

College Students: Coping after the Recent Shooting

The recent shooting has been an extremely frightening experience, and the days, weeks, and months following can be very stressful. How long it will take to cope depends a lot on what individuals experienced during and after the shooting, including whether they experienced physical injury, involvement in a police investigation, worry about the safety of family and friends, and loss of loved ones. In the aftermath, it's often difficult to figure out where to begin. Over time, many people will return to normal routines. We also know that for some people this will be more of a struggle. You may need to know if what you're experiencing is a common reaction to these types of events. Reactions generally diminish with time, but knowing about them can help you to be supportive of both yourself and others you know affected by the shooting.

What you could be experiencing:

- **Posttraumatic Stress Reactions** – are common, understandable, and expectable, but are nevertheless serious. There are three types of Posttraumatic Stress Reactions:
 - *Intrusive Reactions* are ways the traumatic experience comes back to mind. This includes recurrent upsetting dreams, thoughts or images, and strong emotional and physical reactions to reminders of the shooting
 - *Avoidance and Withdrawal Reactions* include avoiding people, places and things that are reminders of the shooting; feeling emotionally numb, detached or estranged from others; and losing interest in usual pleasurable activities; and
 - *Physical Arousal Reactions* include sleep difficulties, poor concentration, irritability, jumpiness, nervousness, and being “on the lookout for danger.”
- **Reactions to Danger** – refers to the sense that events or activities have the potential to cause harm. In the wake of the shooting, people and communities have greater appreciation for the enormous danger of violence and the need for effective emergency management plans. There may be fears of recurrence that are increased by misinformation and rumors. Danger always increases the need and desire to be close to others, making separation from family members and friends more difficult.
- **Grief Reactions** – are normal, vary from person to person, and can last for many years. There is no single “correct” way of grieving. Personal, family, religious, and cultural factors affect the experience of grief and its meaning. Over time, grief reactions tend to include positive reminiscing or finding positive ways to memorialize or remember a loved one.
- **Traumatic Grief** – is when people who have suffered the traumatic loss of a loved one find grieving more difficult. What this adds to the experience of loss is a tendency to dwell on the circumstances of the death, how the loss could have been prevented, what the last moments were like for the person who died, and issues of accountability.

- **Depression** – is associated with the experience of loss, unwanted changes, and prolonged grief and is strongly related to the accumulation of post-violence adversities and the frustrations that accompany them. Symptoms can include depressed or irritable mood, changes in sleep or appetite, decreased interest in activities, fatigue, and feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness. Some youth and adults may experience suicidal thoughts, which is a significant issue that should be taken seriously to prevent self-harming behavior.
- **Physical Symptoms** – can occur, even in the absence of any underlying physical injury or illness. These symptoms include headaches, stomachaches, rapid heartbeat, tightness in the chest, change in appetite, and digestive problems. These types of reactions reflect the intimate and complicated relationship between our emotional wellbeing and our physical experience of health and wellness.
- **Trauma and Loss Reminders** – are things, events, situations, places, sensations, and even people that remind a person about a traumatic event or loss.
 - *Trauma Reminders:* Many people will continue to encounter places, people, sights, sounds, smells, and inner feelings that remind them of the shooting. The sounds of gunfire, the smell of smoke, and people screaming may become powerful reminders. Adults and youth are often not aware that they are responding to a reminder, and the reason for their change in mood or behavior may go unrecognized.
 - *Loss Reminders:* Those who have lost loved ones continue to encounter situations and circumstances that remind them of the absence of their loved one. These reminders can bring on feelings of sadness, emptiness in the survivor's life, and missing or longing for the loved one's presence.

Contending with ongoing stresses and adversities can significantly deplete coping and emotional resources and, in turn, interfere with recovery from posttraumatic stress, traumatic grief, and depressive reactions. For example, young adults may engage in risky behaviors, experience changes in expectations for the future, show signs of irritability, or be less motivated. Intrusive images and reactivity to reminders can seriously interfere with school and work performance, and avoidance of reminders can lead to restrictions on important activities, relationships, interests and plans for the future.

There are several ways to enhance coping with the types of reactions you may be experiencing:

Physical	Stress can be reduced with proper nutrition, exercise and sleep. Youth and adults may need to be reminded that they should take care of themselves physically to be of help to loved ones, friends, and their community.
Emotional	Youth and adults need to be reminded that their emotional reactions are expectable and will decrease over time. However, if their reactions are too extreme or do not diminish over time, there are professionals who can be of help.
Social	Communication with, and support from, family members, friends, religious institutions and the community can be very helpful in coping after catastrophic events. People should be encouraged to communicate with others, and to seek and use this support where available.

What you can do for yourself:

- Identify and talk about your safety concerns with a trusted friend, family member, professor, resident advisor, or counselor.
- Avoid watching too much news about the shooting or the recovery efforts. Although you may understandably want to know “the facts,” the repetitious recycling on the news may make you feel worse about the future and leave you more worried, angry, or depressed.
- Keep to your healthy routine as much as possible (get enough sleep, eat and exercise regularly, and drink plenty of water).
- Spend time with family and friends. Don’t cut yourself off from loved ones.
- Focus on your breathing. Slow down as you inhale and exhale when you are upset.
- Do stretches or learn yoga.
- Listen to soothing music.
- Daydream. Imagine things that calm you. Picture people or places that have brought you joy.
- Write in a journal.
- Do activities and things with others that make you happy.
- Pay attention to your thoughts. When you find you are thinking about things that make you upset, nervous or angry, notice them and stop or change them. You can distract yourself by changing activities.
- If you have faith in a Higher Power, use it to elevate your thoughts and connect with others who have similar faith backgrounds.
- Get involved. Volunteer with a non-profit, private, or community organization.

In the aftermath of the shooting, you or your family may be facing difficulties, or you may know others—friends, neighbors, extended family, co-workers—who are having difficulties. With so many people facing the challenges of recovery, no one needs to experience them alone. We all can reach out to one another—to give support or to get support. Surround yourself with people you trust, talk through what you are feeling, stay involved with others, and don’t expect too much from yourself or others under such difficult circumstances. You will find that you and your support network have what it takes to make it through these challenging times.