

DEALING WITH THE IMPACT OF VIOLENCE AND VIOLENT DEATH

Hearing about violence that results in injury or death can bring up strong emotions. What is it about death by violence that strikes us so deeply? What can we do to manage and work through our feelings in healthy ways?

Common/normal reactions

Feelings and reactions may vary depending on how close one is to those who experienced the violence. People with a direct connection may struggle with very intense grief. However, even those far removed may find themselves facing unexpectedly strong reactions.

- > **Emotional reactions** are often the most obvious first response. Feeling a sense of shock or numbness is common. Fear, anxiety, deep sadness and anger are also normal reactions.
- > **Mentally**, it is not unusual to struggle with a sense of disbelief about what happened. Many people find that they can't stop thinking about the event or have trouble concentrating.
- > **Physical reactions** may be less expected. People sometimes can't stop crying. An upset stomach or a pounding heart and trembling are common. Sometimes being very tired can be a response.

For most people, strong reactions pass fairly quickly. They may last longer or stop and come back for other people. Remember, these are normal reactions. They do not suggest mental or physical health problems. They are the way that our bodies and minds cope with a difficult event.

Challenges of coping

Coping with grief and loss after a death can be difficult. Coping after a violent death or injury can be even more difficult. This is because other stressful thoughts and feelings can be triggered along with grief. What might you experience, and what are some helpful responses to these added concerns?

Lingering fear	Strategies
"Am I at risk?" Worrying about your safety is a natural reaction to the news of violence. It can lead to a healthy response, such as taking extra precautions in situations that might be dangerous. However, when fear is not based on a realistic risk, those worries can become a problem.	Understand that "what-if" thinking tends to increase stress. Practice moving away from this type of thinking by focusing on things that are within your control. It may be helpful to talk about your concerns with people who support you or someone trained to help with these types of fears. Putting your personal risk into perspective may also be useful. In this country as a whole, the number of people hurt or killed in violent attacks is very small.

Dealing with unknowns	Strategies
<p>When violent acts occur, it can take time to get accurate information about what happened. Not having answers, especially if a perpetrator is still at large, can be both frustrating and frightening.</p>	<p>It is important to get reliable information and facts from trusted sources. Relying on hearsay can increase stress and anxiety. Sources might include established news publications and local police or government websites.</p>
Questioning and doubts	Strategies
<p>Death or injury by violence is unexpected. You can't prepare for it. It is shocking and feels senseless. This randomness can disrupt your core sense of security. It may cause you to question life's meaning: "How could such a bad thing have happened to such a good person?" Or struggle with all the "if-onlys": "If only he had taken a later flight." This may even translate into survivor's guilt for some: "Why them and not me?"</p>	<p>Focusing on questions without answers can leave you feeling powerless and unable to move forward. It may be helpful to ask a different question: "How can I respond to this event in a meaningful way?" The answer might be a small gesture, such as a promise to show your kids how much you love them. Or it could be something bigger, such as getting involved in a group that supports change. Examples might be participating in causes that build mental health awareness or work to end domestic violence.</p>
Desire for retaliation	Strategies
<p>A violent death or injury can bring up feelings of anger and helplessness. Thinking about retaliation or payback is common. Ongoing investigations may keep these feelings alive and even make them worse. It is important that you do not act on these thoughts.</p>	<p>Turning negative thoughts into positive acts honors those impacted and can help channel your emotions. Many find that helping others can help them move past feelings of anger. Some people find purpose in volunteering or working with those affected by or at risk of violence.</p>
Imagining victim's fear	Strategies
<p>Most of us have seen depictions of violent death on film and TV. These images, along with your imagination, can create a frightening picture of a victim's final moments. These thoughts can intensify your reaction.</p>	<p>It may be hard to refocus, but actively try to change your mental picture to something calming. If the person impacted by violence is close to you, bring up an image of them doing something they enjoyed. Use this to displace the disturbing image.</p>
Media overload	Strategies
<p>Violent events often involve a crime and may be on the news. You may be exposed to repeated, graphic accounts of the event.</p>	<p>Be aware that news coverage is designed to be dramatic and emotional. Don't keep watching it. Once you have the facts, you can turn it off.</p>

Taking care of yourself

It can be hard to manage the distress caused by violence. Studies show that grieving lasts longer and the process of adjustment is more difficult with violent death. Be patient with yourself and get the support you need. It may be helpful to recognize that the impact of this incident will never completely go away. It will, however, slowly be woven into your life experience.

As you work through it, allow yourself to feel sad, to cry and grieve. Remind yourself that your feelings are normal. Also give yourself permission to feel good or happy. Remember, physical activity can be one of the best ways to ease some of the emotional stress you may feel.

It takes time to adjust to and process distressing news, even if you were not directly impacted. There is no right or wrong way to feel, nor is there one right or wrong way to feel better. Some people need the comfort of returning to a routine. Others prefer taking time away from their normal duties. Grief can be a long process; give yourself time.

It is important to seek help if your reactions to the event continue long term or become overwhelming. Your EAP can provide professional help and connect you with resources for support in your community.

References

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