

Managing Traumatic Stress: Coping with Terrorism

Terrorism threatens a society by instilling fear and helplessness in its citizens. It seeks to hold a society or government hostage by fear of destruction and harm.

When terrorist acts occur, people generally look for ways to cope with the acute stress and trauma. Terrorism evokes a fundamental fear of helplessness. The violent actions are random, unprovoked, and intentional, and often are targeted at defenseless citizens. Trying to cope with the irrational information that is beyond normal comprehension can set off a chain of psychological events culminating in feelings of fear, helplessness, vulnerability, and grief.

Xenophobia — fear or hatred of strangers or foreigners — can be heightened under a terrorist threat and can become a social and psychological danger. The fear generated by terrorism can be exacerbated by a population's diversity if there is distrust between groups, categories and classification of citizens. It is important to recognize that diversity in a population can be an opportunity for unity and strength. There are members of our diverse society who have experienced past terrorist incidents. The knowledge and experience they have gained from surviving and coping with these incidents can make them a valuable resource on how to cope and how to offer assistance to others.

Who Is Affected?

After a terrorist attack, many people are impacted. People who have experienced the trauma often fall into the following categories:

- Survivors of past traumatic events (e.g. refugees of wars, terrorism, or torture, and survivors of domestic violence, child abuse, or street crime). These individuals may have a heightened sense of vulnerability.
- People who personally witnessed or were victims of the terrorist attack.

- People who experience traumatization from learning of relatives, friends and acquaintances who were subject to the violence, or from exposure to repeated media accounts of the trauma.

What You May Experience Following a Terrorist Attack

People who have experienced or witnessed a terrorist attack may go into a state of acute stress reaction. You may feel one or all of these symptoms:

- Recurring thoughts of the incident
- Becoming afraid of everything, not leaving the house, or isolating yourself
- Stopping usual functioning, no longer maintaining daily routines
- Survivor guilt — "Why did I survive? I should have done something more."
- Tremendous sense of loss
- Reluctance to express your feelings, losing a sense of control over your life

Coping with the Trauma

- Identify the feelings that you may be experiencing. Understand that your feelings are a normal reaction to an abnormal situation.
- Remember that you have overcome adversity and trauma in the past. Try to remember what you did that helped you overcome the fear and helplessness in that situation.
- Talk to others about your fears. It's okay to ask for help. Workplaces may convene small groups with an EAP counselor or other mental health counselor so people can share feelings.
- Make efforts to maintain your usual routine.

- Think positively. Realize that things will get better. Be realistic about the time it takes to feel better.
- Recognize that the nature of terrorist attacks creates fear and uncertainty about the future. Continue to do the things in your life that you enjoy. Don't get preoccupied with the things you cannot control to the extent that they prevent you from living your normal life.
- Know the actions our government is taking to combat terrorism and restore safety and security. Recognize that trained officials throughout the country are mobilized to prevent, prepare for and respond to terrorist attacks.
- Limit exposure to media coverage.
- Tips for helping children cope:
 - Encourage children to say how they are feeling about the event.
 - Ask children what they have seen, heard or experienced.
 - Assure children that their parents are taking care of them and will continue to help them deal with anything that makes them feel afraid.
 - Help children recognize when they have shown courage in meeting a new scary situation and accomplished a goal despite hardship or barriers. Instill a sense of empowerment.
 - Let children know that institutions of democracy are still in place and our government is intact. (It can also be helpful for adults to realize this.)
 - Know that it is possible for children to experience vicariously the traumatization from the terrorist attack (e.g. watching TV coverage, overhearing adult conversations).

If you are having trouble coping with the terrorist attacks, consider seeking help from a psychologist or other mental health professional. There are many ways to feel traumatized by terrorist incidents.

Psychologists and other licensed mental health professionals are trained to help people cope and take positive steps toward managing their feelings and behaviors.

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