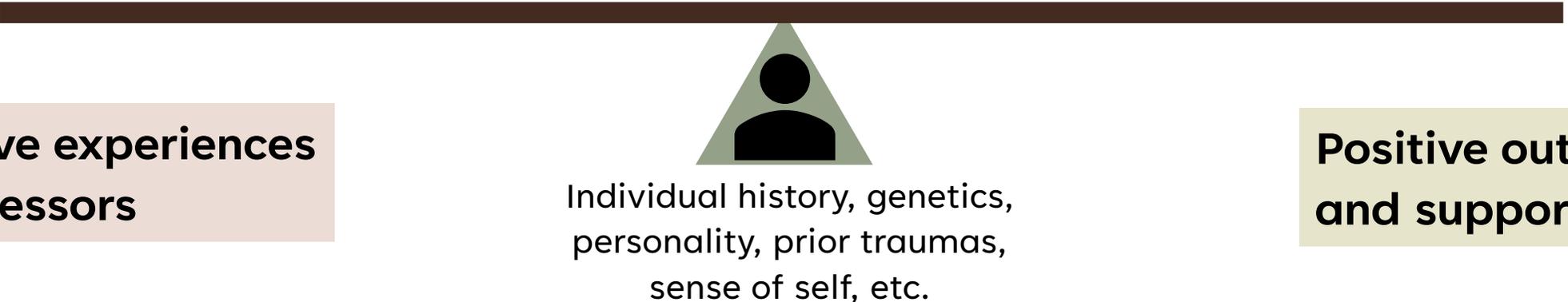
- Things are easy.
**Resilience co-occurs with very challenging situations and involves working through them.*
- Stress-free, or that mental health isn't affected.
**Support is often a part of maintaining resilience.*
- You are done learning, reacting, or feeling! Or that you have “won,” “beat it,” or conquered all!
**Resilience is active, ongoing, and constant throughout life's obstacles.*

What is resilience? 2 min video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1r8hj72bfGo>

Resilience as a scale:

Resilience occurs when the scale tips towards positive outcomes, even in the face of challenging situations and stressors.



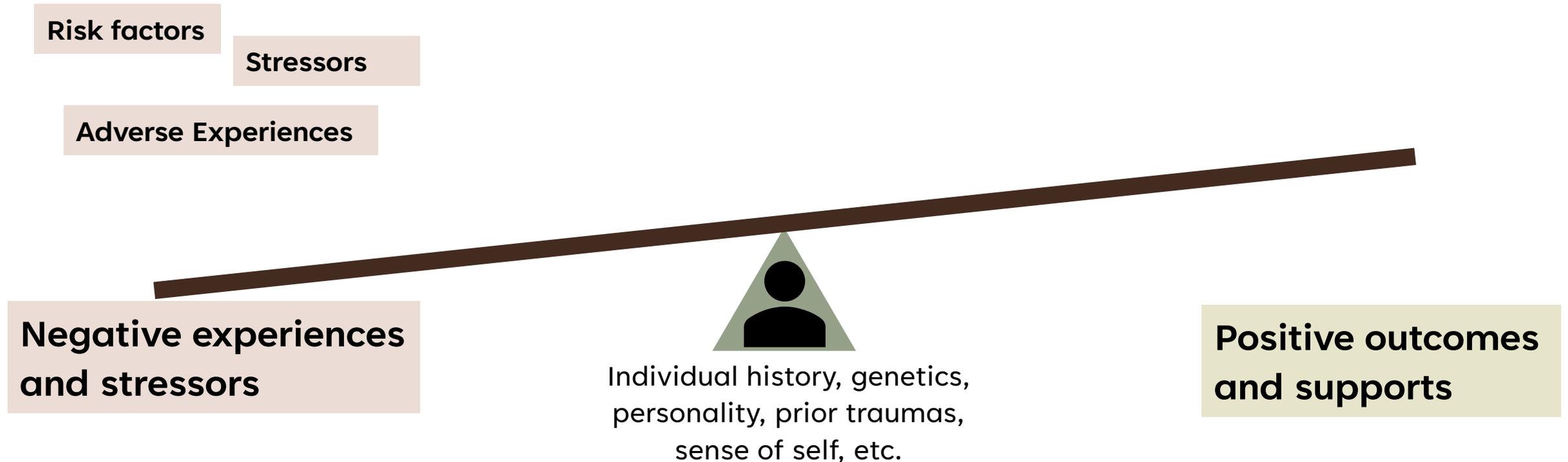
**Negative experiences
and stressors**

Individual history, genetics,
personality, prior traumas,
sense of self, etc.

**Positive outcomes
and supports**

Resilience as a scale:

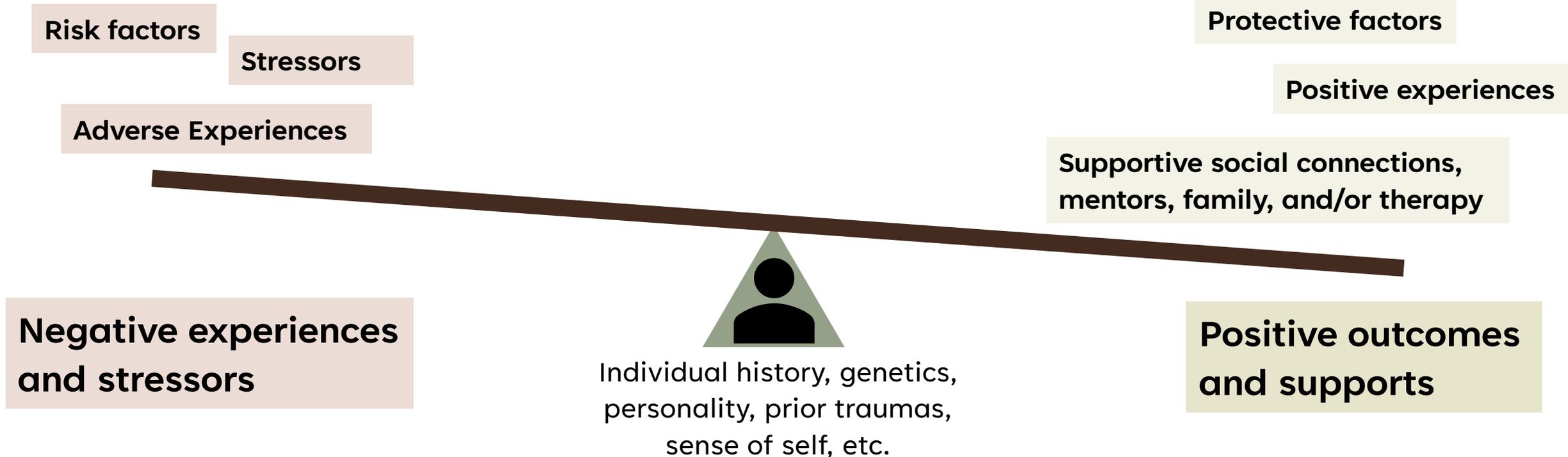
Resilience occurs when the scale tips towards positive outcomes, even in the face of challenging situations and stressors.



Resilience as a scale:

Resilience occurs when the scale tips towards positive outcomes, even in the face of challenging situations and stressors.

How might a wildfire affect this scale?



Resilience as a scale:

Returning to our case studies from Session #1:



1. **Grace:** 10 years old, has asthma, lives across from the fire zone, and walks to school.



2. **Clara:** 60 years old, has high blood pressure, and works without a mask in housekeeping in the fire zones.

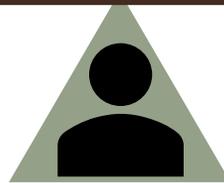


3. **Michael:** Evacuated and has high-quality air purifiers that he runs daily.

How might a wildfire affect their scale?

What could help with positive outcomes and support during and after a wildfire?

**Negative experiences
and stressors**



Individual history, genetics,
personality, prior traumas,
sense of self, etc.

**Positive outcomes
and supports**

Coping following a disaster or a wildfire...

RISKY

**SHORT-TERM
STRATEGIES**

Feel good temporarily but often aren't helpful long-term or make it worse



**LONG-TERM
SKILLS OR ROUTINE BEHAVIORS**

Don't help us build good routines or feel better in the long run



SUPPORTIVE

Help during stressful times temporarily



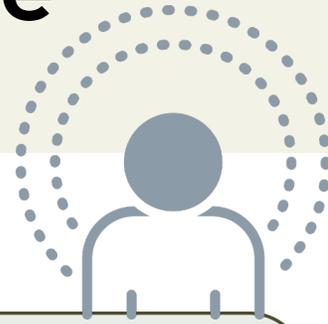
Help us build good routines and feel better in the long run



What are these to you? How might they affect your resilience scale?

Active Resilience (1/3): Purpose, focus, & balance

What is most important to you?



Valuing your purpose:

Fulfilling the role you play in your family/household, friends, profession, and community

- Seeking meaning in your work
- Making a contribution
- Take action. Figure out what needs to be done, make a plan, and take action.
- Do something every day that gives you a sense of accomplishment and purpose. Having something meaningful to focus on can help you share emotions, feel gratitude, and experience an improved sense of well-being. Reduce big tasks into manageable, smaller ones over time, or involve others in helping to manage tasks.



Honoring and understanding yourself: Recognizing feelings and needs

- Accepting your limitations
- Being gentle with yourself
- Taking care of yourself (Eating, sleeping, etc.)
- Paying attention to needs and feelings
- Journaling, tell your story, sharing honest reflections



Balance

- Relaxation, vacation & avocations (hobbies)
- Exercise & recreation
- Stress management, therapy, meditation, etc.
- Not losing yourself, keeping a routine



Active Resilience (2/3): Building your community

What community is most supportive?

Look to and seek out your role models, ancestors, guides, teachers...

- Inspiration, motivation
- Leadership
- A reminder of how hard things have been overcome
- Reminder of values
- Help support your esteem, feelings/emotions,



Be part of communities that support your...
learning, grounding, reflecting, & listening

- Social or community groups and gatherings
- Religion
- Book clubs
- Support groups (AA meetings, etc.)
- Sports/exercise groups



Seeking and giving support:
Benefits you (rewarding or supportive) and others (receiving support)

- Supporting others... volunteering
- Finding a cause...
- Listening, communication, etc.



Active Resilience (3/3): Perspective

How can you reflect and learn from this?



Look for positives... and things to look forward to...

- Look toward the future and identify what you can look forward to.
- Practice gratefulness for what you are learning and how you are growing or changing!
- Find something in each day that signals a change.



Learn from experiences

- Remember the skills and strategies that helped you through prior rough times.
- Focus on what you can change versus what you do not have control over.
- Celebrate what you've learned or how you've changed.



Welcome Change

- Expecting change makes it easier to adapt, tolerate, and even welcome it.
- Staying flexible reduces anxiety.



Take the wide view

- What will matter most in 10 years?
- A long-term perspective can help you focus on how you can improve your situation if you actively work towards it.



Laugh

- Finding humor in stressful situations has multiple benefits-
-supports bonding with others, and has physical and mental health benefits.
- Helpful coping mechanism!



Active Wildfire - Protective Mental Health Concepts

Active Fire
(Immediate)



Key points:



Basic needs take priority
food, water, shelter,
safety, healthcare



Steady routine
Provide stability when
there is unpredictability



Reduce smoke exposure
Reduces health risks



Limit/reduce endless media
Reduces stress



Talking openly about what is known/unknown
Reduce confusion, support understanding



Acknowledging and identifying feelings
(even constantly changing, or numb feelings)
Supports processing, self-awareness,
relationships, and communicating needs



All responses are normal, but know when to seek help (or seek help early)
It's OK to not be OK –AND–
It's OK to be OK, but not be OK later

After the Fire - Protective Mental Health Concepts

Post Fire (Short and long term)



Key points:

All of the things on the previous slide, **PLUS:**



Communicating stories and experiences

It helps you process, grow, and understand yourself and your experiences, while grounding you in the present moment to function. Find the ears and groups who will listen and from whom you can also learn.



Community and social support

Receiving and providing support. Social, family, peer, neighbors, or related connections. Recognizing everyone has a different path, a windy road, setbacks, and when it hits differently.



Look for positives, what you can look forward to, and practice **gratefulness**

“This situation sucks, but I’m grateful for my family, who welcomed me into their home. I look forward to seeing my teachers when school opens again.”



Exercise

Moving your body



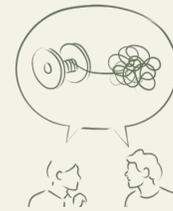
Nature

(when it’s safe)
Outdoors, gardens, ocean/lakes, trees



Mindfulness & Spirituality

Being present, instilling peace



Therapy

When needed, or actually, before you need it 😊



Using your hands and being creative

Cook, journal, draw, touch, garden, pet animals, bounce basketball, etc.

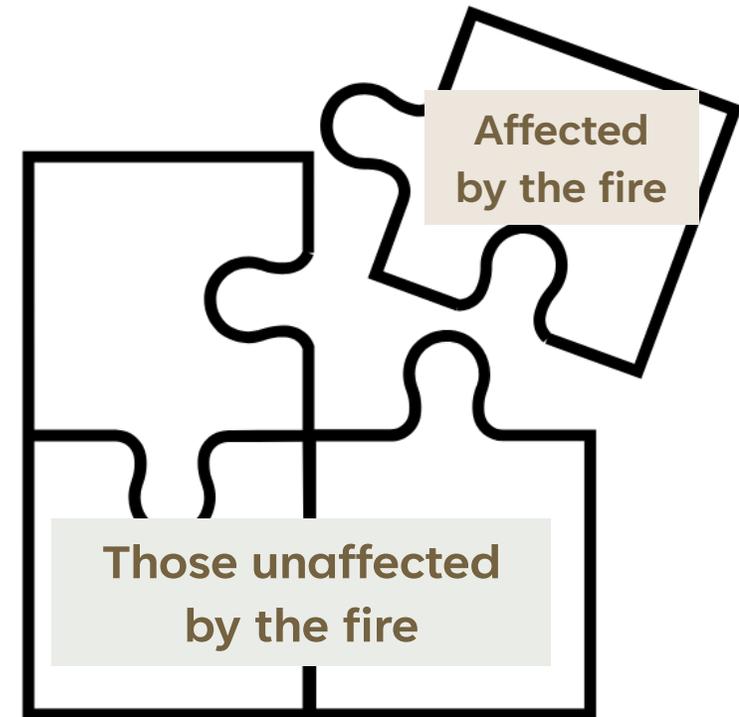
Recognizing: What you're feeling and what you need

- We're very used to "carrying on" and "moving on"
- Media and the world can move fast
- Capitalism and the continuing need to support oneself and family, pay for housing, healthcare, food, etc.
- Various cultures, religions, or personalities may also have different customs in which one puts others' needs above their own.

Self-care may seem unimportant, selfish, or time-consuming, but it is critical to reduce burnout and keep balance.

Key point:

Media, life, and others who are not affected... can all shift around you, *before you may have moved on*. But recovery from a disaster is a long-term process. Recognize what you're feeling, what you need, and be part of a supportive community.



Discussion

1. What does the **community need most** to support mental health after the fire? What are the **unmet mental health needs**?
2. What has been **most helpful** in improving resilience in your community since the fires? What **resources or community connections** have contributed to this?
3. What has your **community learned** about mental health since the fires?
4. How can we **better prepare for and respond** to future incidents?

Mental Health Resources

Question: When to seek support?



Answer: Sooner than you may think!

As soon as you recognize a change in yourself or your surroundings that may be affecting your well-being, it is a great time to connect with supportive communities and mental health supports.



Levels of care

- **Preventative** (after-school programs, social support meant to strengthen protective factors)
- **Treatment** (therapy, support groups, medication)
- **Urgent/Crisis** (ensuring safety)

Unsure where to start?

Call 988, nationwide mental health support (which connects to all forms of local support), currently for LA:

<https://didihirsch.org/>

Knowing what you need and how to get connected

Setting expectations early helps prepare for the journey!

Things that can take time when seeking help:

- Recognizing you could use support, asking for and seeking help can be hard, new, or uncomfortable
- Figuring out insurance (if any) and who is in network, co-pay
- Finding the right therapist, what is important in a provider, for YOU

If you have insurance, the back of your insurance card will have a mental health line:

Member Services:	1-855-270-2327 (TTY/TDD 1-855-576-1620)
Mental Health:	1-877-344-2858 (TTY/TDD 1-800-735-2929)
Nurse Advice Line:	1-800-249-3619 (TTY/ TDD 1-800-854-7784)
Health Education:	1-855-856-6943

Providers can call for: * Pre-authorizations: <crosswalk #> Pharmacy info: 1-888-648-6765 <small>* Pre-authorization is required for all non-emergent hospital admissions.</small>	Submit Medical Claims to: <crosswalk PPG> <crosswalk ATT:> <crosswalk Address:> <crosswalk Address:>
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www.lacarecovered.org

Unsure where to start?
Call 988, nationwide mental health support (which connects to all forms of local support), currently for LA:
<https://didihirsch.org/>

Resources for children and supports

UCLA

Pritzker Center

For Strengthening Children and Families

Parenting, teaching, caregiving for children- Wildfire resources:

- "Supporting Children, Strengthening Communities: Professional Skills for Talking About Wildfires Together" with Dr. Melissa Brymer <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FTwZj5kvbTg>
 - Communication handout: <https://d3kdbh1wduemv1.cloudfront.net/attVnm39LDeYME657.pdf?cache=1736380069>
- Addressing the Wildfires: A resource guide for Caregivers and Educators https://ugc.production.linktr.ee/6bfe8bf5-5438-46a2-9db7-5988260d3960_Wildfire-Resources-for-Caregivers-and-Educators.pdf
- Parent Guidelines for Helping Children Impacted by Wildfires: https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/parents_guidelines_for_helping_children_impacted_by_wildfires.pdf

Service/resources links:

- Wildfire resources (more children's resource links, **pro bono therapists**, etc.): https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ttP8nT6ueNz_aUFJv2ebVVFijkmecOra/edit?tab=t.0
- Eaton/EFRU Local Mental Health Supports: <https://www.efru.la/mental-health>

Resources to get connected to providers



Disaster Mental Health Support and Connections

<https://www.calhope.org/pages/ccp.aspx>



Los Angeles County Mental health resources for those affected by the fire (text lines, in-person support, etc)

<https://dmh.lacounty.gov/our-services/disaster-services/disaster-mh-resources/>

Free UCLA writing workshop on the LA Fires

Nov 22nd, Virtual, Registration Open

November 22, Saturday 10:00AM - 1:00PM PT

"There is a crack in everything," Leonard Cohen wrote in his song "Anthem," "That's how the light gets in." Such cracks come from all kinds of disasters--a cancer diagnosis, a loved one's death, a worldwide pandemic or a devastating wildfire. Resourceful and resilient writers find the light in our greatest trials. Led by an instructor who lost her home to the Palisades Fire, students will discover ways not only to survive tragedies but thrive in their aftermath. We'll consider how journals can be a first draft of history, how overwhelming struggles can be captured with vivid action, granular emotions and telling details, and how micro stories can connect to macro truths, all potentially turning trauma into transcendent literature. Topics for lecture and discussion will include the latest studies on the physical and psychological benefits of writing, a sampling of powerful dispatches from life's fault lines, and exploration of real life challenges that can be best served by writing, whatever form it might take--memoir, essay, poetry or fiction. Participants will leave with new approaches to boosting their own resilience and navigating whatever calamities come their way.

Registration: <https://www.uclaextension.edu/writing/creative-writing/course/after-fire-writers-approach-surviving-disasters-writing-7217e>



After The Fire: A Writer's Approach to Surviving Disasters

WRITING 721.7E

Led by an instructor who lost her home to the Palisades Fire, students will discover ways not only to write about surviving tragedies but thrive in their aftermath.

[View Course Options](#)

[READ MORE ABOUT THIS COURSE](#)

CURRENTLY OFFERED	COST	UNITS
Live Online	\$0	0.0
	DURATION	
	As few as 1 day	

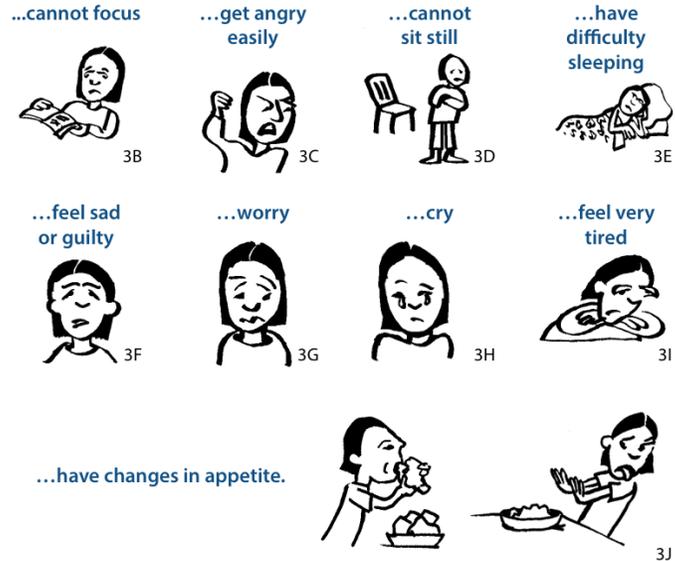
A really great resource...

Adult/kids book, training, teaching, and learning tool for stress

Doing What Matters in Times of Stress: An Illustrated Guide



When they are stressed, many people ...



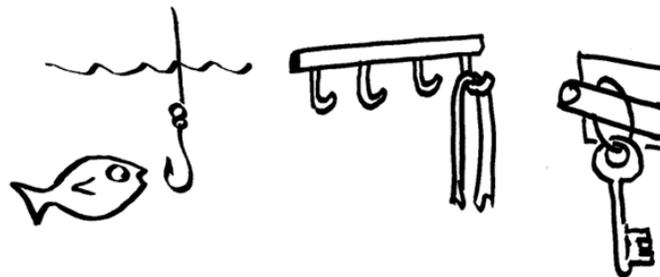
And many of us think a lot about bad things from the past or bad things we fear in the future.



These powerful thoughts and feelings are a natural part of stress. But problems can occur if we get "hooked" by them.



What does "hooked" mean?
Well, there are many types of hooks.



So these difficult thoughts and feelings "hook" us and pull us away from our VALUES.

What are values?



Values are your deepest desires for the sort of person you want to be.



Live events, stress, and health

Holmes-Rahe Life Stress Inventory: The Social Readjustment Rating Scale

Directions: Select each of these life events that have happened to you this past year that apply to you. Your points will be totaled. A total score of:

- 150 or lower: Low risk for stress-induced health issues in the next two years.
- 151 to 300: At-risk, or about a 50% chance for stress-induced health issues in the next two years.
- 301+: High risk, implying about an 80% chance of a health issue in the next two years.

Results: While this scale isn't perfect, nor may it capture all the things in your life, seeing your score can help convey "big things" happening in your life that may lead to an increase in mental and physical health load...

How did your score make you feel? Was it surprising?

Key point:

Tools like this can remind us of all that may be going on, helping us recognize the importance of taking care of our mental and physical health during big transitions.

Thank you!!



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- LA FIRE HEALTH STUDY

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Other Resources

Resources

Mortgage Relief: The CalAssist Mortgage Fund still has grants available. There are income limits for the household, and they list that it must have been your primary residence on January 8, 2025, but if you don't meet every single criteria point, their director recommends you apply anyway, and they will review each case. Notes:

- You can get up to \$20,000 in mortgage assistance
- That money is a grant - you do not need to pay these funds back
- Paid directly to your lender, with no tax implications.

Free Air Purifiers (Post Fire LA): To receive a purifier, you'll have to verify that you live in or up to six miles around the burn scars. If you have already verified and would like to receive a purifier or have any questions about the program or verification, please respond to this email to let us know. <https://www.postfirela.org/airpurifiers>

Admin

Next meeting?

Date options:

November 4th, 18th, or Dec 9th

Goal: Check in on past year of meetings, what's been helpful, small celebration, shorter meeting...