

# COPING IN THE AFTERMATH OF A TARGETED ACT OF VIOLENCE

News of yet another mass attack in our country can trigger a range of difficult emotions. We may struggle with outrage, fear, and deep sadness. Learning that it was an attack planned specifically to target a certain group, race, or ethnicity can compound those feelings. It may add agonizing questions that we struggle to answer. How do we maintain our well-being as we try to come to terms with our thoughts and feelings? Understanding your reactions and having strategies to manage the stress may help.

## Normal reactions

The intensity and range of reactions we might experience can sometimes be surprising or feel overwhelming.

- › **Emotional reactions** may start with a feeling of shock or numbness. As the news registers, the floodgates open, and we may feel unfamiliar or deeper emotions, such as: profound sadness, anger, outrage, grief, anxiety, and fear. These feelings may build in intensity or perhaps ebb and spike with repeated news accounts and disturbing images.
- › **Our thoughts** can race and strain to find a place to land. Many people find that they can't stop thinking about what has happened or have trouble concentrating. We find ourselves constantly drawn to news reports.
- › **Physical reactions** may be less expected. People sometimes cry unexpectedly or are unable to sleep. There may be a strong feeling of restlessness, as if you can't sit still. You might notice an upset stomach or a pounding heart or trembling. Some experience a loss of appetite or a feeling of being deeply exhausted.

These are just some examples; you may react differently. But know that it's normal to have intense reactions. It doesn't suggest mental or physical health problems. It's the way that our bodies and minds respond to a difficult event. It is okay to feel what you feel.

## Understanding reactions

These reactions are all part of a normal stress reaction. They tell you that this matters to you. For some people it can trigger memories tied to past traumatic experiences. You may find yourself reliving the emotions of those events.

While each person has their own lens, we're all affected. Whether we're connected by location, skin color, or just as people who honor the value and rights of every human life. It can shake the core of our moral code and beliefs, especially when history shows a pattern of similarly targeted violence. Those in marginalized communities, who live with this reality every day, may feel buried by this undeniable, relentless truth.

This can leave us struggling with our response. We may feel caught between giving in to the numbness and exhaustion triggered by this repetition and embracing the anger and sorrow as drivers of change. This tangle of thoughts, perspectives, and emotions can be overwhelming.

It's important to honor these feelings and understand that they are challenging for a reason. While we can't control how we feel, we do have control over regulating our emotions. Doing this can help us to better manage what we're feeling and allow us to respond to it in meaningful ways. The following coping strategies may be of help.

<p><b>Co-opted thoughts</b></p>	<p><b>Coping strategies</b></p>
<p>While we do need information to process what has happened, we risk being overwhelmed, flooded with our emotions, when our thoughts are shaped by repeated, graphic media accounts. Putting yourself in the victims' place and imagining their fear and helplessness can feel overwhelming. This image can play over and over in your mind, intensifying your reactions.</p>	<p><b>Take control of your news exposure.</b> Even though it may feel necessary to be tuned in 24/7, try to take breaks from it to bring your emotional temperature down.</p> <p><b>Shift your thoughts.</b> Mental images can trigger the same level of stress as the actual situation. Look for activities that can draw your thoughts to a neutral place for a time. Turning away doesn't mean you don't care, it's simply a way to lower stress and help you regain emotional control.</p>
<p><b>Fear of the unknown</b></p>	<p><b>Coping strategies</b></p>
<p>We all have a built-in, hard-wired threat response. Targeted lethal events have the power to trigger it repeatedly. From the fear that we or loved ones are at risk, to the worry that there will never be meaningful change. All the unknown "what ifs?" can fuel an unhealthy level of uncontrolled anxiety. It's important to do what we can to address worries and stop feelings of freefall.</p>	<p><b>Take steps to feel safer.</b> We can't stop random violence, but we can't live in constant fear either. Stay aware, but not fearful. Have a response in mind if there's violence or you feel targeted. Talk with family, friends, and children about how to reduce risk.</p> <p><b>Focus on what you can control.</b> We can only manage the "here and now," not all the "what ifs." Look for what is within your power right now. It might be just managing your emotions and stress levels or reaching out for support.</p> <p><b>Remind yourself of positive actions being taken.</b> Seek out stories about constructive and hopeful responses to rebalance.</p>
<p><b>Trying to make sense of it</b></p>	<p><b>Coping strategies</b></p>
<p>We may find ourselves questioning life's meaning in a world where injustices keep repeating themselves. We try to make sense of events that feel so senseless. For some, this results in a sad and angry validation of their life experiences. For others, it's dissonant and confusing. We can all be left with stressful, unanswerable "Whys?" Focusing on questions without answers can leave you feeling powerless and unable to move forward.</p>	<p><b>Change your perspective.</b> It may be helpful to ask a different question: "How can I respond to this in a meaningful way?" The answer might be engaging with public officials, marching, painting a mural, or getting involved in a group that supports change.</p> <p><b>Learn more.</b> Educating yourself about systemic oppression and violence – past and present – can bring greater understanding and offer ideas for how to support change. Becoming familiar with movements and organizations that are working for change can help you determine how you can take meaningful action.</p>
<p><b>Desire for action</b></p>	<p><b>Coping strategies</b></p>
<p>The combination of powerlessness and outrage can set off extreme feelings of stress. Ongoing investigations and legal proceedings may deepen those feelings. It can spark a need to make the world sit up and take notice. We can feel a strong urge to do something, but struggle to know what that is.</p>	<p><b>Turn negative thoughts and reactions into constructive acts.</b> This honors those we've lost and can help channel your emotions. Many find that supporting others and investing energy into making a difference can help redirect the power of anger in positive ways.</p> <p><b>Speak up; don't be silent.</b> Use your voice to support equity and justice on social media, with friends, family, at work, and in the community. Be willing to have difficult conversations.</p> <p><b>Listen to understand.</b> Challenge yourself to engage with others and really hear instead of jumping to defend your viewpoint. Allow discomfort. Strive to be open to learning and dialogue.</p>

## Taking care of yourself

**There's no right or wrong way to feel**, nor is there one right or wrong way to feel better. There are rarely easy answers to our many tough questions. It can feel necessary to hold onto anger. You may need to cry, grieve, vent. Give yourself permission to feel good or positive feelings too. It's okay to be where you are right now. Remember, physical activity can be one of the best ways to ease some of the emotional stress.

### **The reality is that this is hard on many levels.**

There's no easy way through it. There may be ongoing developments that cause distress. You may be faced with opinions, comments, or actions from others that increase stress. This may be on social media, but it may be from friends or family as well. You might want to take a break from others who are highly emotional or aggressive about their viewpoint. It's important to take care of your well-being as you work through this.

### **Know that it will take time to process and find your balance.**

For some, it can be helpful to rely on regular routines, others might need to take a "time out." Being actively involved in the movement for change may be the most helpful for some. Do take time to reflect. Journaling your thoughts, feelings, and experiences or talking about them with others can be a useful way to gain perspective and vent emotions. A professional counselor may be able to suggest strategies tailored to your needs and experience. Recognize that the impact of this incident may never completely go away, but you can manage your emotions and stress.

### **Be good to yourself** – physically and emotionally.

Turn to the positive coping skills and strengths that have gotten you through hard times in the past. Be patient with yourself and get the support you need.

**It is important to seek help** if your reactions to the event feel unmanageable, continue long term, or become overwhelming. Reach out for professional support or connect with resources for support in your community. Talking through concerns and sharing your feelings can help.

## Talking with your child

### **Consider if/how you wish to communicate about current events with your child.**

Discussing this topic can be a very personal decision, for many reasons. However, avoiding or downplaying a topic that they know is charged can make events feel even more worrisome.

**Think about what you want to share and how to do that at an age-appropriate level.** You might ask them what they've heard as a place to start. Prepare for a range of questions. Encourage them to share their thoughts and feelings.

**Reassure them that you will always do your best to keep them safe.** Talk about the positive ways people are responding and how your family might be able to help. This can counteract feelings of powerlessness. Consistency and routines also help them feel safe. Make time for soothing activities such as reading or playing games together. Give extra hugs.

### **Monitor your child's exposure to news stories.**

Watching repeated images of the event(s) can be as disturbing to a child as if it were happening anew each time. Supervise what you want them to see and plan time to talk about it afterwards. A general rule of thumb is to offer only as much information as they request. But know that an older child may press for a more in-depth discussion.

**Be aware that your child is watching you** to understand how to process this experience. Be honest with words, feelings, and actions, but be mindful of *how* you are communicating them. It can be unsettling for a child to feel that you're overwhelmed.

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