

Common Reactions and Tips for Coping With a Mass Violence Incident

Any incident that evokes feelings of intense horror, fear, or helplessness, or an experience that puts you, or someone very close to you at risk of harm or death can cause a trauma response, regardless of whether you were hurt or lost a loved one. You can be affected just by witnessing the traumatic incident. In the aftermath of a mass violence incident, emotional and physical symptoms may arise, and are actually part of your body's natural response to a highly stressful event. These symptoms will naturally decline over time for most people. Distressing feelings about a traumatic event usually fade 2–4 weeks afterward as you get back to routines—and especially if you have engaged in some ways to help yourself. It is very important to monitor your physical and emotional health, and if you notice that your symptoms persist or are getting worse, seek support early on.

Traumatic events reshape the way you perceive the world around you and can create in you a sense of lost hope, limit your expectations about your life's potential, and create fear that your life may end abruptly or early. We all respond to trauma in different ways, and while there are no "right" or "wrong" ways to come to terms with significant events, there are some common trauma signs and symptoms.

Emotional and Psychological Trauma Symptoms may include:

- ▶ Extreme anxiety / panic / intrusive thoughts about the incident
- ▶ Grief (over loss of a loved one, or loss of peace of mind / safety, financial loss)
- ▶ Inability to focus / confusion / difficulty staying on task / difficulty remembering things
- ▶ Guilt (even though you had no control over the event)
- ▶ Feelings of being disconnected from people and everyday life
- ▶ Lack of self-care / difficulty accepting help
- ▶ Denial / shock / disillusionment
- ▶ Eating too much / too little
- ▶ Anger/ irritability / outbursts
- ▶ Fear/anxiety / heightened sense of awareness / altered sense of safety / obsessive worrying
- ▶ Isolating behavior
- ▶ Feelings of sadness / hopelessness

Trauma can also Disrupt Physical Health

Studies have shown a direct correlation between trauma and health conditions like Type 2 diabetes, COPD, heart disease, high blood pressure, thyroid problems, rheumatoid arthritis, and even cancer.

Physical symptoms may include:

- ▶ Fatigue
- ▶ Nightmares about the event / sleeping more / sleeping less
- ▶ Racing heartbeat
- ▶ Muscle tension / twitching
- ▶ Headaches / back pain / other body pain
- ▶ Stomach aches / diarrhea
- ▶ Jittery / easily startled

VICTIMS

Studies have shown that having and seeking out social support can be beneficial in recovering from a traumatic event. Even though you may want to avoid people or isolate, it is very important to remain active and maintain your connections with friends and loved ones.

Be aware of unhealthy coping strategies that may arise, such as drug or alcohol use. Substance use may seem effective in reducing anxiety short-term, but it is only a temporary solution. It does not help you work through the trauma. Consequently, the anxiety will continue its haunting.

Tips for Coping with the Aftermath of a Traumatic Incident

- ▶ **Limit your consumption of news.** Continual replay of stories about the traumatic event, or other traumatic news stories can trigger stress, anxiety, and flashbacks.
- ▶ **Get enough “good” sleep.** After a traumatic event, difficulty falling asleep, or waking up during the night can be a problem. If you have trouble sleeping, avoid drinking caffeine or alcohol at least one hour before going to bed, avoid using cell phones or laptops in bed, and only go to bed when you are ready to sleep. If you wake up and can't go back to sleep, try writing your thoughts and feelings in a journal or on a sheet of paper.
- ▶ **Be patient with yourself and others.** It's common to have any number of temporary stress reactions assault your senses simultaneously, or repeatedly one at a time.
- ▶ **Spend more time with the people who care about you.** Family and friends can offer emotional support. Physical touch is comforting, hug one another, and share and listen.
- ▶ **Establish and maintain a routine.** Eat meals at regular times, drink plenty of water, put yourself on a sleep schedule, exercise regularly. Include a positive or fun activity in your schedule that you can look forward to each day or week.
- ▶ **Carve out time for relaxation.** Listen to music, practice deep breathing, take a walk, or gentle stretching, and watch a funny movie, laughter produces endorphins.
- ▶ **Avoid making major life decisions.** Doing things like switching jobs or careers, buying or selling a home, are already stressful things without a trauma, but becomes even more difficult to manage directly after a traumatic event.
- ▶ **Positive Self-Talk.** Remind yourself to remember what you are feeling is normal reaction to the experience, and with time, the symptoms will diminish.
- ▶ **Avoid isolating.** Communication with, and support from, family members, friends, religious institutions and the community are very helpful in coping after catastrophic violence.
- ▶ **Connect with other survivors.** Sharing with survivors of the same violence event, or similar victimizations can be helpful because they understand your experience.
- ▶ **Don't hesitate to seek support.** Short term assistance from a mental health professional can help you to understand and manage the symptoms.

Resource Information for Tennessee can be found by county at

www.tnvoicesforvictims.org