

Guest column

http://missoulian.com/opinion/columnists/smoke-taking-emotional-toll-too/article_d3944730-4a84-56f9-ae07-33f3bbc3e86b.html

Smoke taking emotional toll too

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As a mental health professional, I have been counseling people through challenging times for 45 years. One of the techniques I teach to alleviate anxiety is deep breathing, but the toxic soup of smoke that surrounds us is causing people to question whether this is a good idea.



Smoke fills the Missoula Valley. THOM BRIDGE, thom.bridge@helenair.com

Who can argue? Wildfire smoke (an unhealthy mix of gases and fine particles) at the levels and over the duration we are experiencing can harm our respiratory and cardiovascular health. Health experts tell us to avoid outdoor activities, seek smoke-free environments, close the windows and take extra precautions with kids.

As we move into month two of this relentless smoke cover, we must also recognize the emotional toll that the smoke is having.

Earlier this week, a client – a parent of two young children – remarked with only slight humor, “All winter I look forward to summer to relieve my seasonal affective disorder, but now I think I’m getting it in summer too.” In addition to feeling stressed and depressed by the smoke, he felt the additional concern of needing to keep his little ones cooped up indoors and wondering how he could afford protective HEPA air filters.

There was a time in our recent history when we could fairly safely assume that by early September, the rains would come and the smoke would lift. Not so anymore. With no appreciable rain in the forecast, who knows when we will see our big blue skies again and more than a vague outline of our mountains. Who knows when we will breathe healthy air again and resume our normal routines.

In the meantime, just as breathing unhealthy air can exacerbate asthma, allergies and other respiratory conditions, prolonged smoke exposure can exacerbate mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. The smoke makes it harder to exercise, obscures our views, keeps us

shut in, and can create a sense of claustrophobia. There's uncertainty over how we will keep our kids safe and when it will end. We feel as though we are being robbed of our precious summer. One client describes experiencing a strong sense of foreboding. The economic inequality in the ability to respond to the smoke is also real, as many of us worry about how we will afford air filters to keep our kids and families safe.

One of the reasons we feel so emotionally challenged by the smoke is the sense of powerlessness that accompanies it. But don't lose hope. Besides protecting ourselves from the physical impacts of the smoke, we can spend time focusing on the aspects of our lives for which we are grateful. We can stay informed about the quality of our air by visiting [Today's Air](https://svc.mt.gov/deq/todaysair) (svc.mt.gov/deq/todaysair).

Staying informed also means understanding the role that climate change is playing in our increasingly smoky summers. Science tells us that climate change is increasing the length and severity of our wildfire seasons, meaning more unhealthy smoke and more people suffering from the physical and mental impacts of prolonged smoke exposure. No wonder the World Health Organization identifies climate change as the greatest threat to global health in the 21st century.

While we can't control where the fires start and where the smoke goes, we can be advocates in our own lives and tell our elected officials that we know that human-caused climate change is exacerbating our wildfire seasons, in turn causing us physical and emotional harm, and that we expect them to take action to meaningfully address climate change. Our freedom to live healthy lives must be preserved.

Nancy Seldin has been a mental health therapist for 45 years, and an asthmatic for 65.