

# COPING IN THE AFTERMATH OF A MASS SHOOTING

We live with the expectation that if we don't harm others, they won't harm us; a mass shooting shatters our sense of safety. When ordinary citizens doing ordinary things are killed or wounded by the bullets of a shooter, life turns upside down. We don't have a roadmap for how to feel or what to do. For those directly impacted – witnesses, survivors, first responders, loved ones of those killed or injured – finding the way forward can be a long and challenging process. Many struggle with anger, fear, guilt, and crushing grief. But we can all be touched by these tragic and senseless events. We can be left with feelings of helplessness, sorrow, and outrage. How can we manage these difficult emotions and find a way forward?

- **Allow your feelings.** Don't try to ignore or deny them. You may feel grief, anger, anxiety, exhaustion, or something else. You may just feel numb. These are all normal reactions. Talking about them (sometimes over and over) with people who care about you can help you process unsettling emotions. Vent feelings of anger in healthy ways. Allow yourself to grieve. Some people find it helpful to let feelings flow out on paper or address them in some creative way, such as painting or music.
- **Focus on what you do have control over.** The images we see, the stories we hear, and our own thoughts about what happened or what could happen can increase our anxiety. It can leave you feeling overwhelmed and helpless. Try to bring your focus to what you can control, such as learning how to respond in the face of danger. Or helping others, such as volunteering or making a donation.
- **Minimize your exposure to news media.** Once you have the facts, it's a good idea to limit watching coverage of the event. While it's important to stay informed, constant exposure may add to feelings of distress. Try to give yourself a break from the tragedy and thoughts and feelings stirred up by emotional news stories.
- **Lean into your routines as much as possible.** When an attack occurs, life can feel chaotic in many ways. The structure and predictability of doing daily tasks can help us to feel more grounded. This is also a simple but powerful way to help children feel safer after an attack. Some find it is emotionally liberating to stand up to fear in this way.
- **Give yourself a break.** It may be hard to focus and concentrate at times after a traumatic event. Your energy level may be low. Be patient with yourself. Don't overload your schedule. Give yourself a little more time to do tasks. There is no right or wrong way to feel, nor is there a right or wrong way to feel better.

## Understand unique challenges for those directly impacted

When you live through a mass shooting, the trauma and emotional shock doesn't just go away. You have to work through it; finding your own way, in your own time. This process can be impacted by thoughts, emotions, and even how the brain is wired. It's important to understand that some people may struggle to recover after a traumatic event. Issues that may point to the need for more help include:

### Survivor's guilt.

A person experiences intense feelings of shame and remorse. They feel they should have done more to save others or guilty for having survived when others died. The person may struggle with flashbacks, irritability, nausea, and feel disconnected from others. It can be a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder.

- › **Turn to others for support.** Being alone with your thoughts and emotions means there is no other voice in the conversation. Others offer different perspectives, while giving you a chance to talk about how you feel. This can bring comfort and help you move forward. It can be especially helpful to talk to others who've shared the same experience.
- › **Help children process what has happened.** Be honest but measured when talking with a child about the attack. Think about what you will say and how you want to say it. Focus on reassuring them that they are safe. If they're struggling, help them process their feelings, don't just push them to feel better. Talking through worries and questions can help. Give them a way to respond, such as writing a thank you note to first responders.
- › **Channel your feelings into action.** Be of service in some way. Even small moves can help release the paralyzing sense of helplessness. Reaching out and supporting others shifts your mental and emotional focus. Doing helpful things and offering kindness to others can open your heart and renew your spirit. It can be a powerful antidote to the inhumanity of a violent attack.
- › **Increase your sense of safety.** Understand what is being done to protect your community. The more you know about what has happened, the more effective steps you can take to minimize your risk. Make sure you are getting your information from a reputable source. Be sure to follow directions from state and local authorities, including law enforcement.
- › **Balance your thoughts.** When feeling overwhelmed by tragic events, it's easy to forget the good in the world. Try to balance feelings of pessimism by deliberately thinking about acts of goodness and kindness that people are doing every day. Adding some balance to your viewpoint can help when you feel the world is in a dark place.
- › **Take care of yourself.** Do what you can to make sure you get enough sleep to feel well rested. Work to maintain a healthy diet and regular meals. Remember that exercise and being physically active can reduce stress. Avoid overuse of alcohol and/or substances.
- › **Try relaxation techniques such as deep breathing or meditation.** Even taking a short time-out to bring your thoughts to the here and now can help. These gentle techniques can help calm the physical symptoms of anxiety and slow down racing thoughts.

### Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

Experiencing or witnessing a terrifying, life-threatening event triggers a hard-wired fight or flight response in the body. When this response doesn't stop after the danger passes, it may lead to post-traumatic stress disorder. Symptoms include high anxiety, avoidance of reminders, emotional numbness, hyper-vigilance, intrusive memories or nightmares of the event.

### Complicated grief

Losing someone in a violent act can make working through grief an even more challenging process. When normal grief symptoms linger and deepen over time, it may point to complicated grief. Symptoms include continued, extreme focus on the death, numbness, intense pining for the person who died, withdrawing from others and inability to enjoy life.

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