

## Coping following community violence

Extreme and distressing events like public shootings, hate crimes, terrorist threats, violent racist demonstrations, and other acts of community violence, are powerful and upsetting incidents that intrude into daily life.

This tip sheet will help individuals to cope with distressing feelings following community violence, and find ways of responding constructively to these events.



### Strategies for coping following community violence

Extreme and distressing events like public shootings, hate crimes, terrorist threats, violent racist demonstrations, and other acts of community violence, are powerful and upsetting incidents that intrude into daily life.

Many people can have strong emotional or physical reactions like sorrow, anger, confusion, or even fear after an incident of community violence. Whilst they may not have experienced the incident first hand, these emotional reactions can be sadness for the people who lost their lives or lost loved ones, as well as a response to other types of losses. They may experience the loss of their sense of safety, their trust in those who live in their neighbourhood, or their trust in the government and the authorities, or the event might trigger feelings around a personal experience of violence or loss.

For most, these reactions subside over a few days or weeks. For some, the feelings and reactions may last longer and be more severe.

#### What can individuals who are personally involved do?

##### **Following a traumatic event, strive to promote a sense of safety and calm.**

Resuming normal routines can be very helpful.

##### **Take a break from the media.**

The way the media portray these events can make them seem even more overwhelming or distressing, and turning off the news for a while can be very helpful.

##### **Ask for support from people who care about you and whom you trust.**

Social support is enormously helpful in times of crisis.

##### **Communicate about your experiences.**

When people are personally involved in an event, they often need to share stories and emotions, and should be listened to, but in a way that does not encourage disclosure beyond the level at which they feel comfortable. Others may not want to talk about it at all, and this is also OK. Finding some other way to express your feelings, through a diary, or art work, can also be helpful. Remember that there is no right or wrong way to feel.

##### **Remember that you have plenty of your own coping skills, strengths and resilience.**

People cope well when they believe they have the ability to manage a stressful event.

##### **Take care of yourself with healthy eating, exercise, and plenty of rest.**

##### **Give yourself time to adjust.**

Resilience is the norm, but it can take a little while to bounce back.

#### What can others do?

Even following such events from a distance, either through the media or through stories you hear, can be distressing. The following suggestions can be helpful for people trying to make sense of these sorts of distressing events.

##### **Talk about the issues that the event raises**

Our usual and understandable reaction to horrific ideas is to avoid them, although we cannot afford to react in this way. Talking about our fears can enable us to understand how and why we have avoided facing them, and how we can change this response.

By talking to each other we can come to recognise and acknowledge the very real, appropriate and adaptive concerns that we have about violence and injustice.



Only when these concerns become a daily reality in our minds will we be motivated to take action.

### **Talk about how to treat others**

These events are a chance to have discussions about how to treat others, and to share values about what sort of a society you want to have.

You can use it to open up a frank discussion about realities in society, and the ways in which some people who live in this country are treated. Hate and prejudice are not innate but learned. No one deserves any act of violence for their race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, culture, or other beliefs.

Avoid stereotyping, narrow analyses of the problem, disaster or crisis, and blaming of whole groups for the actions of few.

Try to separate angry thoughts and feelings about specific people who behave in cruel ways from the larger cultural or religious group to which those people may belong.

Define the problem group (e.g. bigots, haters, terrorists, violent activists) narrowly. A narrow definition reduces the problem's impact and the potential leverage of people advocating or using violence.

Remember that people who advocate hate and violence are a tiny minority. It's a problem, but it's a small problem relative to many other challenges we face in society like homelessness, poverty, discrimination, or environmental destruction.

Discuss the importance of encouraging peace and non-violence at all levels of society, by promoting understanding of people from different groups, supporting ways that strengthen people's cultural identities, teaching conflict resolution skills, and changing social norms (making it unacceptable to be violent or hateful).

### **Foster hope**

In the aftermath of tragic events we can also be reminded of the goodness of people.

We need to remember that the world is largely a safe place, people are usually good, and that life is worth living.

Look for the positive changes that come from distressing or tragic events, for example:

- Increasing the motivation for us to turn the tide of violence and fear and work harder to build a better, safer and respectful society.
- Increasing people's desire to help more and show acts of kindness to others in their community or in other parts of the world.
- Having increased appreciation for relationships and loved ones.
- Becoming allies to other people and minority groups who might be in need of support, including those of which you are not a member.

Find something positive to do in response to distressing world events, so you feel like you can make a positive difference in the world, like:

- Volunteering in the community to help others.
- Donating money to Red Cross or other emergency organisations.
- Standing up and speaking up for others who you see being bullied or targeted.

For more information about the APS disaster recovery resources please visit [psychology.org.au/topics/disasters/](https://psychology.org.au/topics/disasters/)