



After a violent event: how to help yourself

When violence happens to us or in our communities, it can shake our foundation. At best, it leaves us momentarily unsettled. At worst, we feel unable to resume our lives before the event. How do we return to the things we did before? How do we create a “new normal?”

1. **Acknowledge your fear.**

Fear is one in the category called “dark emotions.” To move through those emotions (fear, guilt, anger, shame), we can’t ignore them. After a violent or scary event, acknowledge the emotion. Say it aloud or write it down: “I was really afraid.” “I am still really afraid.”

People try to protect themselves by denying the emotion. That is one of the worst things you can do. Trying to block it out with food, alcohol, drugs, or mindless activities like watching television doesn’t work. The trauma doesn’t go away until you acknowledge and deal with it.

2. Turn to people who can support you.

Don't isolate yourself. Access social systems that are already working for you. Return to the people with whom you are comfortable. If you mostly talk to people through social media, do that. If you connect through a place of worship, go there.

Don't worry about building new support systems at this point. The supportive people we have in our life can help validate our feelings. They are already inside our normal comfort zones and make us feel like we're not alone. They can remind you that "This is a scary thing, but it's not your world on a regular basis."

If there is a support group for the specific act, you can join it. In cases of random violence, it is not as necessary. Even if the people in your life weren't affected, they could be supportive enough. Reaching out to others at this time is not really about the event. It's more about being able to talk to someone who knows you and your emotions. Don't worry about building new relationships unless you want to.

3. Educate yourself.

How much crime or violence is in your community? How common is the event? Do some research. You may find that it's not every person's experience and is pretty rare.

4. Practice self-care.

Exercise can help burn off some of the anxiety and stress. It can also produce chemicals in your body to make you feel happier. As an added bonus, if you are physically tired, you may find it easier to sleep. But this isn't the time to start a new exercise program. This may cause extra stress. Instead, increase the exercise you are already doing. Go to an exercise class three times a week instead of two. Add 10 more minutes onto your run. Walk your dog an extra time.

If you are practicing yoga, tai chi, meditation, or other mindfulness exercises that tap into emotions, it may be good to do so with a friend. Have someone who can help process any emotions that come up.

Continue to follow your routine (eating, sleeping, exercising, work, social time) as much as possible. Increase the components that keep you healthy. Be gentle with yourself.

Practice deep breathing techniques and "verbal first aid" (phrases like "I'm going to be OK." "The worst is over." "I'm safe.") several times throughout the day.

If you feel stuck because you haven't been taking care of yourself, your resiliency will be lower. It might be a good idea to seek out a health professional. They can listen to you and also suggest small changes to help you practice taking care of yourself.

5. Seek professional help.

Some signs that you should seek help include:

- Trouble sleeping
- Irritability
- Unexplained stomach pain or headaches
- Withdrawal from activities you used to enjoy

Talking to friends and family about the event could help the fear to weaken. If you find that it's not, or if you find yourself unable to move on, consider seeing a mental health professional.

Source(s)

1 "Recovering from Trauma" by Ellen McGrath. *Psychology Today*, Helpguide.org

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