

# **Following a Terrorist Act**

## A Guide for Caring Adults

**T**errorism is defined as the act of terrorizing, use of force or threats to demoralize, intimidate, and subjugate. Terrorist acts typically cause chaos and confusion by disrupting our daily life in many venues: government, financial, community, schools, families and individuals. Terrorist acts of violence may also create disorganization, polarization of feelings and attitudes towards others, fear and insecurity.

### **Sense of Loss**

People traumatized by terrorism often experience a pervasive sense of loss, these reactions are common and may include some of the following:

- Loss of feeling safe
- Loss of safety in the community
- Loss of identify/future
- Loss of feeling of control over one's life
- Loss of trust in others
- Loss of hope
- Loss of personal power
- Loss of friends
- Loss of home/belongings

### **Common Reactions To Unexpected Acts Of Violence**

Individuals and communities may experience a range of intense emotions, feelings, thoughts, and reactions to the unexpected violence.

The psychological impact of an unexpected violent act may include the following thoughts and emotions:

### **Emotional Reactions**

- |                |                       |
|----------------|-----------------------|
| ➤ Shock        | ➤ Disbelief           |
| ➤ Insecurity   | ➤ Fear of the unknown |
| ➤ Hopelessness | ➤ Helplessness        |
| ➤ Panic        | ➤ Anger               |

### *More emotional reactions*

- Anxiety
- Despair
- Depression
- Irritability
- Re-activation of prior or negative memories
- Isolation
- Survivor Guilt
- Excessive worry
- A state of tension

### **Physical or Behavioral Reactions**

When unexpected acts of violence occur they disrupt our daily routine and sense of equilibrium. Physical or behavioral reactions may include:

- Appetite disturbance
- Sleep disturbance
- Restlessness
- Free-floating or generalized anxiety
- Panic attacks
- Feelings of gloom or despair
- Exaggerated responses to stimuli
- Headaches
- Diarrhea
- Stomach ailments
- Decrease in performance levels

### **Normal Reactions**

The thoughts, reactions, and feelings described above are considered normal reactions to abnormal events. It is important to reassure individuals experiencing a range of unexpected feelings or symptoms that these are typical manifestations in reaction to a stressful incident of unmatched proportion. Finally, reactions to abnormal events may surface immediately or in many cases, days or weeks after the incident. This is normal.

### **Strategies For Recovery**

Reassurance it is extremely important.

- It is very helpful to **communicate** to others a sense of safety, control, and balance.
- **Limit time** spent on repeated exposure to TV, radio, Internet viewing of the incident.

### *More Strategies for Recovery*

- The resumption of **normal activities** plays an important role in achieving a sense of **control and well-being**.
- Talking about the incident and associated thoughts, feelings, and reactions are extremely helpful in the recovery phase.
- Denying, avoiding, blocking, or minimizing thoughts or feelings are not helpful and may prolong the recovery period.
- An emotionally **supportive environment** can minimize the negative effects of disturbing incidents.

It is also important to provide survivors a framework that explains the uneasiness and discomforts that typically follows an unanticipated act of violence. It is normal for persons exposed to unexpected acts of violence to trigger a range of confusing and intense thoughts and emotions.

- **Rehearse safety measures** that may be taken to give family members a sense of control over a similar type event.

Diet, physical activity, exercise, rest and relaxation also help to achieve a sense of balance or equilibrium. Reaching out to friends and significant others is also important.

- **Prolonged exposure** to media coverage is **not** helpful if a person feels a sense of “sensory overload” about the event.

### **Long Term Impact**

The emotional distress goes far beyond the immediate impact of the initial destruction. Terrorism affects individuals emotionally, can change relationships, disrupt work and cause financial worries.

**Additional stressors** include dealing with bureaucratic hassles such as building permits or settling insurance issues while striving to maintain an ordered, daily life.

- Increased irritability over time, arguments, a feeling of exhaustion, illness and survivor guilt are common.
- The **cumulative stress** from coping with the increased problems from the “violent act” and the necessity to continue with work, family and other obligations may leave us emotionally shattered.

Some individuals are forced to **delay** dealing with the psychological impact, because they need to focus energy on concrete needs such as finding their loved ones, finding temporary housing, food or attending to financial matters. **Over time** they may be hit with feelings of anger, depression, isolation, or apathy. These feelings may remain strong or even increase in intensity as time progresses.

- **Delayed reactions are normal.**
- An event, sights, sounds or smells may trigger emotional responses months after the event.
- **Just as it takes months or years to rebuild damaged or destroyed buildings ... it takes time to grieve over losses and to rebuild our lives.**

Please know that the feelings you experience now are normal reactions to an uncommon event.

And, you are not alone.

### **When Problems Persist**

Talk to a counselor or family therapist. With professional assistance, “adjustment reactions” may be dealt with relatively quickly and easily.

People who have had previous experiences with trauma may experience more severe reactions, including flashbacks.

- When “normal reactions” begin to interfere with daily functioning or are subjectively distressing to the individual, please seek professional counseling.
- If you are not sure whether you could benefit from counseling, just call and speak with a licensed, professional counselor to help determine if you need some short term counseling.

Call the Riverside County Department of Mental Health – Central Access Team (800) 706-7500 for information or referral **24 hours a day, 7 days a week.**

# **1(800) 706-7500**