Coping After Tragedy

Our hearts go out to those affected by the recent tragic events in Orlando, Fla.

Even for people not directly affected, an event like this can have a significant impact. It can leave you feeling a range of emotions including anger, frustration, vulnerability, confusion and sadness – all of which are normal reactions. The continual media coverage, discussions and reactions keep the event directly in front of us.

How can you cope with this additional stress? What can you do to increase your resilience and protect your overall wellness?

While different strategies for coping and resiliency may work better for different people, some common suggestions can be helpful, such as exercising or playing sports; listening to music; spending time with friends and family; relying on a faith community; journaling and practicing yoga or meditation.

Here are a few other suggestions from Ranna Parekh, M.D., M.P.H., APA Director of the Division of Diversity and Health Equity:

Take control of your exposure to media.
Keep informed about new information and developments if you want, but be mindful of overexposure to news, or to reaction and discussion on social media. Consider creating your own boundaries and limits. There is much we cannot control, but we can take control of our own media consumption.

All of the information we have access to can be very useful and helpful; in fact, accurate information is necessary to help people understand and process an event or loss. However, too much information can be overwhelming. People should not feel guilty about turning off and tuning out. Try to digest the events and information at your own pace.

Maintain routines.
Maintaining normal daily activities – regular healthy meals, exercise, sleep routines – can be very helpful for both mental and physical health. While extreme events often lead us to break routine, this is a time when routine can be especially helpful, so it’s important to get back to them when possible.

Remember you are not alone.
If you feel anxious or overwhelmed, remember you are not alone. Find supports and talk with friends, family or peers. Reach out to your faith community.

Keep in mind that taking care of yourself will help you deal with information and your feelings about the situation and will make you better able to help and support those around you.

Help children cope.
Children may also be affected by the events and media coverage. Children recognize when their parents are distressed and that can make them feel sad or worried. Parents frequently underestimate the impact that events and their own distress have on their children.
Traumatic events such as this are not easy for anyone to comprehend or accept. As parents and caring adults, we can best help by listening and responding in an honest, consistent and supportive manner using words and concepts they understand. By creating an open environment where children feel free to ask questions, we can help them cope with stressful events and experiences. Although these may be difficult conversations, they are important.

See more on talking with children about traumatic events.

Get help.
Feelings of fear, sadness and anger following a traumatic event are natural. If you find that you are overwhelmed or experiencing physical symptoms from stress – like headaches, poor appetite and insomnia – or if you continue feeling depressed or anxious, you may want to see a mental health professional.

Resources
Information on mental health - Visit the APA's patient/public education pages for more on mental illness, treatment and coping.

Disaster Distress Helpline – Call or Text
Call 800-985-5990 or text TalkWithUs to 66746 to connect with a trained crisis counselor. For texting support in Spanish, text Hablanos to 66746.
(operated by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration)

Find a psychiatrist - Locate a psychiatrist in your community.