

## Social support in the aftermath of major disasters

The Government has issued “Post Social Support” guidelines following the Pedrógão fires in June 2017 which led to deaths of 64 people. It is part of an article Guide of Health Care and Social Support carried out in partnership with the Directorate General of Health and was published in *Diarios de Noticias*.

### Emotional Support: What to do?

The health and psychological well-being can be affected by the experience of a natural catastrophe with the dimension of the Pedrógão fire.

Emotional responses are usually intense and different between each person, whether child, adult or elderly. Everyone, in their own way, can feel fear, anxiety and even vulnerability. It is important to be attentive to some signs and to know the answers that will allow to deal with the situation more effectively.



Photo: Nuno Pinto Fernandes – Global Images

### Children and adolescents

Each one experiences what happened in his own way, but it is usual to feel: sad, anxious and worried about what may come next.

Everyone may feel like crying or hitting someone.

Angry and angry at what happened.

Afraid that there will be a fire again or that someone will disappear, fear of being separated from family and friends.

Wanting not to leave parents, brothers, friends or teachers "not for a second." Or, on the other hand, wanting to be alone, away from everyone.

Confused that the day-to-day routine has been temporarily altered.

Feeling sick, with headaches or tummy aches.

### **How can you help?**

Talk about what happened and about fears and concerns.

Accept that you are feeling things that you do not usually and that these feelings are painful.

Find ways to do activities with family and friends, things that you enjoy.

Remember that you are not responsible or guilty for what happened around you.

Usually, intense emotional responses to the event begin to fade after a few weeks.

### **Adults**

Shock and denial are normal immediate responses.

Feelings can become intense and unpredictable. You may feel more irritable than usual and have sudden mood swings. Feeling particularly anxious, nervous, scared, distressed or very sad.

Patterns of thinking and behaviour may be affected. There may be vivid and repeated memories of the fire. These can occur at any time and lead to physical reactions (accelerated heart or sweating). You may have difficulty concentrating or making decisions, sleeping and eating. Interpersonal relationships can become tense: discussing with family or friends, isolating oneself, feeling unable to act or taking action to respond to needs.

Headaches or nausea may occur.

### **How can you help?**

Accept that intense emotions are part of the normal response to the emotional impact and stress caused by the fire.

Painful though they may be, intense feelings tend to subside. It is necessary to express them to another person or to resort to specialized professional support.

Allow time for adaptation and mourning for loss - material, emotional or a loved one. Sleep well, eat well, and exercise (even if it's the "last thing you want". It is important for psychological well-being.

Share emotions with other fire victims.

Return to routine and usual activities (or establish new routines).

## **The Elderly**

In the elderly, confusion and even disorientation may arise. Fear of being placed in a home or away from home, isolation, apathy or anger are frequent in these situations.

Recovery time, return to normal, can take more time, so the support of family members and the whole community is fundamental.

It is important that family members and caregivers help the elderly return to their routines and remain available to speak as often as necessary about the occurrence.

## **Community**

When a community is hit by a natural disaster, such as this fire, even those who were not direct victims may feel psychologically affected. Learn how you can be helped or helped.

### **How can you help?**

Organize logistical support for the people of the community.

Do not criticize, but encourage to continue and improve support

Participate in community manifestations of pain and grief, since they are the expression of the feeling of all.

Ask for information from the institutions that coordinate the response to help on how they can contribute as well.

It is important to take care of each one. When each person cares for you, you are also taking care of the community.