

Trauma in the Community

People who experienced the school shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut may act differently. Even if they were not directly affected by it. Events like this affect people in different ways. But there are some common reactions.

Symptoms may start right away. Or they might happen after a few days or weeks. Remember that these reactions are normal. It is normal for people to have these emotions after an event like this.

Common Reactions to Trauma

- **Feel fear or anxiety about things that you never thought about before.** People may question things after a disturbing event. They may question their:
 - Faith.
 - Ability to be a good parent.
 - Ability to do well at work.
- **Have emotional outbursts and startled responses.** You may be startled at sudden loud noises. This is all right. Taking deep breaths can help to calm you.
- **Be very aware of things around you.** People are more aware of things that they might otherwise not pay attention to in times like this. This could include a noise in their house or a helicopter in the sky. Everyday activities may not seem everyday anymore after a trauma. You also may feel unsafe. It is important to keep a healthy perspective between what you feel and what you know.
- **Experience a change in sleep or eating patterns.** Sleep problems are normal. You may:
 - Sleep a little more or a little less than usual.
 - Have bad dreams or nightmares.
 - Lose your appetite. Or have a craving for “comfort” foods.
 - Have digestive problems.

Try to stick to your normal routine. It could help get other daily habits back on track.

- **Get distracted easily.** This could be a bad thing if it involves drinking or drug use. But there are ways to do this in a good way. Try listening to music. You could read a book or go out to dinner with friends. These activities can help to get your mind off things for a while.

- **Have flashbacks.** This is normal. Talk to a professional if these get stronger or do not slow down over time. You can learn to manage these thoughts.
- **Have mood shifts and strong emotions.** Feelings can be very confusing. You may feel fearful one moment and tearful the next. Try to identify what you are feeling. This helps you to be aware of how your feelings may influence your thoughts and actions. Write down your feelings in a journal. This can be a good way to look for any patterns. It can help you track whether your feelings are getting better or not.

What Causes These Reactions?

They are a sign that the body and mind are trying to cope with the experience. Your reactions may not seem normal. But many people go through them.

How Long Do These Symptoms Last?

They should get better with time. There are some things that may influence how mild or severe your reactions are.

- How close you were to the trauma.
- Other personal or psychological problems.
- Whether you have been exposed to similar traumas in the past.

Note the symptoms that worry you if you are worried about your reactions. It may help to write them down. For each symptom, write down:

- **How long it lasts.** Trauma reactions should grow less strong and disappear within a few weeks.
- **How strong it is** and if your reaction gets in the way of your everyday life.

Can I Try to Forget About What Happened?

People who have been through traumas often want to avoid reminders of the trauma. They can be very upsetting. Sometimes they are aware of this and avoid reminders on purpose. Sometimes they do it without realizing it. Ways of avoiding things associated with the trauma can include:

- Staying away from anything that may remind you of the trauma.
- Having trouble remembering important parts of what happened during the trauma.
- Being unable to feel any strong emotion.
- Feeling strange or “not yourself.”
- Feeling like you are not connected to the world around you.
- Avoiding situations that might make you have a strong emotional reaction.
- Having unusual physical feelings.
- Losing interest in things you used to enjoy.

Staying away from thoughts about the trauma or not getting treatment for your related problems is risky. Facing your fears and getting help makes your symptoms get better. You can get back to your normal life more quickly.

What Else Do I Need to Know?

Secondary symptoms are problems that happen because of post-traumatic symptoms. A person who avoids talking about a trauma may end up pulling away from friends. She may then start to feel lonely and sad. More symptoms may develop as time goes by. They can be more troubling than the original symptoms.

Associated symptoms are problems that do not come directly from being overcome by fear. They happen because of other things that were going on when the event happened. A person who gets emotionally injured in a car accident might also get physically injured. Then the person may get sad or upset because he cannot work or leave the house.

Examples of Symptoms

Violent behavior toward the self or others. This can happen because of anger over not being able to control other symptoms. It could also happen because of the nature of the trauma itself. Angry feelings and violent actions push other people away. This can cause:

- Job problems.
- Relationship problems.
- Loss of friendships.

Find someone you trust to talk about your feelings and get support if:

- You have a quick temper.
- You feel angry much of the time.
- You have thoughts of hurting yourself or someone else.

Blaming yourself, guilt, and shame. These can happen when symptoms make it hard to do everyday things. It can also happen when people blame themselves for what happened. This is unfair. It does not consider the other reasons why the events occurred. Blaming yourself causes a lot of grief. It can stop a person from reaching out for help.

Feeling disconnected from others. This can happen when a person has a hard time feeling or expressing positive feelings. People can get wrapped up in their problems or feel “numb” after traumas. Then they can stop putting time and energy into their relationships with friends and family. Soon, they feel alone because they have isolated themselves from others.

Physical complaints. These can happen because of long periods of feeling anxious. Trauma survivors may also not get medical care because it reminds them of the trauma and causes anxiety. This may lead to poorer health. Unhealthy habits used to cope with this kind of stress can also cause health problems. These habits can include drug or alcohol use.

Alcohol or drug abuse. This can happen when a person wants to avoid bad feelings that come with symptoms after a disturbing event. This is a common way to cope. But it leads to more problems. Talk to a medical or mental health professional with experience in substance abuse issues if you find yourself relying on alcohol or drugs to cope.

Symptoms and other related problems may take up most of your attention when you are suffering. But remember that you also have:

- Strengths.
- Interests.
- Commitments.
- Relationships with others.
- Past experiences that were positive.
- Desires.
- Hopes for the future.

How to Cope with Your Reactions

- Exercise and relaxation may help. Ask your doctor if physical symptoms continue.
- Talk to trusted family and friends. Talk can be the most healing medicine.
- Spend time with others. Do not isolate yourself.
- Give yourself permission to feel bad.
- Keep a journal. Write your way through sleepless times.
- Do not make major life changes until things settle down.
- Make as many daily decisions as possible. This will give you a feeling of control over your life.
- Get plenty of rest and eat regular meals. Even if you do not feel like it.
- It is normal to have recurring thoughts, dreams or flashbacks. Do not try to fight them. They will get better over time. They will become less painful.

Help Is Available

Call us using the phone number in your member handbook for more information, help and support. We are here to help you get and stay well.