

MANAGING DISTRESS

After Violent Attacks

When targeted violence or harassment occurs, it reminds us of how vulnerable we are. We're hard-wired to respond in self-protective ways. You may find yourself avoiding certain places, observing your surroundings, being careful about language, wording, and appearance, or preparing for threats.

We can also experience a range of emotions from fear to anger to grief. These emotions can deepen with each new incident. If a sense of anxiety or other difficult emotion is ongoing, it can make it hard to be at work or out in the community. It can factor into stress-related illnesses or a numbing of our emotions. Our quality of life can be negatively affected.

This handout offers some strategies to help manage these difficult feelings. The violence may have occurred in your community, or to someone you know, or come into your world via the media. Anyone who has been impacted by a violent act may want to seek support services.

Coping with fear and other difficult emotions

- › **Get reliable information.** One of the best ways to manage fear is to understand what is being done to protect your community. 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 state and local authorities.
- › **Be aware.** If you are in a situation where there is potential for violence or you feel targeted, it's important to remain vigilant. Pay attention to your surroundings; have a plan for seeking help if needed. Also be aware if you notice others are being targeted or harassed and consider how you could respond without endangering your own safety.
- › **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 the emotional fallout after an event. 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 some creative way, such as painting or music.
- › **Balance your thoughts.** When feeling overwhelmed by tragic events, it's easy to think of the world as a very dark place. It may help to focus on ways that people stand up for and support one another. This may be friends, family, or people in your community. Adding some balance to your viewpoint can help you manage your emotions.

- › **Focus on what you do have control over.** The images we see, the stories we hear, and our own thoughts about what happened can increase our anxiety. It can make you feel overwhelmed and helpless. Try to bring your focus to what you can control, such as learning how to react in the face of danger. Or how you might respond in a meaningful way, such as volunteering or making a donation.
- › **Bring thoughts to the present.** It's natural to dwell on "what if" thoughts. These tend to highlight worst case scenarios and increase worry. Being able to reset to the "here and now," a mindfulness technique, can help you feel more resilient. Take time in the day to stop and take a few slow, deep breaths. As you do, bring your attention to the present. Notice the world around you using all your senses. Allow yourself to just be in the grace of this moment.
- › **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.
- › **Channel your feelings into action.** Consider how you might 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.
- › **Lean into your routines as much as possible.** When there is prolonged traumatization, 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.
- › **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. It's a good idea to limit watching replays of the events. While it's important to stay informed, remember that constant exposure may add to feelings of distress.
- › **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.
- › **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.
- › **You may want to try relaxation techniques** such as deep breathing or meditation, when emotions run high. These gentle techniques can help calm the physical symptoms of anxiety and slow down racing thoughts.

Get support.

In some cases, it may be difficult to manage your emotional reactions, even with these strategies in place. You may want to get professional support if fear or other difficult emotions feel overwhelming or are interfering with your daily life.