

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Coping with Feelings of Fear and Anxiety About Violence

Acts of violence, whether they occur locally or abroad, can affect our sense of safety—about the present and the future. Graphic images can heighten fears, whether those images be of a terrorist attack, a police shooting, a riot resulting in injuries or deaths, or a targeted mass killing that claims the lives of innocent victims. We may feel especially fearful or anxious due to our ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, religion, or politics. Even if we don't feel directly impacted by violent events, we may experience difficult or painful emotions. We may wonder how we can stay safe and what we can do to help reduce or prevent acts of violence. This article provides information on ways to cope at this time.

How you may feel

Unsettling local, national, and international events affect us in many ways. This is especially true of acts of violence, from terrorist attacks to police shootings to hate crimes. Even if we were not directly impacted, events such as these often affect us as and may induce feelings of:

- fear
- anger
- anxiety
- worry
- uncertainty
- helplessness
- insecurity
- loss of control
- concern about the future

In the wake of an act of violence, you may be concerned about everything from your personal safety and your family's security to whether it's safe to travel. In a world that feels less safe, you may worry too for your family, your community, and your world.

Managing feelings of fear and anxiety

Acts of violence can leave us feeling anxious, overwhelmed, or worried about things over which we have little control. You may wonder what you can do to make a difference. Concentrating on the things over which we do have control can help us feel less worried and anxious.

Be informed and pay attention to information issued by local and federal officials. While it's impossible to predict when or where an act of violence or terrorism will strike, there are things you can do to be safer. Officials may issue warnings, for example, to be vigilant in a crowd or to take special

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precautions when traveling. This doesn't mean staying at home or avoiding public places. It means being more careful—in a common sense way—about the things we do each day.

Connect with others you trust for support rather than remaining isolated. Talk about your thoughts and feelings. Consider getting involved with organizations consistent with your beliefs or causes that promote personal and community peace and justice, which can help you feel you are making a difference.

Try not to jump to negative conclusions. Balance traumatic images and troubling information in the media with a hopeful mindset—understanding that people share the basic need to feel safe, secure, and cared for. Spend your energy gathering reliable information from sources you trust. When we're on edge, it's normal to feel jumpy and unsettled and we may believe or fear the worst. For example, the sight of police or fire vehicles in your neighborhood might leave you feeling overly anxious. Try to remain calm and clear.

Take care of yourself. Make a point of eating nutritious foods at regular intervals. Limit or avoid alcohol and caffeine. Drink plenty of water—stress can sometimes lead to dehydration. Regular exercise is one of the best ways to reduce stress and improve your mood, so try to make it a priority. Focus on a regular sleep routine.

Practice stress-relief techniques that work for you. Consider taking a class such as yoga, taking a walk, exercising, listening to music, and sticking to comforting routines—all are helpful ways to relieve stress.

Avoid using alcohol or illegal drugs to handle your emotions. They provide a temporary escape from unpleasant emotions, but they can also lead to an unhealthy dependence on alcohol or drugs rather than discovering more positive and long lasting ways to cope with difficult emotions. Also, alcohol is a depressant and can lead you to feel even more depressed.

Use relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing, positive visualization, and meditation to reduce feelings of worry and anxiety. You'll find several helpful guided relaxation exercises on the Support and Resources section of this website.

Limit the amount of time you spend following the news, including social media. If news reports about a recent act of violence make you anxious, limit yourself to one dose of news a day. Hide, mute, or unfollow upsetting social media feeds. You can often anticipate which TV or radio programs will have disturbing news. But you never know which of your Facebook, Twitter, or other social media contacts will post or link to upsetting content. You can avoid some unpleasant surprises by temporarily unfollowing some people or organizations.

Avoid visual violence and other disturbing programs just before bedtime. If you watch TV as a way to unwind, remember that certain kinds of programs—news coverage, for example, or suspense and action programs—can make it harder to fall asleep. Try tuning in to news earlier in the day—on the way home from work, for example, or early in the evening.

Avoid spending time with people who make you feel anxious. Know which people you find most supportive and arrange to spend more time with them.

Be patient and kind with yourself and with others. The more compassion and understanding you have toward yourself and others—friends and strangers alike—the more sane the world will feel to you.

If you are a parent, create a safe home environment and model positive behaviour for those who look up to you. Children learn about dealing with uncertainty and fear from watching parents cope during difficult times. If your children see you keeping your fears in perspective and finding positive ways to cope, they will learn to do the same.

Seek support from your faith community. Many people find comfort in their religious and spiritual beliefs and faith communities in difficult times.

Seek professional help

It is normal to experience many strong emotions, including worry and fear, after acts of violence have occurred. But if your fears or emotions are preventing you from doing things you normally do or are having a serious impact on your personal or work life, talk with a counsellor or other mental health professional. For example, if you notice that you are very irritable or have little patience with others or if your fears are interfering with your ability to cope or function, you would likely benefit from professional help. Your doctor can help you find a mental health professional. Your organization's assistance program can also connect you to resources and support.