

Wildfires and moral distress

Instructions

Start the huddle by reviewing the definition of **moral distress**. Then, choose one scenario, read it aloud, and use the guiding questions to have a conversation about wildfires and moral distress.

Definition

Moral distress is when one feels as though they should take a certain action but cannot due to the restraints of the situation.

Learning outcomes

After this huddle, staff should be able to:

- Recognize what feelings they might experience during a wildfire crisis event.
- Identify signs and symptoms of stress they might experience during a wildfire crisis event.
- List ways to navigate through the feelings they might experience during a wildfire crisis event.
- List ways to prepare for wildfires.



Guiding questions

1. What feelings might you experience during the wildfire crisis event in your scenario?
2. What signs and symptoms or warning signs of stress might you experience?
3. Are the above feelings and signs and symptoms normal?
4. How can you help navigate these feelings and signs and symptoms?

Scenario A

A wildfire is near to the care home where you work. While your area is not required to evacuate, you have been asked to assist in evacuating 15 residents from a care home 45 minutes away. You and one of your coworkers take your bus to collect the residents along with two staff members of the care home being evacuated. As you arrive back at your care home, the residents seem confused and begin to panic. The two staff members, from the other care home, have just found out they need to leave to evacuate their own houses.

Scenario B

You live in an evacuation zone and must leave immediately. You are prepared and have a safe place to stay with friends. You have several home care clients in the same area who will also need to evacuate. You are unable to contact them and are uncertain if they are safe.

Notes to the huddle leader

Use the following information and lists to assist your conversation about moral distress, along with the guiding questions. The main goal of this huddle is to allow your staff to explore what feelings might arise and to know that these feelings are normal.

It is important to take care of psychological health by talking with someone you trust. Review the resources list and add your own organization's resources, such as your employee assistance program. Being prepared is one way to reduce anxiety.

Make sure your organization's emergency preparedness plan is up to date, which should include a current staff contact list. Review or print out the PreparedBC Wildfire Preparedness Guide for your staff to prepare their own homes [Prepared BC: Household Preparedness Guide \(gov.bc.ca\)](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/preparedbc/wildfire-preparedness-guide).



Moral distress during a wildfire

The way each person feels, and the timeline of those feelings will be different. The following are some examples.

1. **Helplessness:** Feeling unable to assist everyone in need due to the scale of the disaster.
2. **Risk to personal safety:** Balancing the desire to help others with the necessity of ensuring your own safety, which can lead to feelings of guilt if you prioritize self-preservation.
3. **Resource limitations:** Frustration over insufficient resources or support to effectively aid those affected.
4. **Ethical dilemmas:** Making tough decisions about whom to help first, knowing that some may be left behind.
5. **Emotional burden:** Witnessing suffering and loss can lead to emotional exhaustion and a sense of moral responsibility for the outcomes.

These feelings can lead to significant stress and require coping strategies such as seeking support from others,

Signs and symptoms of stress

Stress can manifest through a variety of signs and symptoms, which can be categorized into physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral effects:

Physical symptoms:

- Headaches
- Muscle tension or pain
- Fatigue
- Stomach issues
- Sleep disturbances
- Rapid heartbeat
- Sweating
- Frequent colds or infections

Emotional symptoms:

- Irritability
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Restlessness
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Mood swings

Cognitive symptoms:

- Difficulty concentrating
- Memory problems
- Negative thinking
- Constant worrying
- Racing thoughts
- Indecisiveness

Behavioral symptoms:

- Changes in appetite (overeating or undereating)
- Procrastination
- Increased use of alcohol, drugs, or tobacco
- Withdrawal from social activities
- Nail-biting or other nervous habits

These symptoms can vary in intensity and duration depending on the individual and the severity of the stressor. Recognizing these signs early can help in taking steps to manage stress effectively.

Safety Huddle: Wildfires and moral distress

Huddle leader: _____

Date: _____

Attendance:

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Resources

SafeCare BC resources

- Emergency preparedness
- Extreme weather
- Heat stress
- Wildfire
- Enhancing Psychological Health, Wellness, and Resilience
- Mental Health: Psychologically Healthy Workplaces

Additional resources

- Prepared BC - Public emergency preparation and recovery - Province of British Columbia
- Canadian Red Cross - Wildfires: Before, During & After
- Canadian Red Cross - Psychological First Aid Courses
- BC's Mental Health Support Line: 310-6789 (no area code)
- KUU-US Indigenous Crisis Line: 1-800-588-8717
- First Nations Health Authority: www.fnha.ca
- HealthLink BC – free health information and services: 8-1-1
- 211 is a free and confidential service for vital resources in your community: 2-1-1
- Your organization's employee assistance program:
