

How to Communicate with Loved Ones Impacted by the LA Wildfires

PHASE 1: Crisis Communications

Initially, you should expect that communication will be limited. Those impacted by the wildfires have been thrust into unimaginable trauma, and they need to focus on re-establishing basic safety and security as a first step in recovery.

Holding your OWN anxiety – and waiting on their timing for renewing communication - while they focus on their most basic needs - is part of how you can support them well.

I received messages from friends of family members of mine who lost their house – asking about their safety. Reaching out to me for an update was helpful for my family members.

Even in crisis, survivors may feel burdened by a need to respond.

As a supporter, you can eliminate this burden by saying something like:

“I’m not expecting a reply. I just want you to know that we love and we’re here for you. If you need (insert whatever you’re offering) say the word. We are praying for you and ready to help when you need us.”

I have encouraged survivors to designate a central point of contact for communication of their status and needs. There is a [downloadable free resource](#) on my website about how to re-direct people to a central point of contact using your email / phone auto-reply functions.

PHASE 2: Re-emergence

In the days or weeks after an event like this, those impacted may begin to respond to messages offering support.

As a supporter, you may experience a second wave of anxiety – stemming from a fear of “saying the wrong thing.”

Here is some guidance to help you.

I have worked with trauma survivors for decades. When you want to help someone with trauma, it’s often not about WHAT you say – but about how you offer your steady, stable presence.

To put this another way:

There is very little you can say that will comfort them as much as your loving, emotionally responsive, mindful presence.

Holding your own anxiety and letting them lead the conversation and share what they choose is how you can best support them.

However, there are some things that you should avoid saying.

Here's a list of common things well-intentioned people say that are NOT HELPFUL for trauma survivors.

What Not to Say:

1. "At least you're safe."
2. "God never gives us more than we can handle."
3. "I know how you feel – I went through the same thing."
4. "It could have been worse."
5. "I'm just heartbroken about this. I can't even imagine how you feel."
6. "Material things can be replaced."
7. "You must be feeling..."
8. "You're so strong – you'll rebuild."
9. "Kids are resilient. They'll bounce back."
10. "I'm so glad to hear back from you - I/we have been so scared for you."
11. "So will you stay and rebuild or sell and move?"
12. "Did you at least have good insurance?"
13. "Everything happens for a reason."
14. "I know someone who lost their home, and they're in a good place now."
15. "Let me put you in touch with (insert name) who has been through this kind of thing."

Trauma-informed responding has these qualities:

- 1) You allow the trauma survivors to lead the conversation.
- 2) You communicate emotional attunement and responsive listening.
- 3) You express genuine concern and love without prescribing or defining how the survivor should feel or respond to their trauma.

Here's are some statements that are trauma-informed:

- 1) "I love you and I'm here for you. You are not alone. I'll help in whatever ways I can."
- 2) "I'm so sorry that you're going through this. What's most helpful for you right now?"
- 3) "I can't imagine what you're going through. I'm here to listen whenever you need to talk."

And then just WAIT...listen...respond slowly, intentionally, and in a way that communicates that you are with them.