USU Extension Publication Emphasizes Supporting Teen Mental Health Following Wildfires

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10/28/2026

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Long after fire embers cool and structural rebuilding begins, adolescents' mental health may still need attention. Utah's 2026 wildfire season underscores that need. More than 474,000 acres were burned by 755 wildfires, disrupting communities and raising concerns beyond immediate property damage.

As wildfires become increasingly common across the West, Troy Allan, Utah State University Extension assistant professor, is calling attention to the consequences these disasters have on adolescent mental health.

Allan shared these concerns in a new publication, *Wildfires and Adolescent Mental Health: A Call to Action*, which highlights research on psychological risks, protective factors, and opportunities for communities to support young people.

According to Allan, adolescents are particularly vulnerable to the psychological effects of wildfires because they are working through a critical period of emotional, social, and neurological development. Unlike adults, who generally have more established coping strategies and life experiences to draw from, adolescents are still developing the skills needed to process uncertainty, manage stress, and regulate emotions. Wildfires complicate this development by disrupting family relationships, schools, friendships, housing stability, and daily routines. These changes can remove the systems young people rely on to feel safe and connected.

Allan said research links wildfire exposure to increased symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, and sleep difficulties. However, this does not mean every adolescent exposed to wildfire will experience lasting psychological problems.

"Wildfires can be emotionally difficult for adolescents, but many recover well with time and support," Allan said. "Communities can help by recognizing higher-risk experiences, strengthening family and social supports, creating pathways to professional care, and following up over time."

Factors associated with increased psychological distress include evacuation, property loss, injury, displacement, fear, and previous mental health challenges.

Allan said that supportive families, stable routines, positive school relationships, and community connections can help protect adolescents during recovery.

He outlines five ways communities can support adolescents:

- Notice: Recognize significant fear, loss, displacement, and changes in behavior or daily functioning.
- Stabilize: Restore predictable routines, reliable information, school continuity, and family stability.
- Connect: Strengthen relationships with parents, peers, teachers, and other trusted adults.
- Refer: Connect adolescents who are experiencing severe or persistent distress with qualified mental health professionals.
- Follow up: Continue checking on young people as recovery progresses and circumstances change.

“Although studies document psychological effects following wildfires, relatively little research has evaluated specific interventions for affected adolescents, particularly those living in rural communities,” Allan said. “We need a more thoughtful approach to wildfire recovery; one that recognizes adolescent mental health alongside physical safety, ecological restoration, infrastructure, and economic recovery.”

Allan encourages schools, families, emergency managers, and community organizations to incorporate adolescent mental health into their wildfire preparedness and recovery plans.

“Not every wildfire survivor will experience lasting trauma, but communities should recognize that additional support is needed after the fire is over, especially for our youth,” he said.

For more information, view the publication, Wildfires and Adolescent Mental Health: A Call to Action.

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