Tip sheet for site teams

Addressing community stress during ATSDR's public health assessment process

Support community members and build resilience through community engagement

During the public health assessment (PHA) process, site teams evaluate whether people may be harmed by coming into contact with hazardous substances in their environment. But it's important to recognize that environmental contamination can contribute to chronic stress (i.e., long-term ongoing stress) in affected communities—which can also pose a health risk. In fact, research shows that stress may put some people at greater risk for health effects from certain contaminants.

As a site team professional, you have the opportunity to make this difficult situation a little easier. You don't have to be a behavioral health specialist to support community members who may be experiencing stress. **Here are a few ways you can support community members throughout the PHA process:**

Find out what community members need.

Effective community engagement starts with understanding how the contamination has affected peoples' lives. One-on-one conversations, interviews, town halls, and meetings with community leaders are all opportunities to listen, build relationships, and learn how people are feeling about the situation. Through these conversations, you can identify factors that may be contributing to community members' stress.

Acknowledge what people are going through.

When you interact with community members, it's important to acknowledge the stress they may be experiencing—stress which may be influenced by many individual, community, and societal factors.

Connect community members with helpful resources.

By partnering with local organizations, you can better understand community members' needs and plan collaborative engagement activities to meet those needs. For example, consult with community leaders on whether to bring in a behavioral health specialist to meet with community members or speak at a public event.

For tips on how to talk with community members, see ATSDR's tip sheet for public health professionals (www.atsdr.cdc.gov/community-stress-resource-center/php/resources/supporting-communities-of-environmental-contamination.html). You can find more resources to guide your conversations at www.atsdr.cdc.gov/community-stress-resource-center/.

Address stress in your report

In addition to engaging with community members throughout the PHA process, you can address stress in your report. **Consider including a discussion about stress in the following sections of your public health assessment or health consultation report:**

Community Health Concerns

Not everyone who has been affected by environmental contamination will experience chronic stress. But if community members do show signs of stress or express that they're feeling overwhelmed, document stress as a community health concern. Note that chronic stress can put people at increased risk for various health problems, including heart disease, high blood pressure, anxiety, and depression.

Next Steps

Recommend steps that ATSDR and partners can take to support community members in preventing and managing stress. Your recommendations might include:

- Steps that state and local partners can take to address contamination-related stressors identified by community members, such as acknowledging uncertainty, showing residents you're listening, or sharing resources
- Opportunities to collaborate with local organizations or health care providers
- Actions that community members can take, like joining a community group to connect with neighbors who are facing similar issues

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry

For more action steps for community members, see ATSDR's fact sheet for community members at www.atsdr.cdc.gov/community-stress-resource-center/tips-for-communitymembers/environmental-contamination-stress.html

To learn more about the PHA Process, see ATSDR's Public Health Assessment Guidance Manual at www.atsdr.cdc.gov/pha-guidance/index.html.

Questions?

Contact ATSDR at ATSDRstress@cdc.gov.