

DEALING WITH THE IMPACT OF VIOLENCE AND VIOLENT DEATH

In the Community

Seeing or learning about violence that results in injury or death can bring up strong emotions. It can impact us on many levels, especially when it occurs in our community. What can we do to manage and work through our reactions and feelings?

Common/normal reactions

There are many factors that can impact how we feel and react. You may struggle with very intense emotions, even if you didn't have a close personal connection to the person(s) who died. Even those far removed may find themselves facing unexpectedly strong reactions. Acts of violence can trigger a deep sense of injustice and lack of fairness in the world, sometimes stemming from a history of similar events. Personal experiences can deepen the feelings.

- › **Emotional reactions**, such as deep sadness, anger, rage, grief, anxiety, and fear are common. Feeling a sense of shock or numbness is normal, as well.
- › **Mentally**, it is not unusual to struggle with a sense of disbelief and horror about what happened. A sense of outrage can be coupled with feelings of helplessness. Many people find that they can't stop thinking about the event or have trouble concentrating.
- › **Physical reactions** may be less expected. People sometimes can't stop crying or are unable to sleep. An upset stomach or a pounding heart and trembling are common. There may be a strong feeling of restlessness. Sometimes loss of appetite or being very tired can be a response.

These are just some examples; you may react differently. Remember, these are normal reactions. They do not suggest mental or physical health problems. They are the way that our bodies and minds respond to a difficult event.

Challenges of coping

Coping after a violent death or injury can be difficult. It can be helpful to understand what you might experience and have strategies for coping with your feelings and reactions.

Dealing with unknowns	Strategies
When violent acts occur, it can take time to get accurate information about what happened. Not having answers can be both frustrating and frightening.	It is important to get reliable information and facts from reputable sources. Relying on hearsay and social media can increase stress and anxiety.

Trying to make sense of it	Strategies
<p>Death or injury by violence is unexpected. You can't prepare for it. It is shocking and feels senseless. This randomness can disrupt your core sense of security. It may cause you to question life's meaning: "How could such a bad thing have happened to a good person?" Or struggle with "if-onlys:" "If only he had stayed home." There may even be feelings of guilt for some: "I wish I could have done something."</p>	<p>Focusing on questions without answers can leave you feeling powerless and unable to move forward. It may be helpful to ask a different question: "How can I respond to this event in a meaningful way?" The answer might be a small gesture, such as reaching out to public officials, making phone calls, or sending letters. Or it could be something bigger, such as getting involved in a group that supports change.</p>
Desire for retaliation	Strategies
<p>A violent death or injury can bring up feelings of anger and helplessness. Thinking about retaliation or payback is common. Ongoing investigations may keep these feelings alive and even make them worse. It is important that you do not act on these thoughts.</p>	<p>Turning negative thoughts and reactions into constructive acts honors those impacted and can help channel your emotions. Many find that supporting others and investing energy into making a difference can help them move past feelings of anger.</p>
Intrusive thoughts	Strategies
<p>Putting yourself in the victim's place and imagining their fear and helplessness can feel overwhelming. This image can play over and over in your mind. Violent events often involve a crime and may be on the news. You may be exposed to repeated, graphic accounts of the event. This can intensify your reaction and make it hard to separate yourself from the event.</p>	<p>It may be hard to refocus, but actively try to turn off the image in your mind. Look for an activity that can help draw your thoughts away. Try to channel your energy into something that requires your focus. Be aware that news coverage is designed to be dramatic and emotional. Don't keep watching it. Once you have the facts, turn off the TV or close your browser.</p>
Ongoing fear	Strategies
<p>"Am I at risk?" Worrying about your safety is a natural reaction to the news of violence. It can lead to a healthy response, such as taking extra precautions in situations that might be dangerous. However, uncontrolled fear can become a problem.</p>	<p>Understand that "what-if" thinking tends to increase stress. Practice moving away from this type of thinking by focusing on things that are within your control. It may be helpful to talk about your concerns with people who support you or someone trained to help with these types of fears.</p>

Taking care of yourself

It can be hard to manage the distress caused by violence. There is no right or wrong way to feel, nor is there one right or wrong way to feel better. As you work through it, allow yourself to feel angry and sad. You may need to cry and grieve. Remind yourself that your feelings are normal. Also give yourself permission to feel good or happy. Remember, physical activity can be one of the best ways to ease some of the emotional stress you may feel.

It takes time to adjust to and process distressing news.

Studies show that grieving lasts longer and the process of adjustment is more difficult with violent death. (Nakajima et al., 2012) For some, it can be helpful to rely on regular routines, others might need to take a break. Be patient with yourself and get the support you need. It may be helpful to recognize that the impact of this incident may never completely go away. It will, however, slowly be woven into your life experience.

Be aware that living with other, ongoing stressors can make it more difficult to manage your reactions. A major stressor, such as the COVID-19 pandemic could be a significant factor. It is important to seek help if your reactions to the event feel unmanageable, continue long term, or become overwhelming. Your EAP can provide professional help and connect you with resources for support in your community.

References

Smith, M., Robinson, L., & Segal, J. (2020). How to cope with traumatic events. Retrieved from <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/ptsd-trauma/traumatic-stress.htm>

Nakajima, S., Masaya, I., Akemi, S., & Takako, K. (2012). Complicated grief in those bereaved by violent death. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3384450/>

Helping children cope with emotions related to violence

Our children are particularly vulnerable to fears in the wake of violence. They have a harder time understanding what is happening and putting it into perspective. We need to pay special attention to their needs. Here are some tips for doing this.

- › **Give them honest information about the event(s)**, at a level they can understand. Offer only as much information as they request. Be prepared to go deeper into the conversation with older children.
- › **Encourage your children to talk** to you about their thoughts and feelings related to the event(s).
- › **Listen to their concerns, and then reassure them.** Communicate that you will always do your best to keep them safe.
- › **Limit your child's exposure to broadcast news and social media.** Watching repeated images of the event(s) can be as disturbing to a child as if it were happening anew each time. Try to watch it with them, and discuss it afterwards.
- › **Talk about positive ways that people are responding and what you might be able to do.** Looking for any sort of positive actions that others are taking, or that your family might do, may help to counteract some of the negativity.
- › **Maintain family routines**, particularly around meals, bedtimes, and scheduled social and leisure activities. Structure helps a child feel safe. Make time for soothing activities such as reading with them or playing board games as a family.
- › **Be especially patient** with your children, your family, and other loved ones. Give them signs of reassurance such as hugs and affection. Also be patient with yourself and understanding of your own needs.