

Helping Families Cope After a Natural Disaster

Natural disasters can be traumatic for families. The devastation to a familiar environment such as your home can be long-lasting and distressing.

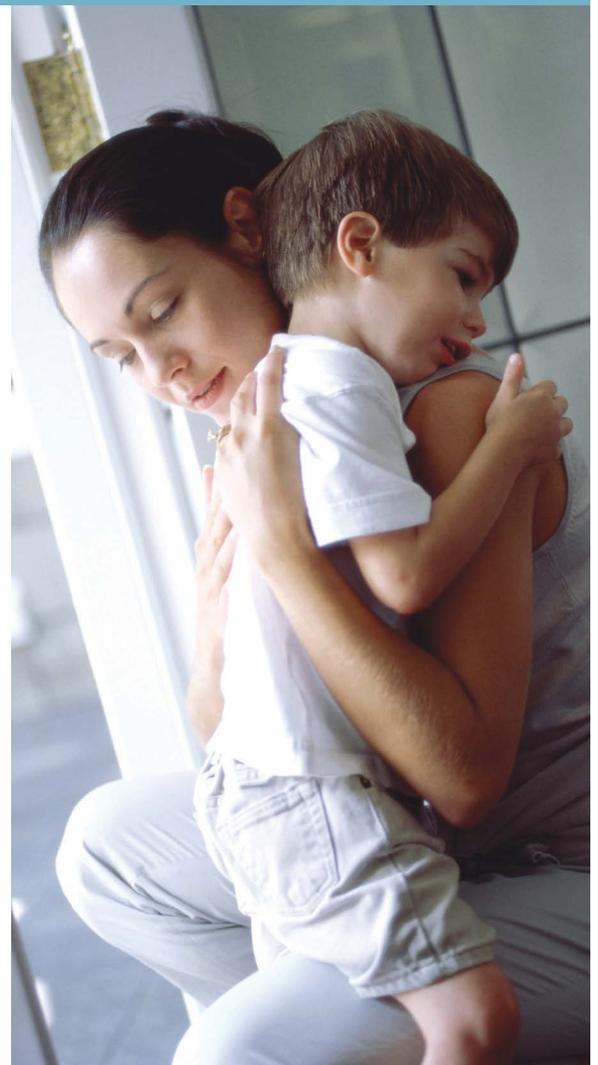
Often an entire community is impacted, further undermining a family's sense of security and normalcy. Natural disasters present unique issues and coping challenges, including the need to relocate when home and/or community have been destroyed.

Reactions immediately following an event may include emotional and physical exhaustion. For example, given the scale of some wildfires, individuals living outside the ravages of the fires may still feel threatened because of environmental reminders of the event. After the event, some individuals may react to follow-up news coverage and reports of changing conditions.

Common reactions children may experience

For children, the effects of a fire or other traumatic event may be especially difficult. Over time, children should be able to cope with the help of parents and other caring adults. However, some children may be at risk of more extreme reactions. Symptoms may differ depending on age and can include:

- **Preschoolers:** Thumb sucking, bedwetting, clinging to parents, sleep disturbances, loss of appetite, fear of the dark, regression in behavior, and withdrawal from friends and routines.
- **Elementary School Children:** Irritability, aggressiveness, clinginess, nightmares, school avoidance, poor concentration, and withdrawal from activities and friends.
- **Adolescents:** Sleeping and eating disturbances, agitation, increase in conflicts, physical complaints, delinquent behavior, and poor concentration.



Sutter EAP is available to assist employees with additional resources and offers free, confidential counseling 24/7. You can reach us at 1-800-477-2258 or at sutterhealth.org/eap for a referral to a trained therapist in your area.

Tips for Helping Children Cope

Remain calm and reassuring.

Children take their cues from the adults around them, especially young children. Acknowledge the loss or destruction, but emphasize efforts to cleanup and rebuild. To the extent it is possible to do so, assure them that life will return to normal.

Acknowledge and normalize their feelings.

Allow children to discuss their feelings and concerns, and address any questions they may have regarding the event. Listen and empathize. Let them know that their reactions are normal and expected.

Encourage children to talk about disaster-related events.

Children need an opportunity to discuss their experiences in a safe, accepting environment. They may find comfort in a variety of verbal and nonverbal activities, including drawing, stories, music, drama, audio and video recording.

Emphasize children's resiliency.

Help children identify what they have done in the past that helped them cope when they were frightened or upset. Bring their attention to other communities that have experienced natural disasters and recovered.

Strengthen children's friendship and peer support.

Children with strong emotional support from others are better able to cope with adversity. Children's relationships with peers can provide suggestions for how to cope and can help decrease isolation.



Take care of your own needs.

Take time for yourself and try to deal with your own reactions to the situation as fully as possible. You will be better able to help your children if you are coping well. Talk to other adults such as family, friends, counselors or other supportive people. It is important not to dwell on your fears or anxiety by yourself. Sharing feelings with others often makes people feel more connected and secure.

Sutter EAP can help.

At Sutter EAP, our trained staff can help you with your feelings, and refer you to a therapist in your area. Sutter EAP is available to assist you 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Our service is confidential and free to employees and eligible dependents.

You can contact us toll free at **800-477-2258** or through our website at **sutterhealth.org/eap**.

