



Guarding our mental health

Photo by Steve Mitchell

The threat of wildfires, evacuations and smoke causes stress and anxiety each summer in the Methow.

How we're faring in the face of COVID, wildfire

BY SANDRA STRIEBY

Our whole community has been destabilized by the pressures of resurging COVID-19 coupled with another round of devastating wildfire. We're all experiencing mental and emotional upheaval, while finding and seeking ways to keep ourselves, our families, and our community on an even keel.

What we're experiencing

There's no doubt that conditions this year are contributing to stress among Methow Valley residents.

"I don't talk to [anyone] who isn't affected on some level by the strain that this struggle

has brought on," said Kathy Kirner, Psychiatric Mental Health Nurse Practitioner at Family Health Centers' Twisp Medical Clinic. Everybody is feeling hopeless or discouraged or unsafe or anxious, she said.

Methow Valley Elementary School Counselor Tracie Powney observed that families were stressed by the end of the 2020-21 school year, and said

"I anticipate that the cumulative stress I was seeing at the end of the year will be intensified by the wildfires."

At Methow at Home, "We are definitely seeing ongoing effects of both the pandemic and smoke," said Executive Director Tracy Sprauer, noting that spending more time at home in order to stay safe can lead to a sense of isolation.

Room One staff have seen the mental and emotional effects of the current situation too, stating, "We definitely have noticed higher stress experienced because of wildfire and added



Photo by EA Weymuller

Kathy Kirner

Resources

You matter to this community. Look to the following resources if you need help beyond self care.

- **Counseling**
- Okanogan Behavioral Healthcare: <http://www.okbhc.org/>; (866) 826-6191 or (509) 826-6191
- Family Health Centers Twisp Medical Clinic: <https://myfamilyhealth.org/twisp-medical-clinic/>; (800) 660-2129
- Powney and Liberty Bell School Counselor Erika Spellman are available to provide support and referrals to counselors. See the link below for their contact information
- The Methow Valley School District's Counseling page lists counselors serving children and adults, and contact information for school counselors: <https://methow.org/parents-students/counseling-support-services/>
- **Phone support** for anyone experiencing stress due to COVID-19: Washington Listens, (833) 681-0211 from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday through Friday, and 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturday and Sunday
- **Room One** offers resources to support mental well-being: <http://www.roomone.org/#/mental-health-support/>
- **If you or someone you know needs immediate help**, the resources below are free and available 24/7
- Okanogan Behavioral Healthcare crisis line: <http://www.okbhc.org/>; (866) 826-6191 or (509) 826-6191
- Disaster Distress Helpline: call or text (800) 985-5990
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: (800) 273-8255
- Crisis Text Line: text HOME to 741741

layers of COVID-19.” They’ve also reported rises in suicidal ideation and household violence.

Some groups are disproportionately affected by the combination of COVID and wildfire. “There was no outlet for kiddos and families,” said Room One staff.

Kirner noted that “as the traditional family managers, women have borne the brunt of social distancing. Some have left the workplace and others have lived with increased stress related to the need for child care and home/remote schooling.” And Sprauer pointed out that “it can be especially challenging for the people who have respiratory or other health issues to participate in community life” when they’re confined at home because of health risks outside.

Kirner said that “Hispanic and Native American groups also tend to have a proportionally higher rate of COVID compared to total population,” which can lead to higher stress levels for members of those groups who feel themselves at risk. Others facing greater-than-average mental and emotional burdens include people who have lost income, essential workers, people struggling with housing, and those not able to leave the valley during the

smokiest times.

Young adults may be among the hardest hit. An ongoing Census/CDC Household Pulse Survey of adults reveals that Americans aged 18-29 are reporting the highest anxiety levels. “The main task in that age group is to develop relationships, which has been more difficult during the pandemic,” said Kirner.

How we’re handling it

Local experts stress Methow Valley residents’ adaptability in the face of the multiple stressors confronting the community.

“I’ve been impressed by how flexible people are. We have adjusted to an entirely new pattern of socializing, working, and learning,” said Kirner.

Sprauer concurs. “People are incredibly resilient,” she said. “I’m always amazed at their attitude.” That said, she notes that “There are people who can spend most of their time alone and still feel energized and there are people who really suffer in that isolation.”

Many people have found or created strategies to address stress on their own. “People are using exercise or social support — their usual



Photo by Steve Mitchell

Experts recommend using good coping mechanisms, like exercising, to combat stress and anxiety.

exercising, like exercising, to combat stress and anxiety. coping mechanisms that they’ve developed and that have worked for them,” said Kirner.

Returning to school is likely to help students, according to Powney. “I think the kids are excited to see their friends and the routine of school can help them feel less anxious,” she said.

Community organizations have been able to alleviate some stress. Methow at Home offers educational programs via zoom and a phone-buddy program. Both Methow at Home and Room One have been able to distribute air filters, which Room One staff believe “has been lifting spirits and helping community members navigate air quality and having to be indoors more.”

In spite of all that, said Kirner, “it

seems like people have less reserve in their tank of resilience. The fires this summer seemed harder to manage in the setting of social distancing and increased COVID rates.”

What can we do to pull ourselves through when we need a boost?

Young adults may be helped by opportunities to connect through sports and activities that don’t include alcohol or drugs, said Kirner. Limiting digital connectivity can help too, she said, noting that social-media use “has been linked with increased rates of anxiety.” Users can be “inundated with mixed messages” and become caught up in interactions that may not be supportive, she said.

Sprauer lists key strategies for all ages: “connection, giving back,

education, becoming more prepared to handle extreme temperatures and air quality.” In particular, she recommends reaching out. “Asking questions, listening, reflecting back and sharing some of my travails” are tools she’s used that those around her have found helpful, she said.

Kirner also suggests reaching out to give or receive support; her other tips include:

- Be kind to yourself
- Establish a daily routine
- Get some physical activity every day

- Pursue a hobby
- Step away from electronic devices whenever possible
- Find safe ways to gather with friends
- Be on the lookout for signs that you or those close to you may need professional help: trouble with sleep; inability to keep up with housework and work; irritability
- Be on the lookout for signs of suicide risk – risky behavior, disregard for self, isolating

That’s not a daily to-do list, Kirner notes. Choose suggestions that feel right for you—they should alleviate

stress, not add to it. If you do want to reach out for support, take a look at the resources listed in the sidebar on [this/the next] page.

Powney offered several ideas for supporting children through this challenging time:

- Allowing and encouraging children to process through artwork and play
- Listening; trying to understand and empathize rather than correcting
- Slowing down the breath
- Using grounding exercises, such as getting in touch with the senses

• Spending time outside
Powney adds: “Kids will be directly and indirectly affected by our stress ... when we can model healthy self-care in managing our own stress, it sets an excellent example for our children.”

As you and your family navigate the COVID and wildfire landscape, remember that there’s help available, through both self-care and more formal avenues. Room One staff offered the reminder that, “We’ve been here before and we lean on each other as we move toward the next season.”



Serving Our Community for 35 Years!



SMITHSON INSURANCE SERVICES

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