

Coping with Tragedy and Violent Events

When people go through, witness or vicariously experience violent events such as war, terrorist events or individual acts of violence, it is common for them to experience traumatic stress. Understanding the effects of traumatic stress and the normal responses that may follow can help you cope with your thoughts and feelings on the path to recovery. Following violent events, people frequently feel stunned, disoriented or unable to integrate distressing information. Once these initial reactions subside, people can experience a variety of thoughts and behaviors.

Common responses can be:

- **Intense or unpredictable feelings.** You may be anxious, nervous, overwhelmed or grief-stricken. You may also feel more irritable or moody than usual.
- **Changes to thoughts and behavior patterns.** You might have repeated and vivid memories of the event or may ruminate about images or stories to which you were exposed about the event. These memories may occur for no apparent reason and may lead to physical reactions such as rapid heartbeat or sweating. It may be difficult to concentrate or make decisions. Sleep and eating patterns also can be disrupted — some people may overeat and oversleep, while others experience a loss of sleep and loss of appetite.
- **Sensitivity to environmental factors.** Sirens, loud noises, burning smells or other environmental sensations may stimulate memories of the event creating heightened anxiety. These “triggers” may be accompanied by fears that the stressful event will be repeated.
- **Strained interpersonal relationships.** Increased conflict, such as more frequent disagreements with family members and coworkers, can occur. You might also become withdrawn, isolated or disengaged from your usual social activities.
- **Stress-related physical symptoms.** Headaches, nausea and chest pain may occur and could require medical attention. Preexisting medical conditions could be affected by disaster or violence-related stress.

How do I cope?

Research shows that most people are resilient and over time are able to recover from tragedy. It is common for people to experience stress in the immediate aftermath, but within a few months most people are able to resume functioning as they did prior to the tragedy. It is important to remember that resilience and recovery are the norm, not prolonged distress.

There are a number of steps you can take to build emotional well-being and gain a sense of control following a disaster or violence related event, including the following:

- Give yourself time to adjust. Anticipate that this may be a difficult time in your life. Try to be patient with changes in your emotional state.
- Ask for support from people who care about you and who will listen and empathize with your situation. Social support is a key component to recovery. Family and friends can be

(See reverse side)

important resources. You may also want to reach out to others not involved who may be able to provide greater support and objectivity. Finding an informal or formally organized support group can be helpful.

- **Communicate your experience.** Express what you are feeling in whatever ways feel comfortable to you — such as talking with family or close friends, keeping a diary or engaging in a creative activity (e.g., drawing, molding clay, etc.).
- **Limit your viewing or reading regarding news of the event(s).** Although you may want to stay abreast of the news, repeated and prolonged immersion to the news can heighten your anxiety. Be sure to take breaks from the news.
- **Engage in healthy behaviors to enhance your ability to cope with excessive stress.** Eat well-balanced meals and get plenty of rest. If you experience ongoing difficulties with sleep, you may be able to find some relief through relaxation techniques. Avoid alcohol and drugs because they can be a numbing diversion that could detract from as well as delay active coping and moving forward from the tragedy.
- **Establish or reestablish routines.** This can include eating meals at regular times, sleeping and waking on a regular cycle, or following an exercise program. Build in some positive routines to have something to look forward to during these distressing times, like pursuing a hobby, walking through an attractive park or neighborhood, or reading a good book.
- **Avoid making major life decisions.** Switching careers or jobs and other important decisions tend to be highly stressful in their own right and even harder to take on when you're recovering from a tragedy.

In addition to these recommendations, APA's Road to Resilience brochure at

<http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/road-resilience.aspx>

describes steps that you can take to build resilience — the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress.

When should I seek professional help?

If you notice persistent feelings of distress or hopelessness and you feel like you are barely able to get through your daily responsibilities and activities, consult with a licensed mental health professional such as a psychologist. Psychologists are trained to help people address emotional reactions to disaster such as disbelief, stress, anxiety and grief and make a plan for moving forward. Suffolk University offers free, short-term counseling and medical care to students in the Counseling Health and Wellness Center. Contact information and location for the Center is below.

Suffolk Counseling, Health & Wellness, 73 Tremont Street, 5th floor, 617-573-8226

This document is adapted from the American Psychological Association at:

<http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/recovering-disasters.aspx>

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