

## PREPARING, RESPONDING, AND COPING WITH THE STRESS OF MASS SHOOTINGS

Mass shootings and other disaster events can be extremely stressful. Mobile devices and the internet provide instant access to the details of these events, but can also overwhelm us. Graphic images and videos, often seen in real time, can be very distressing. The seemingly random nature of these events as well as the 24/7/365 access to information about disasters around the world can leave us feeling unsafe and in persistent danger. Constantly feeling unsafe can lead to a variety of behaviors such as trouble sleeping, irritability, difficulty concentrating, increased use of alcohol and tobacco, social isolation, and fear of those around us. In addition to imagery of mass shootings, news commentary and political rhetoric may enhance distress or community division.

It is important to effectively prepare for and manage our response to mass shootings so we are able to care for ourselves, our families, and our communities. Fortunately, there are steps we can take to better prepare and respond in the rare event that we are involved in a mass shooting. Knowing what to do and how to respond can significantly reduce distress. Below is important information and steps to take before, during, and after a mass shooting event.

### BEFORE

- Remind yourself and loved ones that, although mass shootings do occur, most of us will never be directly involved in one during our lifetime.
- Avoid extremes of thinking, such as insisting that threats are everywhere (“I can’t go anywhere or trust anyone!”), or that you are helpless (“The world is so dangerous, there’s no way I can do anything about it.”).
- Find trusted media sources from which to obtain information.
- Avoid public areas, events, or gathering places clearly identified by credible sources as being high risk or high threat for violence.

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- Report suspicious activity to authorities and avoid complacency; practice the approach, “If you see something, say something.”
- Learn emergency response procedures at your place of work; for those with children,

learn emergency response plans for your child’s school.

- Develop a family emergency response plan; know where to go and how to contact each other in the event of an emergency.
- Create or purchase an Emergency “Go Kit”; having things ready in advance of an emergency can feel reassuring and reduce distress.

### DURING

- If you are involved in a mass shooting, remember “Run. Hide. Fight.”
  - » Run from the scene of a mass shooting if it is safe to do so.
  - » If it is not safe to run, hide from the assailant in locked spaces when possible. Barricade doors and stay out of sight. Silence cell phones. Prepare to run when possible.
  - » Engage or fight the assailant(s) as a last resort. Commit to fighting with all your strength and intent.
  - » When police arrive, avoid sudden movements or sounds. Follow their directions. For the safety of all, they will not stop to help people, even if injured, until the assailant(s) is neutralized.
- Remind yourself that you are not helpless and there are steps you can take to care for your safety and the safety of those around you.
- Contact friends and loved ones to check in; knowing you and people you care about are safe can significantly lower distress.

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- Use established sources of credible information to obtain necessary information about where to go and what to do.

## AFTER

- Difficulty with sleep, irritability, and trouble concentrating are normal responses following a mass shooting; talk with your Primary Care Provider if these persist or cause problems with relationships or performance at home or work.
- Stay connected with other people, such as friends, family, and neighbors, that provide positive and helpful support; social support helps people recover from stressful situations.
- If going to public places or traveling causes distress, go with other people or in groups until distress reduces.
- Check in with other people that were affected; reaching out to connect with others can be helpful to both of you.
- Avoid increasing alcohol and tobacco to cope with stress; use behavioral techniques to relax (such as breathing, imagery, and muscle relaxation) that do not have negative health effects.
- Be cautious of news or other commentary that scapegoats large groups of people for the actions of a single individual; these perspectives often damage community connections and may increase the likelihood of future violence.
- Limit exposure to graphic images and videos on the news and social media, especially for children.
- It is important to talk with children and ask questions to learn their understanding of a mass shooting event. Consider the following when talking with children:
  - » Use age-appropriate language, ask questions about what they may have seen or heard and listen to their concerns; respond in a non-judgmental and empathic way.
  - » Pre-school and early school aged children often wonder if they have caused a bad thing to happen; if they have become aware of a mass shooting, they should be told directly it is not their fault.
  - » Remind children and adolescents that even though some people hurt other people, there are many people working to keep them safe such as police, fire and rescue, and healthcare providers.

### Additional Resources

Department of Homeland Security — Active Shooter Preparedness  
<https://www.cisa.gov/active-shooter-preparedness>

National Child Traumatic Stress Network — Catastrophic Violence Resources  
<https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/terrorism-and-violence>

Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress  
<http://www.cstsonline.org>



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