

TARGETED THREATS AND ACTS OF VIOLENCE

Strategies for Coping

When targeted threats, harassment, or violence occurs, it can trigger strong emotional, mental, and physical reactions. We can experience a range of emotions from fear to anger to grief. We might have racing thoughts, difficulty focusing or be on constant high alert. Physical symptoms might include tension, restlessness, or exhaustion. This handout offers some strategies to manage difficult reactions.

Addressing fears for safety

- › **Get reliable information.** One of the best ways to manage fear, especially when there is a threat of violence, is to understand what protections are in place. The more we know about the current situation, the more effective steps we can take to minimize our risk. Be sure to get information from a reputable source. Keep up to date with and follow directions from your workplace and the authorities.
- › **Always put safety first.** While it may be tempting to react to a suspicious look or comment, or something else, ignoring it and walking away may be the best response to prioritize your own safety. Seek emotional support afterwards from those who understand. If you notice others are being targeted or harassed, consider how you could respond without endangering your own safety.
- › **Be aware of your surroundings.** If you are in a situation where there is potential for violence or you feel targeted, it's important to remain vigilant. Places of business, public streets and sidewalks, and public transit may be particularly high risk areas. Pay attention to your surroundings. Have a plan for seeking help if needed.
- › **Ask for immediate support** or intervention from bystanders if you're being harassed. If no one is nearby you might connect with someone who can support you via video chat. Dial 911 if you feel you feel you are in danger.
- › **Try to remain calm and connected with your body.** Our hard-wired stress response kicks in with any kind of threat, even if it's just the fear of what could happen. Connecting with your body helps you stay more calm and clear-headed. Focus on your breath and staying in the present moment to support more rational thinking, rather than defaulting to the impulse to fight, flight, or freeze.
- › **Allow your feelings.** You may feel grief, anger, anxiety, exhaustion, or something else. You may just feel numb. These are all normal reactions. If you have a tendency to hold your feelings in, talking about them with people who care about you can help you process them. Give yourself permission to vent feelings of anger in healthy ways. Allow yourself to grieve and cry if you need to. Some people find it helpful to let feelings flow out on paper or address them in a creative way, such as painting or music.
- › **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 a similar experience.

Managing difficult emotions

- › **Many find that supporting others** and investing energy into making a difference can change their emotional temperature. Even small moves can help release the paralyzing sense of helplessness. This could be lending a hand with donations or something more personal. Taking action can be empowering. Doing helpful things and offering kindness to others can renew your spirit.
- › **You may want to try relaxation techniques** such as deep breathing or meditation. These gentle techniques can help calm the physical symptoms of anxiety and slow down racing thoughts.

Mental coping strategies

- › **Minimize your exposure to news media.** Media stories can be an ongoing reminder of distressing events and trigger renewed fears that this could happen to you or a loved one. Try to limit watching replays of the events. While it's important to stay informed, remember that constant exposure may add to feelings of distress.
- › **Lean into your routines as much as possible.** Living with a sense of threat can make life feel chaotic and out of control. The structure and predictability of doing daily tasks and normal rituals can help us to feel grounded.
- › **Bring thoughts to the present.** You might find it hard to focus on the present if you're imagining what might happen or recalling instances of past violence. Being able to reset to the "here and now," a mindfulness technique, can help. Take time in the day to stop and take a few slow, deep breaths. Bring your attention to the present. Notice the world around you using all your senses. Allow yourself to just be in the moment.
- › **Focus on what you do have control over.** The images we see, the stories we hear, and our own thoughts can increase our anxiety. Try to bring your focus to what you can control. This may just be small everyday aspects of your life – washing the dishes, texting a friend – but noticing that you have agency can be calming.

- › **Intentionally shift your thoughts to a neutral focus** if you notice thoughts or feelings are becoming overwhelming. This may be doing a physical activity, reading words of inspiration, connecting with others, or something else. Taking time out doesn't make the worry go away, but it can help bring stress levels down in the moment.
- › **Balance your thoughts.** When dealing with a threat, it's easy to think of the world as a very dark and lonely place. It may help to focus on ways that people come together to support one another and propel change, such as causes, websites, and testimonials that are a visible show of support. Adding some balance can help you manage emotions.

Take care of yourself

- › **Be good to yourself, physically and emotionally.** 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.
- › **Give yourself a break.** It may be hard to focus and concentrate during these times. Your energy level may be low. Be patient with yourself. Don't overload your schedule. Give yourself a little more time to do tasks.
- › **It is important to seek help** if your thoughts or feelings feel unmanageable or become overwhelming. Your EAP can provide help and connect you with resources for support in your community

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