

Tips for College and University Students: Managing Your Distress in the Aftermath of School Shootings

As a university or college student, you may be struggling to understand how a shooting rampage could take place on a university campus and why such a thing would happen. There may never be satisfactory answers to these questions.

We do know, though, that it is typical for people to experience a variety of emotions following such a traumatic event. These feelings can include shock, sorrow, numbness, fear, anger, disillusionment, grief and others. You may find that you have trouble sleeping, concentrating, eating or remembering even simple tasks. This is common and should pass after a while. Over time, the caring support of family and friends can help to lessen the emotional impact and ultimately make the changes brought about by the tragedy more manageable. You may feel that the world is a more dangerous place today than you did yesterday. It will take some time to recover your sense of equilibrium.

Meanwhile, you may wonder how to go on living your daily life. You can strengthen your resilience—the ability to adapt well in the face of adversity—in the days and weeks ahead.

Here are some tips:

Talk about it — Ask for support from people who care about you and who will listen to your concerns. Receiving support and care can be comforting and reassuring. Your campus is likely to be offering support services through its counseling center. It often helps to speak with others who have shared your experience so you do not feel so different or alone. If your parents seem particularly distressed, it may be because they are reacting to their own sense of not being able to control the college environment to keep you as safe as they would like.

Strive for balance — When a tragedy occurs, it's easy to become overwhelmed and have a negative or pessimistic outlook. Balance that viewpoint by reminding yourself of people and events which are meaningful and comforting, even encouraging. Striving for balance empowers you and allows for a healthier perspective on yourself and the world around you.

Turn it off and take a break — You may want to keep informed, but try to limit the amount of news you take in whether it's from the internet, television, newspapers or magazines. While getting the news informs you, being overexposed to it can actually increase your stress. The images can be very powerful in reawakening your feeling of distress. Also, schedule some breaks to distract yourself from thinking about the incident and focus instead on something you enjoy. Try to do something that will lift your spirits.

Honor your feelings — Remember that it is common to have a range of emotions after a traumatic incident. Go a little easy on yourself and on your friends. You may experience intense stress similar to the effects of a physical injury. For example, you may feel exhausted, sore, or off balance.

Take care of yourself — Engage in healthy behaviors to enhance your ability to cope with excessive stress. Eat well-balanced meals, get plenty of rest, and build physical activity into your day. Avoid alcohol and drugs because they can suppress your feelings rather than help you to manage and lessen your distress. In addition, alcohol and drugs may intensify your emotional or physical pain. Establish or reestablish routines such as eating meals at regular times and following an exercise program. If you are having trouble sleeping, try some relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing, meditation, or yoga.

Help others or do something productive — Find out from your university or community how you can help people who have been affected by this incident, or have other needs. Helping someone else often has the benefit of making you feel better, too. Try volunteering at your school or within your community.

If you have recently lost friends in this or other tragedies — Remember that grief is a long process. Give yourself time to experience your feelings and to recover. For some, this might involve staying at home; for others it may mean getting back to school or work. Dealing with the shock and trauma of such an event will take time. It is typical to expect many ups and downs, including "survivor guilt"—feeling bad that you escaped the tragedy while others did not.

For many people, using the tips and strategies mentioned above may be sufficient to get through the current crisis. At times, however an individual can get stuck or have difficulty managing intense reactions. A licensed mental health professional such as a psychologist can assist you in developing an appropriate strategy for moving forward. It is important to get professional help if you feel like you are unable to function or perform basic activities of daily living. Your university or college counseling center may be a good place to start.

Recovering from such a tragic event may seem difficult to imagine. Persevere and trust in your ability to get through the challenging days ahead. Taking the steps in this guide can help you cope at this very difficult time.

This tip sheet was made possible with help from the following APA members: Dewey Cornell, PhD, Richard A. Heaps, PhD, Jana Martin, PhD, H. Katherine O'Neill, PhD, Karen Settle, PhD, Peter Sheras, PhD, Phyllis Koch-Sheras, PhD, and members of Division 17.

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