



A guide to coping with emotions and reactions after mass violence

In today's world, incidents of mass violence, from shootings to acts of terrorism, reach everyone, even young children, through various media channels.

Continuous exposure to such events can disrupt our daily lives and negatively affect our emotional wellbeing. It is natural to experience a range of emotions following such traumatic events, including shock, sorrow, fear, anger and grief. Sometimes, these negative emotions can make it hard to sleep, focus, eat or remember easy tasks.

These reactions are common and expected in the wake of such tragedies, especially unexplained and unexpected mass violence. Over time, with the support of caring family and friends, the emotional impact can lessen, and the resulting changes become more manageable. It is normal to feel as though the world has become more dangerous after such an event, but with time, you can regain a sense of equilibrium.

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Sources:

<https://www.apa.org/topics/gun-violence-crime/mass-shooting>

<https://www.common sense media.org/articles/how-to-talk-to-kids-about-violence-crime-and-war>

https://www.cstsonline.org/assets/media/documents/CSTS_FS_recovery_in_aftermath_workplace_violence_workers.pdf

<https://www.familymeans.org/coping-after-mass-violence.html>

https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/types/mass_violence_help.asp

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Types of emotional and physical reactions following mass violence

In the aftermath of mass violence, nearly everyone present at the scene is likely to experience a range of stressful reactions.

Initial relief at being alive can quickly give way to feelings of disorientation, distress, fear, survivor guilt or anger. These reactions may occur in survivors, their families, colleagues and friends, making it difficult to disengage from thoughts of the event, leading to disrupted sleep patterns and heightened anxiety. While these reactions will typically lessen over the first few weeks, individuals who were injured, endured prior trauma, lost loved ones or were present when the violence happened may face more intense and longer-lasting responses.

Impact of mass violence

Mass violence fundamentally undermines our sense of security and safety. Its unpredictable nature and widespread impact can instill a pervasive fear of similar occurrences, even among those who were not directly affected. Individuals directly exposed to such violence may grapple with a spectrum of reactions that can persist intermittently for years.

Common reactions

Physical reactions:

- Faintness or dizziness
- Sensations of hot or cold in the body
- Tightness in throat, stomach or chest
- Agitation, nervousness or hyper-arousal
- Fatigue and exhaustion
- Gastrointestinal distress and nausea
- Changes in appetite
- Headaches
- Exacerbation of preexisting health conditions

Behavioral reactions:

- Sleep disturbances and nightmares
- Heightened startle response
- Unexplained crying and tearfulness
- Conflicts with family and coworkers
- Avoidance of trauma reminders
- Difficulty expressing emotions
- Social withdrawal or isolation
- Increased substance use

Emotional reactions:

- Shock and disbelief
- Anxiety and fear for one's safety
- Numbness
- Sadness and grief
- Feelings of helplessness
- Disassociation, feeling disconnected from reality
- Anger or rage
- Irritability and short temper
- Hopelessness and despair
- Self-blame or blaming others
- Survivor guilt
- Unpredictable mood swings

These reactions encompass a broad spectrum of emotional and physical responses to the trauma of mass violence. Recognizing and understanding these reactions is crucial for individuals and communities to effectively cope and support one another in the aftermath of such events.

Learning to cope in the aftermath of mass violence

Learning to cope in the aftermath of mass violence may initially feel daunting, as people's reactions, needs and priorities can vary widely.

However, most people share a common set of priorities that relate to five key needs:

- Reestablishing a sense of safety
- Regaining control and calm
- Connecting with loved ones and others
- Getting through the crisis
- Feeling hope, optimism, faith or the belief that things will work out

Strategies for managing immediate reactions

Dealing with distress following mass violence requires thoughtful consideration and self-care. Here are helpful tips:

- **Seek support:** Communicate your feelings when necessary and be receptive to listening when possible. Sharing experiences with others who understand can provide comfort and reassurance. Take what helps and leave the rest.
- **Respect boundaries:** Recognize that survivors may need space and time to process their experiences. Respect their wishes regarding communication and check in periodically.
- **Embrace resilience:** Accept that resilience often involves adapting to life's challenges. Understand that some aspects are beyond control and focus on adapting to the circumstances.
- **Leverage social support:** Positive social connections are crucial for recovery. Reconnect with loved ones or seek support from individuals who have faced similar challenges.
- **Strive for balance:** Maintain a balanced perspective by acknowledging both the negative and positive aspects of life. This balanced viewpoint fosters empowerment and resilience.
- **Limit exposure to media:** While staying informed is important, limit exposure to distressing news coverage. Take breaks and engage in activities that uplift your mood.
- **Validate emotions:** Honor the range of emotions you may experience, recognizing that they are natural responses to trauma. Practice self-compassion and seek outlets for expressing feelings.
- **Prioritize self-care:** Prioritize healthy habits to bolster your resilience, including balanced nutrition, adequate rest and regular physical activity. Avoid substances that may heighten distress.
- **Help others:** Find ways to contribute to the wellbeing of others in your community. Volunteering or assisting those affected can provide a sense of purpose and fulfillment.
- **Allow time for healing:** Understand that recovery is a gradual process that unfolds over time. Resilience involves bouncing back from adversity and recognizing the impact of trauma while gradually adapting and moving forward.

Trust your ability to overcome adversity, drawing strength from within and the support of others as you navigate the challenges ahead.

Managing ongoing distress after mass violence

There is no standard timeline for recovering from an event as intense and potentially traumatic as a mass shooting. If someone was near the event, it may take longer to heal than a person watching it on the news. Everyone can learn ways to adapt to ongoing events and situations, and some people may learn to mentor and support others in similar situations.

Strategies for managing ongoing distress

Consider incorporating the following strategies into your coping toolkit:

- **Prioritize safety:** Establishing and maintaining routines in daily life can alleviate worries and foster a sense of security. Focus on activities that promote safety and wellbeing.
- **Limit media exposure:** Protect mental wellbeing by reducing exposure to distressing media coverage of the event. Turning off media broadcasts can help relieve distress and anxiety.
- **Problem-solving:** Approach ongoing challenges with an active problem-solving mindset. Break down problems into manageable tasks, brainstorm creative solutions and plan simple, actionable steps toward resolution.
- **Engage in positive activities:** Participate in activities that bring joy, fulfillment and meaning, no matter how small or simple they may seem.
- **Offer support:** Extend support to others, informally or through volunteer work. Helping others fosters a sense of purpose and connection.
- **Manage emotions:** Look for positive coping strategies to manage overwhelming emotions. Whether listening to music, exercising, connecting with loved ones or spending time in nature, find what works to handle distressing feelings effectively.
- **Seek social support:** Surround yourself with supportive individuals who provide comfort, stability and happiness. Connecting with trusted friends or family members can offer solace and strength.
- **Challenge negative thoughts:** Ask yourself if your thoughts, especially those that are persistent and intrusive, are helpful to you right now. Redirect your focus towards constructive thinking patterns and behaviors, finding ways to break free from unproductive cycles.
- **Find meaning:** Explore meaningful ways to honor the lives affected by the tragedy. Adjust your expectations and reaffirm your values and goals, grounding yourself in what truly matters in life.

When to seek professional help

Individuals directly impacted by the mass violence, such as survivors or those who lost loved ones, are at higher risk of experiencing significant distress or impaired functioning. If someone struggles to cope or function effectively, it may be beneficial to seek professional assistance. Reaching out for support can facilitate healing and resilience for yourself or a loved one.

Supporting children in the aftermath of mass violence

Addressing mass violence with children and teens is undoubtedly challenging, yet support is essential in aiding their recovery and fostering their resilience to recover from traumatic stress.

Understanding common reactions

Children and teens may exhibit various reactions to the tragedy, including difficulty concentrating, irritability, separation anxiety and heightened feelings of anxiety and fear. These reactions typically lessen within a few weeks but require understanding and support during this time.

Communicating with children

Here are strategies and conversation starters to facilitate discussions with children of different ages:

Lead by example: As a role model, manage your anxiety before engaging in discussions with your child. Aim to communicate calmly and empathetically, providing reassurance without dismissing their concerns.

Initiate conversations: Talk about the violence with your child. Avoiding discussion can intensify fear and confusion. Acknowledge the likelihood that they've already heard about the event through various media channels.

Assess their understanding: Begin by asking what your child knows about the event, listening attentively to their perceptions and concerns. Correct any misinformation gently and provide age-appropriate explanations.

Tailor the information: Customize your message based on your child's age and comprehension level. Teens may benefit from factual discussions about violence and its causes, while younger children may require simpler explanations about safety and good versus bad behavior.

Validate feelings: Encourage your child to express their emotions and concerns openly. Validate their feelings and provide comfort, assuring them that it's normal to experience a range of emotions.

Limit media exposure: Shield children from excessive media coverage, as exposure to graphic images and reports can worsen distress. Monitor your own media consumption to maintain a calm environment.

Correct misconceptions: Address any misunderstandings your child may have about the event, offering accurate information clearly and reassuringly.

Offer reassurance: Talk about safety measures in place at home and school. Offer physical comfort and maintain regular routines to instill a sense of security.

Restore normalcy: Encourage activities that promote joy and distraction, redirecting attention away from the violence. Spend quality time with young children and support teens in socializing with friends and pursuing hobbies.

Be patient: Allow children time to process and grieve, acknowledging their loss of safety and stability. Offer patience and support as they navigate their emotions.

Should your child's reactions persist or impair their functioning, consider seeking support from mental health professionals specializing in trauma. Contact local resources for guidance and assistance in facilitating your child's healing journey, such as a family physician, pediatrician or state mental health association.