

Stress and Worry: A normal response to potential environmental exposures

It is normal to experience stress and worry if you believe you or your family may have been exposed to environmental contamination. Stress can take a toll on your quality of life and emotional and physical well-being. Persistent stress may lead to serious health problems, such as depression, chronic anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder.

Why are potential environmental exposures so stressful?

FEELING UNSAFE AT HOME

- It is very important for people to feel safe in their homes and schools. Potential environmental contamination near or in the home or school may create deep-seated feelings of anxiety and helplessness.

FEAR FOR HEALTH OF LOVED ONES, ESPECIALLY CHILDREN

- Parents want to and feel very protective of their children from anything that may cause them harm. Exposure to contamination that parents have little or no control over may cause them to feel powerless and unable to fulfill the very important role of creating a healthy environment for their children.

UNCERTAINTY

- The health risks from exposure to environmental contaminants over time are often difficult to define. This uncertainty makes it hard for individuals to decide the severity of the threat and potential consequences, and makes choosing protective action very difficult.
- The invisibility of the toxic exposure contributes significantly to the uncertainty. The uncertainty of when or if there will be effects makes it more difficult for the affected individual to have a sense of closure and safety.

INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT

- Different views of the problems and solutions surrounding environmental contamination in a community are expressed in conversations, social media, by authority figures and in the press. These differences can create tension or conflict in a neighborhood or small community that impact normally supportive social structures. The social structures of support are important in a multitude of ways and so caution is recommended. It is okay for you to have a different opinion or position and it is also important to maintain your normal social supports and structures for long term well being. Maintaining calm will be most helpful to your children who will be witnessing or experiencing your stress about the situation.

LENGTHY PROCESS

- The process of fully evaluating the problem, developing a mitigation plan and implementing the plan takes time. For individuals who believe their family's health is at risk, waiting for this process to be completed can be very stressful. Take time to identify positive stress relievers for yourself and your children.



Signs that Stress Management Assistance is Needed

- Depression, sadness, and feelings of hopelessness
- Limited attention span and difficulty concentrating
- Becoming easily frustrated
- Overwhelming guilt and self-doubt
- Mood swings or crying easily
- Headaches/stomach problems
- Difficulty sleeping
- Poor work performance
- Reluctance to leave home
- Fear of crowds, strangers, or being alone
- Increased use of drugs/alcohol

What can I do to ease the stress?

- Tell your story: It has been found that telling your story to others reduces stress (be mindful of children's presence and find an adult only time).
- Be a good listener to your children and let them express their feelings.
- Get organized and involved in the cleanup process: knowledge is power. This can give you a greater sense of control.
- Join with others in your neighborhood to support each other.
- Take steps to promote your own physical and emotional health by staying active in your daily life patterns or by adjusting them. A healthful approach to life (e.g. healthy eating, rest, exercise, relaxation, meditation, avoiding smoking) will help both you and your family.
- See your doctor if signs of stress persist.

Helpful sites include:

Multnomah County Crisis Line: 503-988-4888.

ATSDR's Report of the Expert Panel Workshop on the Psychological Responses to Hazardous Substances: www.atsdr.cdc.gov/HEC/PRHS/psych5ed.pdf

National Institute of Mental Health:
www.nimh.nih.gov