

Twelve Self-help Tips for Coping in the Aftermath of Mass Violence Incidents

When a mass violence incident (MVI) occurs, it has a devastating and destructive impact on victims (including those who were physically or psychologically injured, and the family members of those who were injured or killed), witnesses, first responders, news media professionals, community leaders, and people who live in the community where it occurred. As MVIs occur with increasing frequency in the United States, there is often a national, collective level of sorrow, distress and anger that results from repeated acts of mass violence.

Experiencing traumatic events can have a cumulative negative effect for some individuals. MVIs can become a “trauma cue” for many people who have previously endured mass violence, criminal victimization, racial, ethnic, religious, and/or anti-LGBTQI violence, or other traumatic life events. Simply put, a trauma cue can be anything that reminds you of a traumatic event that you previously experienced. There are often aspects of MVIs that could serve as trauma cues, whether someone experienced it in person or vicariously through extensive media coverage. Experiencing trauma cues can heighten distress and impede recovery from previous violent victimization experiences.

This brief “tip sheet” offers practical things that can be done to help reduce the distress created by MVIs as well as some self-help resources you may find useful.

- 1. First, recognize that the feelings and reactions you are having – as long as they are not destructive to you or others – are normal and okay.** MVIs can cue a wide array of emotions including shock, fear, worry, anger, sorrow, sadness, hopelessness, and confusion, to name a few. You may also have physical reactions such as stomachaches, heart racing, headaches, tremors, and being jumpy. Whatever you are feeling is okay. Know that these intense emotions and reactions will not remain with you forever. Take positive action to address these feelings by following some of the proactive steps below.
- 2. Accept that what you witnessed or experienced may have been frightening and disturbing,** and that it felt like a serious threat to the safety and security of the affected victims, witnesses, first responders and community. In addition, when MVIs are motivated by hatred, there is often a higher level of distress for people who are members of the entire “community” targeted with hate.
- 3. Talk to a trusted friend, family member or spiritual advisor.** They can help you talk through your feelings and validate that you are not alone in your feelings and reactions as well as help you to process your feelings. Social support can be especially helpful as you navigate this difficult time. Victim service professionals may be available in your community as an additional source of support or can help connect you with others if you are feeling alone and isolated.
- 4. Check in with others** – by text, email, phone, or in-person. The simple act of reaching out and asking, “How are you doing right now?” can be helpful. Check in as often as necessary.
- 5. Do something practical.** In situations where we feel are out of our control, sometimes it is helpful to focus your attention on things that are small, practical, and within your control whether it is just

taking a shower, picking up necessary victim-related paperwork, or checking in on a loved one. Take it day by day and even minute by minute.

6. While it is understandable that you want to stay aware of what is happening, **limit your exposure to television and social media**. Repeated exposure to images of a MVI and its devastating aftermath is not helpful and may instead increase your levels of distress.
7. Children are being exposed to information via the Internet, news, and conversations with peers. **Limit children's exposure to media** (even if you think they are not listening or watching, they take in more than we suspect, and it can frighten them). Provide information to children in [developmentally-appropriate language](#).
8. **Practice and strengthen self-care activities**. Often after a traumatic event, our inclination is to pull back from taking care of ourselves because we feel overwhelmed and focus on others such as small children. However, now more than ever it is important to take care of your basic needs and intentionally tend to your self-care. This includes good sleep hygiene, daily exercise, and eating healthy. Stay active! Take a brisk walk, run, and/or do some quick calisthenics. Exercise can release stress hormones. Use calming techniques such as deep breathing, meditation, prayer, yoga or stretching can also be helpful.
9. **Limit unhealthy coping strategies such as alcohol and other drug use**. Excessive use may inadvertently increase anxiety, cause sleep difficulty, and weaken the ability to use effective coping skills and take care of yourself or your loved ones. Some people drink alcohol to help them fall asleep. However, even though it feels like alcohol helps you fall asleep, alcohol can interrupt restful sleep cycles.
10. **Try to focus on something other than the difficult negative emotions you are experiencing**. Helpful coping strategies can be found in "[Managing Distress](#)." Other tips about coping can be found under the "Coping Tips" tab on our "[Self-Help](#)" page.
11. **Download and explore free self-help apps with resources for stress management and coping with painful emotions**. The NMVVRRC developed the TRANSCEND app that offers guidance for managing distress after MVIs. Access TRANSCEND from your smart devices at these links (or search for "TRANSCEND NMVC" in the [Apple App](#) or [Google Play](#) Stores):

Links to other free apps are available on the "Self-Help Applications" tab on our "[Self-Help](#)" page.
12. **If you or a loved one is feeling overwhelmed with feelings of anxiety and worry, no-cost professional crisis assistance is available**. The National Disaster Distress Helpline at 1-800-985-5990 is available 24/7 to provide crisis support. If you feel that you are in immediate crisis, please call 911. Additional services related to mass violence, including the Crisis Text Line, can be accessed via the [NMVVRRC website's](#) "Get Help Now" button. Your community may have additional in person victim and mental health resources for mass violence victims and survivors. Reach out to a victim service professional in your community to connect to local assistance.

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