

How Are You Coping With the Recent Mass Shootings?

By Rheyenne Weaver (/users/rheyenne-weaver)

<http://www.empowher.com/posttraumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/content/how-are-you-coping-recent-mass-shootings?page=0,2>

The two mass shootings in the last couple of months have been on the minds of many Americans, especially because they took place in seemingly safe places -- a movie theater and a temple. Experts have suggestions for how the general public and victims can cope with such saddening and scary events. Nerina Garcia-Arcement, a licensed clinical psychologist, said in an email that she previously worked with 9/11 survivors. "Unfortunately many people do not seek help for mental health problems following a trauma and most people wait an average of 10 years to seek mental help," Garcia-Arcement said.

"A majority of my 9/11 clients sought help six to 10 years after 9/11. By this point many were isolated from all social support, had difficulties working as they avoided public transportation and public spaces, and suffered from chronic stress due to fear of the 'next terrorist attack.'" She hopes that victims of recent shootings get help from mental health professionals sooner in order to cope with trauma. There are a plethora of mental health issues that could result from being a victim of a shooting.

"The closer the person was to the event, the more emotionally impacted they are likely to be," Garcia-Arcement said. "For people directly affected by the recent shootings, it is common to experience Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety (including panic attacks, generalized anxiety and phobias related to the attack, such as social phobias or fear of the dark) and depression symptoms."

"It is a normal reaction for people to re-experience or remember the event, have nightmares, feel sad and scared, be hypervigilant, avoid reminders of their trauma and isolate from people," she added. "This is the mind trying to process and make sense of what happened."

"Survivors of the [Colorado] shooting will find that things like the smell of popcorn, popping sounds, the dark, being in crowded spaces or watching a movies might trigger reminders of their experience," Garcia-Arcement said. "These are normal reactions that can be managed with deep breathing, relaxation exercises and positive self talk (i.e., 'this is just a reminder, it is not happening again. I am okay. I am safe.'). For many survivors, those in the theaters and injured, survivor's guilt is common."

People who were not directly involved in the shooting can still suffer from slight mental health issues as well, such as "sadness, horror and anxiety," and avoidance of reminders of the shootings.

Here are some tips from Garcia-Arcement to help people cope with the recent shootings:

- 1) "Offer each other social support, as individuals and as a community."
- 2) "Remind yourselves that this was an isolated horrible event that happened to good people. It was not their fault."
- 3) "My strongest recommendation is that survivors and the general public do not avoid reminders of the trauma and do not isolate. It is instinctive for people to avoid things that remind them of their trauma. Unfortunately once they begin avoiding going to movies or spending time in crowded spaces, it often escalates to avoiding more and more things. They begin to misinterpret the fact that they are safe

simply because they avoided going to the movies, instead of forcing themselves to go to the movie and realizing they are safe.”

4) “A person should seek mental health support if they are feeling overwhelmed by their reactions to the shooting. If after a few months they find they are still experiencing PTSD, anxiety or depression symptoms, they ought to seek a therapist that could help them process their normal reactions.”

Robin Zagurski, a licensed clinical social worker, works with adults and teens who have gone through traumatic experiences. She said in an email that a major indicator that professional mental health is needed after a mass shooting is if people are unable to function in their daily lives.

She suggested keeping the same daily routine in order to distract from thinking about the recent shooting, and taking care of one’s overall health and wellbeing.

She said that it’s difficult to plan for rare shooting situations, but to be aware of any “leakage” statements, where a future shooter may tell someone or post on the Internet what their plans are.

Don’t assume these statements are merely threats. Reporting this to authorities could potentially save lives.

“Think ... of maintaining your safety in all environments, especially for hazards that have a higher likelihood,” Zagurski said.

“For example, always know where the exits are in any building in case of fire. Practice evacuations so that you know how to get out safely. If someone talks to you about hurting themselves or others, report it to authorities immediately.”

Sources:

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