



Incidents of Mass Violence

Incidents of mass violence are human-caused tragedies that can impact whole communities and the country at large. These types of disasters, which include shootings or stabbings and acts of terrorism, often occur without warning and can happen anywhere, as shown for example by the recent tragedies in France, Belgium, the UK and Turkey.

These violent acts typically target defenceless citizens with the intent to harm or kill. They can instil feelings of confusion, fear and helplessness in survivors. Incidents of mass violence disturb people's collective sense of order and safety, and may even impact those with no personal connections to the event.

Because of the unpredictable nature of these types of disasters, it's normal for people to experience emotional distress. Feelings such as overwhelming anxiety, trouble sleeping and other depression-like symptoms are common responses to incidents of mass violence. Other signs of emotional distress related to incidents of mass violence may include:

- Feeling numb or like nothing matters.
- Feeling helpless or hopeless.
- Worrying a lot of the time.
- Feeling guilty but not sure why.
- Feeling like you have to keep busy.
- Excessive smoking, drinking or using drugs (including prescription medication).

Symptoms of distress may appear before, during and after such an event and may manifest in the hours, days, weeks, months or even years after they occur. These are just a few warning signs of disaster-related distress.

Who is at risk for emotional distress?

People at risk for emotional distress due to the effects of incidents of mass violence include the following:

- **Survivors:** Injured victims as well as bystanders in close proximity to the event are especially at risk for emotional distress.
- **Friends and Loved Ones:** It's normal for friends and family members located outside the impacted area to feel anxious about people who are in direct proximity to an incident of mass violence.
- **First Responders and Recovery Workers:** These individuals may experience prolonged separation from loved ones during the incident and show signs of mental fatigue.
- **Community Members:** People who live in the area surrounding the event may experience emotional distress.

If a terror alert, lockdown notice or other warning is issued via television, radio, social media or text-alert systems, the risk for emotional distress becomes greater. It's normal to feel unprepared, overwhelmed or confused, particularly if you are not at home. You may also feel isolated if you are separated from friends or family members.

Remember, too, that the anniversary of a disaster or tragic event can renew feelings of fear, anxiety and sadness in disaster survivors. Certain sounds such as sirens, or large crowds, can also trigger emotional distress. These and other environmental sensations can take people right back to the event or cause them to fear that it's about to happen again. These trigger events can happen at any time.

Most people who experience disasters are able to recover quickly, but others may need additional support to move forward on the path of recovery. Finding ways to manage stress is the best way to prevent negative emotions from becoming behavioural health issues. Contact your employee assistance programme (EAP) or another mental health professional to get coping tips for dealing with emotional distress related to incidents of mass violence and other types of disasters.