

Mass violence tragedies impact not only the physically injured and families of deceased victims but every individual who was there and who may have been affected by what he or she saw, heard, and felt. Trauma can affect people in many different ways: physically, mentally, behaviorally, spiritually, and emotionally. Help is available and there are things you can do to cope.

## How are you feeling?

There is no blueprint or template for how witnesses react to an act of mass violence. No two people react exactly the same. You may feel intensely sad or angry, or you may feel numb. Stress, anxiety, and depression are also common reactions. Emotional responses can be complicated and overwhelming.

It is important to know that no matter how you relate to the event, you may experience physical and psychological changes in the coming days and weeks. **These can include the following:**

- sudden and disturbing memories of the event
- disbelief that the event happened
- unexplained worry and fear
- irritability
- inability to focus
- difficulty making decisions
- eating too much or too little
- lack of energy or increased tiredness
- headaches/stomachaches/unexplained pain
- sleeping too much or too little
- difficulty connecting with others
- feeling like you won't ever be happy again

Over time, most people will see these reactions fade away naturally as they gradually get back into their routines and reconnect with work, family, and friends. However, some people may continue to have thoughts and reactions that make it difficult to function on a daily basis.

## Taking care of yourself.

It is important to first recognize how you are feeling, thinking, and behaving. The next step involves doing things to protect your emotional and mental health. If you are struggling, do not be afraid to take steps to make helpful changes. **The following are suggestions:**

- Turn off the TV and step away from social media. The more you expose yourself to news about the tragedy, the more deeply the tragedy may affect you emotionally and psychologically. Tuning in occasionally to stay current on the latest developments can be helpful in understanding what happened. Marathon sessions of graphic images, video footage, and audio can be overwhelming. Know your limitations when it comes to exposure to news about the event.
- If you have children in your life, limit their exposure to television coverage, work to keep their routines in place, and reassure them that there will always be adults who will take care of them.
- Reach out to family and friends. Experiencing a tragedy can make you feel alone, isolated, and helpless. Staying in contact with friends and family can help you feel less alone. You do not have to talk about what happened, just let them know you need their support. Some family members and close friends may need help in understanding how the event affected you.
- Limit your intake of caffeine, tobacco, alcohol, and other mood altering substances. Drink as much water as possible to prevent dehydration caused by stress.
- Be aware that anniversary dates, reading or hearing about similar tragedies, returning to the area where the event occurred, or court dates can trigger the feelings you had at the time of the event. Give yourself a break if you need it.
- Look for positive ways to spend your energy. Make a list of what gives you pleasure, like taking a walk, exercising, playing music, spending time with family and friends, or writing in a journal. You might not feel like doing something that makes you feel joyful, so it can require a little effort. It may help to start with simple things that make you feel renewed and allow you to take better care of yourself such as deep breathing, eating well, getting plenty of rest, and surrounding yourself with positive people.
- Witnessing violence can change how you feel about yourself and the world. You may question the things that you previously believed. Look for balance. Remind yourself of people and events that are meaningful and comforting. Some people will benefit from counseling and/or spiritual guidance.
- Get help if you need it. Professional counseling can help if you find it hard to function and get through the day. If things become worse in the coming weeks and you still feel severely affected by the event in a month's time, it may be in your best interest to seek professional assistance. Looking for help is a positive step. You do not have to do this on your own. Most people are resilient and able to cope with a traumatic experience over time, even those who need help along the way.