Supporting communities dealing with the stress of environmental contamination

You can help residents manage stress.

If you're working in an area where the air, water, or soil may be contaminated, the people you serve may be facing difficult questions:

- Could chemicals in my community be causing health problems?

- How can I protect myself and my family?

- Where can I get reliable information about what's happening?

During uncertain times, it's normal for people to feel stressed or even overwhelmed. And because environmental contamination concerns can take months or years to address, stress may become an ongoing issue for residents who are affected.

As a public health professional, you have an important role to play — and a chance to make a difficult situation a little easier for the communities you serve. While you may not be able to change what's happened, you can validate residents' experiences, offer support, and help them manage stress. **Here are a few ways you can support residents who are dealing with stress from environmental contamination:**

Acknowledge uncertainty.

In an uncertain situation, people want all the information they can get. Be upfront about what you know (and don't know) about potential health risks or safety issues — and don't downplay

Why stress matters

Stress is a natural response to new, uncertain, or threatening situations, but too much stress can interfere with everyday life. Chronic stress can also raise the risk of health problems like heart disease and high blood pressure.

So when you're working with communities affected by environmental concerns, keep stress in mind — and be ready to provide support and resources to residents.

Learn more with **ATSDR's Community Stress Resource Center** at **www.atsdr.cdc.gov/stress**.

residents' worries. Instead, acknowledge that dealing with so much uncertainty is hard, and you don't have all the answers, but you're here to help. Residents will appreciate any details you can share.

Show residents you're listening.

Residents may lose trust in the government and local organizations, so it's important to let them know you take their health and safety concerns seriously. Help residents feel heard by paying attention to their concerns and reflecting them back in your own words.

Recognize community expertise.

Another way of listening is to engage with other local resources and acknowledge their expertise. Listening to community groups can provide invaluable experience, support, and firsthand knowledge of the community's needs.

Share resources wisely.

When residents ask for more information about local environmental issues, provide or point them to reliable resources that include specific, realistic action steps. If residents mention feeling stressed or overwhelmed, consider sharing resources about stress from environmental contamination — like our **Stress Fact Sheet**. You'll find it and other resources in our **ATSDR Community Stress Resource Center** at **www.atsdr.cdc.gov/stress**.

If you choose to share resources about stress, be sure to distribute them along with resources about the specific contaminants and related health risks that are affecting the community. It's best to share stress-focused materials during individual or small group conversations.

Take care of yourself.

Addressing community members' concerns can take a toll — and if you live in the same community, you may have similar worries about your own health and safety. When you're focused on helping community members, it's easy to overlook your own needs. Be sure to practice self-care by:

- Getting plenty of sleep
- Staying physically active
- Practicing mindfulness — for example, meditating or journaling
- Making time for other activities that you enjoy

And if you find yourself struggling with stress, reach out to your health care provider for help.

Questions?

Contact ATSDR at **ATSDRstress@cdc.gov**.

Learn more about ATSDR at **www.atsdr.cdc.gov**.

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