



# For Teens: Coping after Mass Violence

Mass violence incidents, where several people are injured and killed, affect everyone in the community. Coping with mass violence can be very stressful. You or your friends might have been physically injured; you may have been worried about the safety of family and friends, or lost a loved one. You may have been interviewed by the police. It can be difficult to figure out where to begin when trying to understand what happened. Over time, most people begin to feel better and return to normal routines, but knowing about the impact of mass violence can help you take care of yourself and others. Here are some common reactions to mass violence:

## Feeling afraid or unsafe:

Mass violence is shocking and can make you fear for your safety. If the people at the event or those who were killed were doing things that you often do, in places you might have been, it can contribute to your fear, anxiety, and feelings of not being safe. You may believe that feeling afraid is childish, but fear and not feeling safe are common reactions after mass violence. Know that people in the community, including first responders, school staff, parents, and other caring adults are working to improve your safety and the safety of your community. As a teen, you can have an important voice in these efforts, too. For example, you can advocate for measures that you believe will make you and your community safer, or lend your voice to existing groups that have similar goals.

## Having trouble getting back to your normal routines and feelings:

After mass violence, many teens will experience some of these reactions even if they aren't talking about them:

- Not being able to fall or stay asleep, not getting restful sleep, having nightmares
- Having trouble concentrating and paying attention at school or work, not getting anything done, feeling in a fog or dazed
- Feeling sad, angry, confused, or afraid that the mass violence will happen again
- Feeling isolated, or numb, like friends and family don't understand, or feeling distant from them
- Being unable to get rid of thoughts, images, or visions of the mass violence event
- Not caring about things that used to matter or were important
- Experiencing headaches, stomachaches, a racing heart, or a change in appetite
- Having sights, sounds, people, places, or other things remind you of the violence
- Feeling jumpy, irritable, or on guard for danger all or nearly all of the time

If you or someone you know lost a loved one, you may experience additional grief reactions. Each person grieves differently, and there is no one "correct" way of grieving.

## Worrying about family and loved ones:

As a teen, you are becoming more independent and developing your own values and interests. After mass violence, you may find yourself worrying about your family in new ways, or your worries may have intensified. For example, you may suddenly be much more aware of the impact of these events on elderly relatives or younger siblings and be more protective or concerned for their well-being. If you sense that your parents or caregivers are very distressed about what happened, you might not talk to them about your own feelings because you do not want to further upset them. It can be very helpful to identify a trusted adult to talk to about your thoughts, feelings, and reactions related to the mass violence so that you are not alone with your experiences.

**Making everyday issues worse:**

Teens face many challenges, like adjusting to middle or high school, meeting academic expectations, balancing athletics or other activities or job responsibilities, planning for college, dealing with peer pressure, or managing problems at home or in your personal life. You may think that your problems are small compared to mass violence. However, going through this experience can magnify the daily issues that you were already dealing with, and make them feel much worse than before. This may be especially true if you experienced a trauma prior to the mass violence, if you had depression or anxiety in the past, or if you are currently involved in counseling services.

**Impacting identity issues:**

As a teen, you may be learning more about yourself and what it means to identify with a sexual orientation, gender, religion, ethnicity, race, or political affiliation. If the mass violence targeted a group that you identify with, this may cause you to have especially strong emotions. You may feel a heightened level of threat, fear, or lack of safety. This also may increase your sense of feeling isolated or cut off from your peers, family, or wider community. In many cases, communities respond to mass violence by coming together to support those involved and who died, as well as each other. Hopefully this will provide you with a sense of support, acceptance, and safety as you explore your identity.

**Searching for meaning:**

It is difficult to understand why a person would intentionally hurt and kill others. This can challenge your trust in other people, your religious beliefs, or the ways you think about or view the world. Searching for meaning in the face of hate is extremely challenging. Reading and talking to friends, family members, teachers, and faith leaders can help you formulate your own ideas about why terrible things happen.

## Taking Care of Yourself

**Limit Media and Social Media Exposure:**

After mass violence, media and social media coverage is constant. You may be tempted to stay glued to your phone, but this can cause even more distress. Try to disconnect from the news and social media at least for several hours every day. If watching TV or being on your phone helps you to cope, turn on a movie, watch a channel that doesn't have news alerts, or play a game.

**Practice Healthy Habits:**

This is a good time to establish a daily schedule that includes eating regular, healthy meals and snacks, exercising, and trying to get as close to a full night of sleep as possible. Turning off electronics at night will help you accomplish this.

**Have Fun:**

It's okay to disengage from tragedy. Give yourself permission to have fun. Consider doing something you really enjoy every day such as going for a walk, writing/journaling, creating art, listening to music, being with friends, spending time with your pets, or engaging in other relaxing activities.

**Connect with Others:**

Spend time with your family, friends, and other people who make you feel more relaxed. Don't cut yourself off from loved ones. Find a way to help others through volunteering, tutoring, or other community activities. Finding ways to connect with others often leads to feeling better. If you are worried about how a peer is coping, check in with them, and let a trusted adult know.

**Seek help:**

If you want to talk to someone, ask your parent or other caring adult, school counselor or nurse, or primary care provider for help. Your community may have drop-in centers specifically for this purpose. Most of these issues resolve with time, but if they continue, don't hesitate to seek additional or specialized counseling services.