

Community Crises: Reactions and Coping Strategies

Community crises, such as acts of violence or natural disasters, can turn our lives upside down. These events have a way of changing our perspective, assumptions, and expectations. They can leave us feeling shocked, saddened, and vulnerable. It is important to remember that these are normal reactions to abnormal and unexpected events.

Understanding your personal response may help you cope better. The following are common emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and physical reactions to stress. You may experience some or all reactions, or additional changes not included on the list. In addition, you may immediately feel strong emotions or not notice a change until later.

Emotional Reactions

- Shock, numbness, apathy
- Anxiety, depression, and sadness
- Anger, guilt, fear
- Concern for harm to self and loved ones
- Fear of returning to where an incident took place or of another occurrence
- Feeling lost, alone or abandoned
- Feeling uncertain or overwhelmed

Behavioral Reactions

- Irritability, more frequent arguments
- Careless mistakes
- Suspicion, distrust
- Inappropriate humor
- Loss of interest in family, friends, and daily routine
- Change in sexual interest
- Increase in consumption of alcohol, drugs, nicotine and other substances
- Change in eating habits

Cognitive Reactions

- Poor concentration or difficulty making decisions
- Confusion
- Memory loss
- Shortened attention span
- Intrusive thoughts or memories
- Indecisiveness

Physical Reactions

- Headaches, nausea, stomach pains, tightness in chest, muscle pain or generally feeling unwell
- Listlessness and fatigue
- Increased sensitivity to noise
- Pounding heart, rapid breathing, edginess
- Loss of appetite
- Trembling
- Disturbed sleep or upsetting thoughts, dreams, and nightmares

There is no simple fix to make things better right away, but there are actions that can help you cope better and build resiliency.

Coping Strategies

- Understand that everyone reacts differently to trauma. It's OK if your response is different from someone else's.
- Give yourself time and permission to feel out of sorts, anxious, angry or sad.
- Get plenty of rest, nourishment, and exercise. Focus on relaxing rather than stressful activities.

- Maintain a regular routine. Make as many daily decisions as possible, encouraging a feeling of control.
- Express needs and emotions clearly and honestly. Reach out to at least one person who is a good listener and non-judgmental.
- Accept support and help from caring family and friends. You might also want to share feelings with others who have been affected to see how they're doing.
- Resolve day-to-day conflicts so they don't build up and add to feelings of stress.
- Help other people in the community as a volunteer. Stay busy.
- Don't attempt to numb the pain with drugs, alcohol, or other substances.
- Don't bottle things up. Allowing feelings to come out will help with recovery. Talk, cry, share thoughts, or write them in a journal – whatever strategy works best for you.
- Don't dwell on media reports of the crisis. Limit time around the sights and sounds of what happened.
- Avoid making major life changes or snap decisions until fully recovered from the crisis.
- Try not to fight recurring thoughts, dreams, or flashbacks. These are normal and will decrease over time.

When to Seek Extra Support

Sometimes the stress can be too much to handle alone. If you're experiencing any of the following, you may want to consider seeking additional support:

- Inability to take care of yourself or children
- Continuing to feel numb, tense, confused, or exhausted
- Feeling sad or depressed for more than 2 weeks
- Inability to handle intense feelings, emotions, or physical reactions
- Continuing to have nightmares and sleep disturbances
- Excessive use of alcohol, drugs, nicotine or other substances
- Thinking about harm to oneself or others
- Continuing to make mistakes or have accidents
- Realizing that work performance and relationships are suffering
- Having no one with whom to share emotions and feeling the need to do so