

COPING WITH STRESS FOLLOWING A MASS SHOOTING

Mass shootings and other disaster events can be extremely stressful. Mobile devices and the internet provide instant access to the details of these events, but can also overwhelm us. Graphic images and videos, often seen in real time, can be very distressing. The seemingly random nature of these events as well as the 24/7/365 access to information about disasters around the world can leave us feeling unsafe and in persistent danger after a mass shooting occurs. Constantly feeling unsafe can lead to a variety of behaviors such as trouble sleeping, irritability, difficulty concentrating, increased use of alcohol and tobacco, social isolation, and fear of those around us. In addition to the imagery, news commentary and political rhetoric that surround these events can enhance distress as well as mistrust, and further community divisions.

It is important to manage our response to mass shootings so we are able to care for ourselves, our families, and our communities. Below are steps to help people cope more effectively with stress after a mass shooting.

- Difficulty with sleep, irritability, and trouble concentrating are normal responses following a mass shooting; talk with your Primary Care Provider if these persist or cause problems with relationships or performance at home or work.
- Stay connected with other people, such as friends, family, and neighbors, that provide positive and helpful support; social support helps people recover from stressful situations.
- If going to public places or traveling causes distress, go with other people or in groups until distress reduces.
- Check in with other people that were affected; reaching out to connect with others can be helpful to both of you.
- Avoid increasing alcohol and tobacco to cope with stress; use behavioral techniques to relax (such as breathing, imagery, and muscle relaxation) that do not have negative health effects.

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- Be cautious of news or other commentary that scapegoats large groups of people for the actions of a single individual; these perspectives often damage community connections and may increase the likelihood of future violence.

- Limit exposure to graphic images and videos on the news and social media, especially for children.
- It is important to talk with children and ask questions to learn their understanding of a mass shooting event. Consider the following when talking with children:
 - » Use age-appropriate language, ask questions about what they may have seen or heard and listen to their concerns; respond in a non-judgmental and empathic way.
 - » Pre-school and early school aged children often wonder if they have caused a bad thing to happen; if they have become aware of a mass shooting, they should be told directly it is not their fault.
 - » Remind children and adolescents that even though some people hurt other people, there are many people working to keep them safe such as police, fire and rescue, and healthcare providers.

Additional Resources

- National Child Traumatic Stress Network — Catastrophic Violence Resources
<https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/terrorism-and-violence>
- Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress
<http://www.cstsonline.org>