

WILDFIRE RECOVERY: MENTAL HEALTH FIRST LOOK

For Farmers, Ranchers & Agricultural Communities | Evidence-Based Guidance

Wildfire loss hits agricultural families harder and differently. Land, livestock, equipment, and livelihood are all bound together. The mental health impacts are real, common, and treatable. Research from SAMHSA and the VA National Center for PTSD confirms that stress and grief reactions are **normal responses to abnormal events** — **not weakness**. Use this sheet to recognize warning signs early and connect people with support.

PHASES OF DISASTER RECOVERY — WHAT TO EXPECT & WHEN

Research (VA NCPTSD; SAMHSA, Red Cross, CDC) shows reactions change over time. Knowing your phase helps you understand what you're feeling and what kind of support fits right now.

1. IMPACT Hours–Days–(Weeks) if impact is reoccurring Shock, disbelief, fear, fight-or-flight. Hard to think clearly. Focus is survival and family safety.	2. HEROIC / RELIEF Days–Weeks Adrenaline and action. Neighbors help. Community bonds. Busyness can mask grief.	3. HONEYMOON Weeks–Months Optimism — aid arrives, attention is high. May feel things will return to normal quickly.	4*. DISILLUSIONMENT Months–Years Reality sets in. Aid fades, media leaves. Anger, grief, and mental health strain peak here.	5. RECONSTRUCTION 1–5+ Years Acceptance and rebuilding. Healing is not linear. Meaning and new normal emerge over time.
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⚠️ *The **Disillusionment Phase** is when mental health problems peak and outside attention drop off — this is when farmers and ranchers most need community check-ins.

⚠️ SIGNS & SYMPTOMS TO WATCH FOR

Emotional & Psychological

- Persistent sadness, numbness, or hopelessness
- Anger, irritability, short fuse at family or animals
- Guilt or self-blame for not saving more
- Anxiety, panic, constant dread about the future
- Grief that doesn't ease — or comes in waves
- Loss of pride or identity tied to land and farm

Behavioral

- Withdrawing from family, neighbors, or community
- Increased alcohol, tobacco, or substance use
- Working non-stop to avoid thinking or feeling
- Neglecting livestock, equipment, or personal health
- Risky financial or physical decisions
- Refusing all offers of help

Physical

- Persistent fatigue, sleep problems, nightmares
- Flashbacks to the fire — smell, smoke, sounds
- Headaches, stomach trouble, worsening chronic illness
- Hypervigilance — scanning for danger constantly
- Changes in appetite, energy, and activity levels.

🚨 CRISIS — ACT NOW if someone:

Talks about not wanting to be here • Gives things away • Says others would be better off without them • Has access to firearms and seems hopeless

Call/text 988 • 911 if immediate danger • Stay with them

🌱 COPING SKILLS THAT FIT RURAL LIFE

Grounding & Calm

- 5-4-3-2-1: Name 5 things you see, 4 you hear, 3 you can touch
- Box breathing: breathe in 4 counts, hold 4, out 4, hold 4
- Go to an area outside, not impacted by the fires
- Brief physical work: small projects that don't require a lot of mental energy

Emotional Processing

- Grief is a normal response — give yourself permission to feel it
- Share one hard thing with someone you trust today
- Write it down — a journal, notes app, back of an envelope
- Limit news and social media
- Have a boundary or space for when to talk about what you have gone through and not.
- Give yourself 12-24 months---recovery is not linear

Daily Anchors

- Keep consistent wake, eat, and sleep- times where possible
- Time with animals — livestock contact reduces cortisol
- Accept specific help from neighbors; offer specific help too
- Set one small, achievable goal each week
- Do one thing you enjoy

🤝 SUPPORTS & RESOURCES

Crisis Lines

- 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline — call or text 988
- Crisis Text Line — text HOME to 741741
- NE Rural Response Hotline 1-800-464-0258

Community & Peer

- Show up — stop by, don't just call Farmer peer support groups (many states have programs)
- Local FFA alumni, 4-H, Grange, or co-op networks
- Church & faith community — meals, labor, listening
- Volunteer fire dept. may know local relief contact
- Offer specific help: 'I'll haul water Tuesday morning'
- Don't minimize; avoid 'at least...' statements
- Say: 'I can't imagine. I'm here. What do you need?'
- Show up, offer specific tasks, check in months later
- Ask to hold some time to let them talk about their fears and grief

Sources: SAMHSA Disaster Behavioral Health ([samhsa.gov/mental-health/disaster-preparedness](https://www.samhsa.gov/mental-health/disaster-preparedness)) VA National Center for PTSD ([ptsd.va.gov](https://www.ptsd.va.gov)) • Psychology Today — Six Psychological Stages of a Disaster • CDC Coping with a Disaster • Traumatic Event

988 | 1-800-985-5990 (SAMHSA Disaster) | 1-800-FARM-AID | Crisis Text: HOME → 741741 • Recovery takes time. Reaching out is strength.