

Coping After a Distressing Event

Witnessing an act of violence, live or on television, online, or social media, can be an intense experience that brings up a range of emotions. We may struggle with a sense of disbelief and shock watching events unfold. When the violence is directed at a public figure, there can be an unsettling disruption to our sense of stability and security. It can trigger strong feelings and worrisome concerns about the future and what might happen next.

Emotional responses

Having a range of emotions in this situation is a normal reaction. Fears related to safety are hard-wired into the brain. Situations that seem dangerous and out of control quickly trigger those fears. We may feel a sense of panic or a rush of adrenaline. There may be a strong need to reclaim a sense of safety. The unpredictability of the act can be hard to process and deepen our anxiety.

For some, there can be a numbness. In a time that is defined by uncertainty and stress, we may find ourselves feeling sad, disappointed, and weary.

There can also be a sense of loss – loss of beliefs about the world, about order, fairness, and our sense of security. Others may respond to this loss with feelings of intense anger and frustration. There may be a confusing mix of thoughts and emotions.

Building up a sense of stability and managing the stress can be helpful as you work through difficult or conflicting emotions.

Coping strategies

- **Get facts from reliable sources.** Relying on biased, incomplete, or inaccurate sources can increase stress. Use multiple trustworthy sources to gather information and vet them carefully to be sure the information is accurate and complete.
- **Monitor media use.** Stay informed but be aware that constant exposure may add to feelings of distress. Notice how you are impacted by news coverage and limit viewing as needed. You might try setting a timer to put boundaries around your social media scrolling. Watch out for stories that key on worst case scenarios. Look for articles or media that have more constructive viewpoints to bring some balance.
- **Allow and express your feelings.** Intense events can trigger strong feelings. You may struggle with anger, grief, and anxiety. Putting these feelings into words can help you understand what you are feeling and why. This can help you identify ways to manage your reactions. Remind yourself that this is a normal reaction in this situation.
- **Lean on others for support.** Voice your feelings out loud with people who support you. Share ideas for how to feel more grounded. You might want to take a break from others who are highly emotional and make it harder for you to regain a sense of calm.

- **Recognize anger as a secondary emotion.** Anger is often a surface emotion that covers up a deeper emotion, such as fear, hurt, or powerlessness. If you find yourself feeling anger, search for the deeper emotion, and work with it instead. Write about it. Talk about it.
- **Be cautious not to take out your anger on others.** It can push them away and make it harder to find solutions that help you move forward in a positive way. If possible, talk about what you're feeling and why. Ask for their understanding.
- **Be aware of internal emotional triggers.** Our own thoughts can often be the trigger for strong emotions. If this is the case, you may want to find ways to take a break from them. Consider activities that pull your attention away from distressing thoughts. It may be physical activity, something creative, reading words of inspiration, connecting with others, or something else that will work for you.
- **Focus on what you can control in your own environment.** The images we see, along with the stories we hear, and our own thoughts can increase our stress and sense of powerlessness. Thinking about and focusing on what you *can* control can help you. Routines and structure in the day can help you feel more stable. Completing tasks, even something small, such as tidying up or finishing a project, can be reassuring.

Be honest but reassuring with children. They know when we're avoiding or downplaying, and that can make events feel scarier. Share only as much information as they're requesting and at an age-appropriate level. As part of the conversation, reassure them that your family is safe. Also, monitor their exposure to news stories. Repeated images can seem to a child as if the event is happening over and over again in the present time.

- **Take care of yourself.** Make sure you get enough rest and eat a healthy diet. It can be easy to forget that these are essential ways to feel more resilient. Avoid overuse of alcohol and/or substances. Relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing or meditation may be helpful. These gentle techniques can help you get control over the physical symptoms of anxiety and calm your thoughts.

Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is here to help.

If anxiety or other strong emotions persist or you're struggling with your thoughts and feelings, you may want to seek support. Your EAP can help you get connected. We're available 24/7.