

The Emotional Effects of Violence

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When violence affects you, a loved one, or a co-worker, it's usually by surprise and without warning, leaving a lasting impression and sometimes an impact on your emotional and physical health.

Fear can be a debilitating emotion, and how you cope with that fear is as important as the safety measures you take. There are several things you can do to start coping. This article will sketch out the reactions most people feel, how to cope with those reactions and additional resources to contact for more assistance.

Normal Reactions To Horrific Events

No matter what the act, part of the difficulty with violence events is that they surprise us when we are not prepared. Mental health experts all agree there are common reactions and feelings to traumatic events - even if you are not directly involved.

Factors

There are a number of factors that can determine just how intense your feelings will become, or if you will suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). They include:

- **How close you were to the events** - Whether disaster hits close-to-home or across the country can be a factor in how people react. If you are removed from the situation, by seeing events on television or reading about them in the newspaper, you are less likely to be as affected as someone close to the tragedy.
- **What you saw, witnessed or heard** - Watching a terrorist event over and over on television can have an affect on your feelings and fears about the event. According to the American Psychological Association, hearing first person accounts of the events or seeing the events as they unfold can have an impact on your reaction.
- **Whether you or someone you love was injured during the event** - Being related to someone missing or killed due to violence or living through the earthquake makes you personally touched by violence and can bring the fears very close to home.
- **If you are a past survivor of a traumatic event** - Those who have gone through a previous event and coped with those feelings will feel more fearful and panicked about their safety, according to the University of Pennsylvania's Center for the Treatment and Study of Anxiety.

Experts studied the above factors after the events of the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. They found people who met all of these criteria often developed PTSD.

Reactions

According to the American Psychological Association many people who have witnessed these events "may go into a state of acute stress reaction." These reaction include:

- **Intense and unpredictable feelings** - Irritation, sadness and radical mood swings are just some of the reactions people have to horrific events.

- **Repeated thoughts of the incident** - These reactions can occur for no reason and may lead to physical reactions such as sweating or crying. This can cause difficulty in concentrating and making decisions.
- **Recurring emotional reactions** - Anniversaries of the event, such as one week, month or year, as well as reminders such as noticing airplanes flying overhead or aftershocks from earthquakes, can cause memories of the disaster. These reminders may make people feel like the event could be repeated and things are out of control.
- **Radical changes in behavior** - People may start to have a heightened sense of fear or nervousness. Many times these fears will make people stay inside and away from friends and family where they will become isolated and depressed. Normal routines may be disrupted, and some people will even feel survivor's guilt.

How To Cope After Tragic Events

While people never tend to forget tragic events, easing the feelings that are associated with these traumas can be mitigated by taking specific actions in your life. The following tips have been compiled from the Kansas State Cooperative Extension Service, University of Illinois, American Psychological Association and the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

- **Provide direct help in dealing with the disaster** - Help an elderly or homeless person who is affected by the disaster. Volunteer by helping your fire department or police department during their times of need. Many communities have Community Emergency Responder Teams for neighborhoods. This is a good way to help in times of need. If you are removed from the situation give blood or money to charitable organizations that are helping with the relief effort.
- **Talk and listen** - Sharing feelings with others, especially family, friends and neighbors, helps people deal with and overcome anxiety and feelings of helplessness. On the same token, listening can help others cope with these same feelings. One of the best ways to help is to lend an ear.
- **Identify your feelings** - Understanding your feelings can help you realize that you are feeling the effects of stress and sympathy. Knowing yourself can help you cope with the abnormal situation you might find yourself in.
- **Show by words and actions that you care** - Act. Don't be afraid of doing the wrong thing, or offending someone, just try to help in any way you can. A word of support or a helping hand goes a long way to encourage other people who are also trying to cope in a difficult situation.
- **Realize that you are not alone** - There are many individual including those in numerous law enforcement and government agencies that are trying to prevent and solve the problem of crime and terrorism. Knowing that you are not alone in this situation is an important step in dealing with your fears.
- **Get back to your daily routine as soon as possible** - You might not be able to do all of the things you once did, but trying to get back to some sense of normalcy is important in the healing process. Make sure you also maintain good sleeping and eating habits.
- **Realize that not everyone heals at the same pace** - Don't be judgmental if you have found your way out of the emotional pitfalls of a disaster, but your spouse, son or neighbor is still feeling the pain.



- **Remember you have overcome obstacles in the past** - Try to remember what you did in other difficult situations and see if those skills can be used in the current crisis.
- **Limit watching the news** - Watching the same event time after time will not help you in the healing process. Collecting important information is important, but watching just for the sake of shock is not healthy.
- **Avoid major life decisions** - When people are under stress or bereavement they cannot make logical decisions. Immediately after a traumatic event is not the time to change careers, move or change your relationships. Give it time, and then make the decision.
- **Keep helping** - The disruptions caused by a traumatic event may continue for a long while. Recovery may take even longer. Friends, family members and neighbors will need regular acts of kindness and understanding to maintain their morale and put their lives back together.

Conclusion

We never know when a terrible event may occur, but by knowing how we can cope, behave and react in a positive way we can be in control.

Resources

The following is a list of resources to contact for more assistance.

National Organization for Victims Assistance

1730 Park Road, NW,
Washington D.C. 20010
1 (800) TRY-NOVA

Federal Emergency Management Agency

1(800) 462-9029
<http://www.fema.gov>

American Red Cross

1 (800) HELP NOW
<http://www.redcross.org>

American Psychological Association

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