



The Fire Is Over In Sonoma County. Why Don't I Feel Like Myself Again?

by Alice Petty-Hannum | Nov 27, 2017 | #SonomaCountyStrong, Addictions, Decision Making, EMDR, Individual Therapy, Relationship Counseling, Sonoma County Firestorm

2019 UPDATE

This blog post was originally titled "The Fire is Over in Sonoma County. Why Don't I Feel Like Myself Again?". It was written to address the devastating impact of firestorm in Sonoma County in October, 2017. Tragically, the Camp Firestorm of November, 2018 has eclipsed the fire that this blog was written to address. Other fires have also raged in both southern and northern California in the past year as well as in other parts of the country. My heart goes out to those who experienced the traumatic fires of 2018. Please know that this article contains information to help those who need it and feel free to pass it on to anyone struggling with the aftermath of a firestorm trauma.

THE FIRE IS OVER. WHY DON'T I FEEL LIKE MYSELF AGAIN!?

Just a few short weeks after containment of the fires** most evacuations and road closures have ended. People are returning to sites of their previous homes if their homes were burned, schools and work and other "normal" daily life events are beginning to return to the forefront for many. If you are fortunate enough to have a home to return to and place of employment in tact you are likely returning with a mixture of gratitude

and confusion about what has taken place in our community and for yourself emotionally. If you have lost your home, your job or both, things are magnified far beyond that. Everyone is different and everyone in this community who has been affected or knows those who are is likely to have been dealing with the trauma of what has been experienced with a stress reaction of some kind for the past several weeks.

I have noticed many comments about PTSD, feeling “crazy” or overwhelmed, panicky feelings upon seeing smoke or nonthreatening forms of fire (i.e. BBQ’s, candles, etc.), bad dreams, not being able to sleep and general difficulty feeling safe or relaxed now that the veil of safety has been pierced for some and all aspects of normalcy are gone for others. The purpose of this article is to speak about the aftermath of feelings and thoughts you might be going through. I will also talk about how to aid yourself in healing and releasing the normal stress reaction that this situation has triggered.

Firstly, when a trauma such as the firestorm and the subsequent devastation in our community has occurred, it is normal to feel “traumatized.” This is the natural result of your body and mind having a physiological reaction to experiencing the unimaginable, the unthinkable and something so unexpected and life threatening to various degrees that we didn’t even begin to see it coming when we began our Sunday evenings in thousands of unique situations and places. The common factor is, we didn’t see this coming and if we knew something of the fire, we didn’t imagine it would impact our lives and our communities like this. Immediately after the event, “normal” trauma reactions occur because our mind and body are struggling to make sense of this unthinkable event.

Initial trauma reactions include but are not limited to the following:

Disbelief, struggle with denial as we try to comprehend the situation

The feeling that your mind is literally “blown”

Feeling paralyzed, unable to think, move, make decisions, etc.

Feeling panicked, anxious or filled with fear

Dizziness, shaking, trembling, shallow, rapid breathing or a sensation of difficulty breathing

Crying, feeling numb, frozen or weak

Urges to flee, feeling vulnerable or unsafe

Persistent intrusive memories, feelings about or thoughts of the event

Inability to recall portions of or details about the experience of the event

These immediate reactions to a traumatic event are normal. The extent with which they occur and how long they last are on a continuum depending on a variety of factors about the event and about your unique life experiences and emotional make up. Within a few hours or a few days, these initial reactions become slightly different for many.

Reactions can evolve into some of the following:

Difficulty sleeping and/or nightmares

Change in appetite, not feeling hungry or soothing through food

Feelings of exhaustion, overwhelm

Feelings of profound grief and loss

Gallows humor

Amnesia, confusion about the details of the event

Impaired judgement, problem solving skills, memory or physical coordination

Difficulty concentrating, making decisions, paying attention

Feeling as if you are watching things happen to someone else

Flashbacks or distressing emotions related to the event

Hypervigilance, being on guard or scanning for danger

Feelings of shame and guilt

Irritability, bad feelings about self, blaming self and/or others

Wanting to isolate or not wanting to be left alone

Survivor guilt

Feeling unmotivated, difficulty returning to normal activities

Pessimism and/or expecting more terrible things to happen

Not enjoying activities that used to be enjoyable

Increase in conflicts with family, spouses or significant others

Difficulty trusting others, God or higher power

If you felt overwhelmed just reading this list, I don't blame you. While having acute stress reactions it is important not to forget that your reaction is normal. Often, as I mentioned these reactions are experienced within hours or days of the event. Knowing about them will help you make a plan for self-care and family care as you process this traumatic event. Often these normal reactions will decrease or disappear over time. The typical amount of time is four to six weeks after a traumatic event ends. However, because this fire disaster was so prolonged and each person was affected to different degrees, that timeline as well as what a normal stress reaction might look like for you is unique to you and your situation.

For instance, a person who experienced an evacuation during the night of the firestorm, returned to their home by the next day, lived without electricity for 2-3 days and then began to return to their normal routine will have a much different timeline for recovery from an acute stress

reaction than will a person whose home burned in the fires after they were evacuated with only 10 minutes notice leaving behind beloved pets. Say they have only been allowed to return to their destroyed neighborhood and begin to look at their options, search for their pets and find new housing in the past 2 to 3 weeks. I would say that the latter person's timeline begins when the event is ended and it may or may not have even ended depending upon their circumstances. It is very important to be patient with yourself regarding that. To notice how you are affected and develop a self-care plan rather than pathologizing your reaction.

Some ways to practice self-care and help yourself recover include:

Connect with others. Consider phoning friends or family members, joining social media groups where people have been through similar things, looking into support groups, meeting with neighbors, etc. Many neighborhood residents are networking and supporting each other on www.nextdoor.com or facebook social media pages. If yours isn't, consider forming a page or initiating a get together with neighbors and friends. It is easier when you know you are not alone. It will also let you benefit from other people's experience or research into how to address common situations related to home loss, rebuilding and other issues created by the firestorm.

Move your body. It can be remarkably effective to process negative or stressed feelings with physical activity if that is safe for you. This will help process through the physiological trauma you have experienced. Walk, jog, cycle, stretch or try an exercise class of your preference.

Breathe. I know it sounds basic but seriously, consider taking 10 deep slow breaths with awareness of breathing in and out fully. Often this will help reset your body when it is overactivated and calm your mind. Please try it, especially when it seems there is nothing to do.

Make sure you are eating regularly and including healthy foods. For many, this was a big challenge the first few weeks of the fires. If there is no

kitchen or eating routine, it probably still is. Commit to eating small meals or snacks of whole foods per your health needs even if you don't feel hungry. Be mindful and avoid consuming too much sugar, simple carbs, fast food or alcohol if these are challenges for you. Make sure to include some protein in small amounts throughout the day to help your body recover and rebuild its reserves.

Feel your feelings in safe amounts. Cry, scream, laugh or anything else you feel but be mindful of the impact. Does expressing your feelings like a release or relief or does it feel scary or out of control? If so, give yourself permission to use healthy distraction (see below for info).

Use Healthy Distraction mindfully. Make a list of activities that you can use to "take a vacation" from the realities of your situation or your feelings when they start to become overwhelming. Remember to use these things intentionally and in moderation but do use them. Each person's list will be unique. Some ideas include things like Reading, Favorite TV or Computer shows/activities, Knitting or Crocheting, listening to music, creative activities like drawing, jewelry making and anything else that for you is a way to "get away" without leaving the space you are in at the moment. A Healthy Distraction should be time limited and leave you feeling better than when you began.

Combat negative thinking or self-talk. Watch for extreme or all or nothing messages to yourself or others. See if you can bring them closer to center. Try saying a moderate thing to combat an extreme even if it feels foreign or unrealistic. (For example: replace "I will never get over this" with "It will take me some time, but I won't always feel this way.").

Consider following other firestorm survivor's writings or blogs. For example, check out this one by Jennifer Shannon, MFT, a therapist who experienced the loss of her home in the firestorm. There are several chapters as she chronicles her initial trauma reaction, emotional challenges and coping skills that have helped her. Find it at www.jennifershannon.com/dont-

[feed-monkey-mind-blog-dealing-crisis/](#). Check them all out and take note of coping strategies that might help.

If you are having thoughts of Suicide, hurting yourself or wishing you weren't here, TELL SOMEONE. Please contact a suicide hotline for support (National: 800-273-TALK (8255) or Sonoma County Emergency Mental Health Line: 800-746-8181) or tell a caring family member or friend.

It may be normal for some of these feelings to come up depending on what you have been through but don't keep them to yourself or risk acting on them. You are likely very vulnerable right now given the trauma that has happened. Please reach out rather than struggle with these thoughts alone.

Reading a list of self-care is one thing and doing the things on that list can be much more difficult than anticipated when you are struggling with stress reaction symptoms. Please be patient with yourself and with others. Don't stop with that basic list. Consider alternative care, bodywork, yoga, acupuncture, you tube guided meditations or visualizations or other methods to help your whole being return to health after what you have been through.

So far, we have focused on stress reactions, that they are normal, what they look like and what can help to heal them. A good measure for whether the normal stress reaction is turning into either an Acute Stress Disorder or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is to notice, as time goes by, if there is a lasting impact on your ability to carry out day to day responsibilities. Please keep in mind that time since the fire event is relative. For many, the timeline of Acute Stress Disorder (symptoms interfering with life up to 1 month after the trauma has ended) may have started. However, for some people it could be argued that the timeline has not started because the trauma has not "ended." Also consider that, after a few weeks of plentiful community support, symptoms may increase

when that support is withdrawn and attention turns back to day to day life for those less impacted.

With that said, if you feel that, though time has gone by, doing things is getting harder rather than easier it may be time to consider seeking help. If you find that your family and social relationships are more strained, or you are unable to imagine functioning at your job or in your family responsibilities as you once did, intense focus on self-care or professional help may allow you to navigate this event and avoid the development of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Classic signs of PTSD include experiencing ongoing flashbacks (re-experiencing emotional or visual aspects of traumatic experience), worsening sleep difficulties, avoiding situations or places that remind you of the fire, feeling hopeless about the future, thoughts of suicide or not wanting to go on, worsening panic feelings and other distressing feelings progressively worsening.

Please consider talking with your doctor or a therapist to see if they would recommend a specific treatment. Forms of bodywork, meditation and acupuncture can also help. Also, please note that I have been emphasizing that it is a normal part of a trauma reaction to experience PTSD like symptoms, but it is also fine to seek the support of professional help at any point in this process. Research has shown that early intervention and coping strategies can help minimize or prevent development of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in many people.

Be gentle with yourself and your own unique process. Remember that what you are feeling is likely normal, but you do not have to adapt and live with trauma reactions becoming PTSD if they do not resolve on their own.

***The largest wildfire disaster in the history of California began on the night of October 8, 2017. Multiple fires began that night. The Tubbs fire ravaged through our Sonoma County Community and destroyed thousands of structures in just a few hours time. At the same time, the Atlas fire and other*

fires threatened and burned homes on the other side of the county. The nightmare didn't stop there. More homes burned in the days that followed even as firefighters and emergency personnel poured into the state to try to contain the fires. What began as multiple wildfires spurred by "red flag" high winds spread rapidly and resulted in emergency evacuations where at least 43 people were killed as the fires barreled into populated areas burning subdivisions and businesses literally at the mercy of which way the wind blew the flames. In the coming week, approximately 90,000 people were evacuated from their homes with many of those evacuated multiple times in the middle of the night, residents existed under a combination of mandatory and advisory evacuations and didn't know when they could return home or if their home would be standing when they did return. This unprecedented disaster was listed at 98% containment as of October 29, 2017 but for many residents of our area this is just the beginning as they navigate assessing their losses and determining what their future will be as they cope with a variety of devastating circumstances. Even those of us fortunate enough to have our homes in tact often are devastatingly aware that things don't feel over.

Alice Petty-Hannum is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist in Santa Rosa who is seeking to help people understand the emotional and physiological impact of the firestorm on themselves and the community and help them heal. www.therapywithalice.com

References:

American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing.

Van Leeuwen, D. (2017). Facilitating Resilience and Recovery in People impacted by the NorCal Wildfires. Public Presentation

Alice Petty-Hannum, MFT



Specializing in:

Individual Therapy