

Spokane Complex Fire

Mental Health Information

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August 2026 the Spokane community experienced the largest natural disaster in its history with a wildfire burning through our city. This document is a quick guide for mental health considerations following this traumatic event.

1. This is a trauma.
2. Common reactions:
 - Increased irritability
 - Avoidance
 - Intrusive memories of the event
 - Changed worldview
 - Reckless behavior
 - Difficulty connecting with peers
3. Support yourself and the community.
 - Validate you went through a traumatic experience
 - Prioritize basic needs: food, water, sleep, hygiene
 - If you can, give yourself permission to feel
 - If you can, share your story with safe supporters
 - Be on the lookout for worsening mental health

1.This is a trauma.

(yes, really)

DSM 5 Definition of Trauma	Relating it to Spokane Complex Wildfires
The DSM 5 defines trauma as “the exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence in one of the following ways: • directly experiencing the traumatic event • witnessing, in person, the event as it occurred to others • learning that the traumatic event occurred to a close family member or close friend. In cases of actual or threatened death of a family member or friend, the events must have been violent or accidental”	“Exposure to actual or threatened serious injury.” • This means you experienced actual injury OR you perceived you were imminently about to. • Evacuating a home with a wildfire blowing your way is dangerous. The perception of imminent danger further increases if you experienced traffic or had barriers to evacuating. “Witnessing, in person, the event as it occurred to others” • Watching smoke and thinking about the loved ones who are in danger. • Talking to a neighbor who chose to not evacuate. “Learning that the traumatic event occurred to a close family member or close friend” • Learning your loved one (pets count) is in an evacuation zone, especially if they’re having difficulty evacuating or you cannot communicate with them.

2.Common Reactions

“A normal reaction to an abnormal event”

It's common to judge how you respond to a trauma. It's also common to not notice that you're reacting to a trauma. Your reaction to a trauma is not a reflection of yourself, just a way your body is responding to an unsafe experience.

Common reactions after a traumatic event

- **Increased Reactivity.** You may notice that you're more emotional than normal and have large reactions to small events. This is normal. Your body is hypervigilant to distress and fragile in its reactions. There is a build up of stress in your body, and the smallest thought/experience/feeling can release it.
- **Difficulty resting.** Our bodies are not meant to rest when we are in danger. Adrenaline is a powerful hormone that keeps us alert and functioning. Your body may be struggling to know when it's safe to rest or if you're still in danger.
- **Avoidance.** You may be avoiding your reactions to or reminders of the event. This can look like not wanting to discuss topics connected to the trauma, avoiding rest to disconnect from emotions, becoming busy to stay distracted. This can be a healthy response. It signals that your brain is trying to help you stay in control and focused on things you can handle. While this is healthy and normal, avoidance can eventually increase your risk of PTSD. That doesn't mean you should force processing too soon, just be aware that if your body wants to avoid it, it may mean that you could benefit from processing these events farther in the future.
- **Focusing on the trauma.** You may be struggling to think about anything other than the trauma. Perhaps you see reminders everywhere, only want to discuss topics connected to it, or are hyperfocused on reading information related to it. This can be a helpful way to process events. Sometimes it can be an indicator that you're staying in logic and avoiding emotional processing.
- **Minimizing your experience.** Many people are surprised to realize what kinds of events can trigger a trauma reaction. It's common to think, “what I went through wasn't as bad as what others did.” Technically, this may be true, however, trauma is not defined on a ranking scale. Your experience of trauma does not take away from someone else's experience of trauma.
- **Changed world view.** Your experience likely impacts how you view the world. While you may have logically understood this happens, experiencing it yourself has a different type of impact. It's common for your brain to struggle to make sense of your new understanding of what can happen in the world. Even if you've experienced similar events in the past, your brain may still struggle to process that it's still happening/happening here/happening again.

Timeline

Understanding what is happening to you can help you identify your experience, seek extra support, and know what to expect. These reactions are all common the first 30 days after a trauma. If they continue past 30 days, you may benefit from a PTSD assessment for additional support.

3.Support yourself and the community

There isn't a 'right way' to process trauma. It is a deeply personal and individual journey. Avoid anything that would cause long term harm (trying new drugs, seriously injuring yourself or others, making significant financial choices). Other than that, label what happened, listen to your body, advocate for your needs, and be patient with yourself.

Recommendations

- Assess physical safety and basic needs: water, sleep, food, and hygiene
- Breathe. Like a real, slow, deep breath
- Find your version of emotional safety
- Share your story (if you're up for it)
- Consider how your worldview is changed
- Connect with the present moment and remind yourself "I'm safe"
- Balance offering support and helping others with receiving your own support

Common discussions:

- My friend is saying I have to talk about it and I should cry.
 - You can. It may be helpful. It may not. Listen to yourself. Avoidance can be a very important part of the healing journey. You just went through a big event, it's okay to take some time before you're ready to face it. Also, you may be prioritizing other needs and not be in a place to feel your feelings. Sometimes functioning takes priority over feeling. But yeah, it's generally going to be helpful to let yourself feel.
- I think my friend should go to therapy, but they don't want to.
 - Fair. I'd recommend following their lead for now. Therapy isn't right for everyone. And sometimes it's just not the right time. Most people take months to be ready to talk about a traumatic event in therapy. Also, don't minimize how much you can help by just being a friend who is available and supportive.
- I don't even know where to start with what to do.
 - That makes sense. It's hard for our brains to think and organize tasks after this much stress. Immediately, just focus on making sure you're somewhere safe. And then maybe find some food and water. In the next few days, you'll get more information and help. This is a great time to let someone help you. The community is here to walk you through what to do. Make sure that your helpers are from trusted sources.
- I want to avoid everything.
 - This also makes sense. That's your signal that you need a break. And honestly, most things can wait. Avoidance and numbing can be protective. Do a little check in if you have any urgent responsibilities (like filing an insurance claim or ordering more meds). If you're able to do the bare minimum to stay afloat and then avoid everything else, that's good enough. Your body should start to feel different about responsibilities soon.
- Everyone is offering help. And I just don't know what to say. And I'm not sure I even want to talk to people. It's hard to be around people who aren't going through this .
 - That makes sense. Sometimes it's helpful when everyone knows you're going through a traumatic event. Sometimes it's overwhelming. It's an odd time where you may feel so supported by the community, but also can feel very isolated with your unique circumstances. It's so weird when everyone is going through "the same thing" because there's so much similarity and so much difference in each story. Both can be true.
- So did the entire city have a trauma?
 - Okay, not technically. If you had fears for yours or someone else's safety during the fire, then yes that can be a trauma. If you saw the fire and felt safe the entire time, then no. That's not a trauma. The emphasis on this is 'actual or threatened' danger. The perception of extreme danger is what makes it a trauma. Especially if this was unexpected or felt out of control.

- Does experiencing a trauma mean you have PTSD?
 - Nope. Experiencing trauma is one necessary part of a PTSD diagnosis, there are also a group of symptoms necessary to meet criteria for PTSD and those symptoms must last at least 30 days. A PTSD assessment would look at intrusive symptoms, avoidance, emotional changes, reactivity.
- Does experiencing a trauma mean you need therapy?
 - Nope. Therapy may be a helpful part of your healing after a trauma. It's not the only way to heal. There is no right way to process a trauma. If you're able to spend more time in safe places with safe people, that's great. It's also okay if you avoid, distract, or disconnect as a way to process. Listen to your body and let it guide your healing in these early stages. Feeling your feelings and sharing your story are an important part of healing.
- "But other people have it worse"
 - That is likely true. Trauma does not have a ranking system and your body's reaction does not consider what someone else went through. Comparative suffering does not help the trauma of others, it adds guilt and shame to yours. Validating your experience can help you heal. And typically the more compassionate you are to your own experience, the more compassionate you can be towards others'.
- I'm not sure if what I experienced is officially a trauma, but I'm still struggling a lot.
 - Reactions to severe stress can be just as intense as PTSD and may need the same support. This guide is based on how the DSM-5 defines PTSD, which is just one of the definitions. Losing a home, job, and your security is traumatic and life changing. Your experience is valid.
- How can I help others?
 - Think about your skills, your capacity, and the relationships you already have- is there a way to offer help in one of those areas? Consider short term needs and long term needs of those impacted by fires. Listen to official guidance for what help they're asking for. Financial contributions also are very helpful to the organizations helping.

Now what?

The goal of this guide is to validate what you're going through, give you some information to prepare for how you may respond emotionally, and remind you that you may need support too.

For professional support:

- Call or text 988 if you need urgent mental health support
- Want to find a therapist?
 - Ask your primary care provider
 - Search [Psychologytoday.com](https://www.psychologytoday.com)
 - Check your insurance
- Need help finding a local therapist? Email Laura Tewel at laura@wwcspokane.com to get support with connecting to a therapist.



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