

## EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

# MANAGING EMOTIONS AND REACTIONS AFTER MASS VIOLENCE

Just like natural disasters, mass violence causes lasting harm to survivors, communities and even people in other areas. Extreme violence can bring about a range of emotions for people who are directly exposed to it. Research has shown that those people have more severe traumatic stress reactions, and that these reactions can last longer than other traumas.

### Common reactions and emotions

Everyone who witnesses an act of violence will have stress reactions in the immediate aftermath.

- The initial relief to be alive may be followed by distress, fear, survivor guilt, or anger.
- Survivors, their family members, colleagues and friends may find it hard to stop thinking about what happened, have trouble sleeping or feel anxious all the time.

For some people, these reactions will lessen over the first few weeks after the event.

However, those who were injured, have experienced prior trauma or lost someone they knew may have more intense and longer-lasting reactions. It's different for each person and depends on their physical and emotional health, coping styles, culture, family supports and life experiences.

No matter where you were when the incident occurred or what your experiences have been, you may have a variety of reactions to and feelings about it, such as:

- Feeling physically and mentally drained, with low or no energy
- Having unexplained aches and pains, such as constant stomach- or headaches
- Having difficulty making decisions or staying focused
- Becoming easily and more frequently frustrated
- Arguing with family and friends more often, or pulling away from people and withdrawing
- Becoming disinterested in things you used to enjoy
- Feeling tired, sad, numb, lonely or worried
- Experiencing changes in appetite or sleep
- Excessive smoking, drinking or using drugs (including prescription medications)
- Worrying a lot of the time
- Feeling guilty but not sure why



## Support for yourself and other adults

The majority of individuals who witness violent crimes are likely to do better if they feel safe, empowered to manage their lives and connected to others. Those who are naturally optimistic or hopeful also tend to do better. Consider these tips:

- **Pay attention to your emotional health.**
  - Remember that feeling a wide range of physical and emotional reactions is common.
  - Give yourself time to process what you've experienced. Talk to a close friend or family member.
  - Know that others are also experiencing a range of reactions and may need your time and patience to collect themselves.
  - Avoid use of substances like alcohol and other drugs that can worsen mood.
- **Take care of your safety and physical health.**
  - Find a safe place to stay.
  - Make sure your and your family's basic needs are met.
  - Seek medical attention, if necessary.
  - Monitor your physical health, and try to eat and get good sleep.
  - If you can, try some light exercise each day.
  - Try to maintain a normal daily routine.
- **Stay connected.**
  - Try to recognize when those around you may need extra support. Look for the reactions and emotions listed above.
  - Watch for regressed behaviors, such as clinging in children, and intense emotional reactions or a strong need for retribution in adults.
  - Pay attention to statements like "I'd rather be dead" or "the world would be better off without me."
- **Avoid overexposure to media.** While it is important to stay informed, media portrayals of shootings and mass deaths have been shown to cause acute stress and post-traumatic stress symptoms. Take a break from news sources and social media.

- **Focus on what you can control.** You can't control all that happens in the aftermath of violence, so focus on what you can control like caring for your own health, preparing activities for the day, and volunteering for the causes you support.
- **Give it time.** Resilience means that you bounce back in the end; it doesn't mean that you never feel the impact of traumatic events. Learning to live with the things you experience is a continual and sometimes lengthy process.
- **Remain positive.** Remind yourself of how you've successfully gotten through difficult times in the past.

## Professional help

If you were or someone you know was present during the incident or knew any of the people who were injured or killed, you may be at higher risk for more serious or longer lasting problems. If you are not able to manage your emotions or function well, seek help.

There are competent and caring professionals available who can effectively treat the most common responses to mass violence, like depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and complicated grief. The most effective treatments will help you:

- Mourn and make sense of what happened
- Process intense emotions or numbness
- Solve problems you may be encountering
- Build resilience and coping skills

You may not ever feel the same after the incident, but the sooner you get help, the sooner you will feel better.

## National resources

**American Red Cross:** [redcross.org](http://redcross.org)

**Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Disaster Distress Helpline:** 1-800-985-5990 or text TalkWithUs to 66746 or [samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline](http://samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline)

**VictimConnect Resource Center:** 1-855-4-VICTIM or [victimconnect.org/get-help](http://victimconnect.org/get-help)

**EAP is here to provide you with compassionate and caring support.**

**Go online to [eap.calhr.ca.gov](http://eap.calhr.ca.gov) or call 1-866-327-4762 to get started.**