

WELLNESSMONTHLY

Coping in the Aftermath of Mass Shootings | June 2022



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Coping in the Aftermath of Mass Shootings

Mass shootings and other acts of violence can trigger a stress response, even for those who are not directly involved.

It's natural to have feelings of helplessness, anger, anxiety, depression, detachment or irritability following a traumatic event. Related physical responses may include upset stomach, sleep disruption, rapid heart rate and headache. It can be difficult to concentrate and be productive.

A 2021 [Princeton University analysis](#) of findings from a Gallup poll found that geographic proximity to a mass shooting has a substantial emotional impact on adults. In the days after a mass shooting, the percentage of local respondents who reported feeling sadness and anger rose sharply, while the percentage who reported feeling happy, or smiling and laughing a lot, plummeted over a four-week period after the incident.

Regardless of proximity, repeated exposure to the details of a tragedy is difficult to avoid in the age of 24/7 news cycles, smart phones and social media platforms. Some people try to avoid the news as a protective mechanism, but disengagement can fuel stress, misunderstandings and guilt feelings. Polarizing issues and environments also generate tensions and trigger stress responses across the political spectrum.

For those who experience an event through media coverage, social media posts and online videos, there is a risk for developing symptoms similar to post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but in a less intense way than it might be for those who directly experience a trauma. This condition is referred to as secondary traumatic stress (STS), according to an article by Chad A. Buck, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist associated with the Work/Life Connections employee assistance program at Vanderbilt University.

People who have experienced similar events, who have pre-existing PTSD or who have other mental health issues are considered to be at higher risk for an exacerbation of symptoms and the development of STS. Symptoms of STS include:

- Intrusive thoughts
- Chronic fatigue
- Sadness
- Anger
- Poor concentration
- Second guessing
- Detachment
- Emotional exhaustion
- Fearfulness
- Shame
- Physical illness
- Absenteeism

Dr. Buck suggests it is counter-productive to blame people with mental health conditions for committing acts of violence. According to data from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, most people with mental illness are not violent and tend to be victims rather than perpetrators. In addition, he cites a study published in the *American Journal of Public Health* in which Vanderbilt researchers Jonathan Metzl and Kenneth T. MacLeish write, "Fewer than 5 percent of the 120,000 gun-related killings in the United States between 2001 and 2010 were perpetrated by people diagnosed with mental illness."

In 2020, there were more than 45,222 firearm-related deaths in the U.S. Among approximately 124 deaths a day, more than half were attributed to suicide and four out of 10 were firearm-related homicides, according to government statistics.

Coping Strategies

Lynette Helmer, managing director of Wellness Solutions, a WorkCare company, offers these strategies for dealing with the aftermath of mass violence:

- 1. Stay informed but limit exposure** to news and social media until you feel better able to manage your physical and emotional reactions. Give yourself permission to take a break.
- 2. Take care of yourself** so you can be of service to others. Prioritize rest, exercise and healthy eating to help your body deal with stress. Do activities that you enjoy and find relaxing.
- 3. Try to limit alcohol consumption** or problematic behaviors such as overeating, reckless driving, gambling or taking drugs as a way to soothe your feelings.
- 4. Pay attention to your own and others' emotional health.** People may need time and patience to put their feelings and thoughts in order.
- 5. Maintain contact with friends and family.** Seek out those who will not minimize your feelings or thoughts, and who allow you to process how you feel without judgment or an agenda.
- 6. Offer reassurance to children.** Ask them about their feelings. Listen to their fears and safety concerns.
- 7. Participate in group discussions,** campus events, spiritual gatherings or other positive community activities to help channel your reactions in a positive way.
- 8. Consult with a mental health professional** or a behavioral professional if you are having trouble recovering and everyday tasks seem difficult to manage. This is perhaps the most important coping strategy.

Resilience is another effective coping mechanism. Psychologists say it's possible to cultivate resilience as you navigate through life. Research shows that people with resilient brains deal more effectively with intense emotions than those with less-resilient brains.

Social connections enhance resilience during times of stress and conflict. Being resilient doesn't prevent feelings of anger, sadness, depression or anxiety, loss of sleep or appetite, and other manifestations of distress. It is a process that involves: 1) acknowledging a difficult situation, 2) recognizing how it affects your mind and body and 3) taking intentional action to overcome it.

Related Resources

- [Coping in the Aftermath of a Shooting](#)
- [Disaster Distress Help Line \(SAMHSA\)](#)
- [National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Division of Violence Prevention](#)
- [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#)
- [Trauma and Violence Resource Guide](#)
- [Youth Mental Health Trauma-informed Approaches](#)