

## Is your community dealing with the stress of environmental contamination?

### You can help your patients manage stress.

If your community's air, water, or soil is contaminated (for example, because of chemicals from a nearby factory), your patients 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 clinician, you have an important role to play — and a chance to make a difficult situation a little easier for your patients. In addition to addressing physical health concerns, you can validate your patients' experiences, offer support, and help them manage stress more effectively. **Here are a few ways you can support your patients:**

#### Stay informed.

Learn about the issue, like cleanup efforts or testing results, by reviewing information from federal, state, and local environmental and health agencies and local universities. Community groups can provide invaluable experience, support, and firsthand knowledge of your community's needs.

### 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](http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/stress).



## Acknowledge uncertainty.

Patients want to know that you're taking their concerns seriously. So show them that you're listening. Be upfront about what you know and don't know about potential health risks — and don't downplay their 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.

## Take an exposure history.

If your patient may have been around contaminated materials, consider taking an exposure history: a record of any times the patient has come into contact with the material. You can review ATSDR's guidance on how to take an exposure history at [www.atsdr.cdc.gov/csem/](http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/csem/).

## Share resources wisely.

When community members ask for more information about local environmental issues, point them toward reliable resources from environmental and health agencies and other organizations that include specific, realistic action steps. If they mention feeling stressed or overwhelmed, you might 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](http://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.

## Recommend counseling when appropriate.

If you're a primary care provider, consider referring patients who are struggling with stress to a therapist or counselor. Patients who have never been to therapy before may be skeptical or unsure what to expect. Remind them that stress is a completely natural response to this difficult situation, and it's okay to get help.



## Take care of yourself.

Addressing patients' 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 your patients, 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](mailto:ATSDRstress@cdc.gov).

Learn more about ATSDR at [www.atsdr.cdc.gov](http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov).



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