

Coping with grief after community violence

After an incident of community violence, it is quite common for individuals as well as entire communities to experience anger as well as grief reactions. Grief is the sorrow and confusion that comes from losing someone or something important to you. Most people will experience a natural occurrence of grief after the death of a loved one; however, grief can also be the result of other types of losses. In situations of community violence, people may experience the loss of their sense of safety, their trust in those who live in their neighborhood or their trust in local government. The trauma and grief of community violence can be experienced by all involved.

Common grief reactions

Your reactions to a death or loss of some kind will be unique to you, depending on your health, coping styles, culture, family supports and other life experiences. Typically, you will feel multiple emotions and experience several symptoms together, though perhaps in different degrees. Over time, emotions do ease.

Emotional & behavioral Reactions

- Emptiness
- Emotional Numbness
- Withdrawal from Others
- Restlessness
- Hyper Vigilance

Physical Reactions

- Trembling or shakiness
- Muscle weakness
- Nausea, trouble eating
- Trouble sleeping, trouble breathing
- Dry mouth

Grieving takes time

It takes time to accept and learn to live with the changes that have occurred in your community due to violence and its aftermath. People do not heal on a timetable –feelings and symptoms of grief can take weeks, months and even years to manifest and evolve. How long people grieve may also depend on the resilience of the community and its ability to restore the basic needs of the community, such as getting businesses back to work again.

How communities can cope with their grief

Often the community needs to come together to understand the causes of violence, honor those affected and find meaning in a way that will help everyone in the community recover. It may help community members be determined to work out their differences in other ways in the future—for example, by forming a community advisory group or identifying a local leader to be their liaison with law enforcement and other government entities.

Easing your personal grief

Talking to others who understand and respect how you feel, such as family members, faith leaders and other people you trust, is a helpful way to ease your grief. Recognize that although you might still have these feelings over a long period, they will likely be less and less intense

over time. Make sure to exercise and eat healthy meals. Do the things that you used to enjoy doing, even if you don't always feel like it. This will help you get back into your routines. Allow yourself to feel joy at times and to cry when you need to.

Even though you may be experiencing grief, you may also exhibit positive changes from the experience of loss, such as:

- Becoming more understanding and tolerant
- Having increased appreciation for relationships and loved ones
- Being grateful for what you have and for those in your community who are loving and caring
- Experiencing enhanced spiritual connection
- Becoming more socially active.

Children's reactions to community violence

Witnessing community violence can be particularly traumatic for children. Losing their sense of safety can represent the loss of social capital –the emotional support that enhances their wellbeing.

Tips for Helping Children Cope with Grief

- Allow children to talk about their feelings and to express their grief (e.g. crying, being sad).
- Try to follow the same routines as usual.
- Encourage them to play and laugh.
- Limit exposure to violence on TV news.
- Encourage them to get adequate rest and to eat healthy meals.

If you have been exposed to community violence, feelings of grief and anger are normal reactions. However, if these feelings persist, access your programs resources for support and assistance. If you or someone you know is struggling, you are not alone.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). (2014, November). Tips for survivors: Coping with grief after community violence (Pub. No. SMA-14-4888).