

Tips for Managing Distress in the Aftermath of Campus Tragedies such as at Virginia Tech and NIU (adapted from the American Psychological Association)

As a 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 fully satisfactory answers to these questions about sudden violence and consequent suffering.

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, grief, confusion, depression, numbness, fear, anger, disillusionment, and other reactions. 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 earlier. It can take some time to recover your usual sense of equilibrium.

Meanwhile, you may wonder how to go on living your daily life. There are some simple and time-tested strategies that could help 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 — Reach out to the people who can be there for you and with whom you can express your concerns. Receiving support and care can be comforting and reassuring. The Counseling Center is one place you can find such understanding, in a confidential setting, an appointment can be made by calling 312 996-3490. There are many other opportunities on campus as well, for examples, with your teachers, classmates, advisors, or staff in other offices and departments and at the various religious centers. It often helps to share your reactions with others who can appreciate what you are experiencing, so that no one has to feel so different or alone. While families and loved ones may usually be the most natural relationships to turn to for care, they may also be distressed at this time, worrying about how to ensure that you can be kept as safe in this world as they want you to be.

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

Turn it off and take a break — You may want to keep informed about recent and current events, but try to limit the amount of news you take in whether it's from the internet, radio or television, newspapers or magazines. While getting the news can add to your understanding of what happened, being overexposed to it can sometimes actually increase your stress. The images can be very powerful in provoking feelings of distress. Also, schedule some breaks to distract yourself from thinking about the incident and focus instead on something which you enjoy or in which you may find some sense of peace. Try to do something that will offer some relief or could lift your spirits.

Honor your feelings — Remember that it is common to have a fluctuating 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, restless, distracted, 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 the rest you need, and build physical activity into your day. Avoid

relying on 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 pain. Establish or reestablish routines such as doing schoolwork, meeting friends, or following an exercise program. If you are having trouble sleeping, try some relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing, meditation, prayer, music, or yoga.

Help others or do something productive — Seek out in your community or campus organizations ways that you might be able to share your talents and care with others in need. Helping someone else often has the benefit of making you feel better, too. Try volunteering if your time and opportunities allow, or find other ways to engage in activities that might honor the memory of those who have been lost.

If you have recently lost friends in this or other tragedies — Remember that grief often can be a complex and extended process, and it can re-awaken other losses you have suffered. Give yourself time to experience, share and express your feelings. There is no single “right” way to recovery. For some, it might involve staying at home more; for others, it may mean getting back to the regular routines and responsibilities of school or work. Dealing with the shock and trauma of such an event can take some time. It is typical to expect various ups and downs, sometimes including “survivor guilt”—feeling bad that you escaped the tragedy while others did not, and maybe at other times not even thinking about what happened.

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 feel more stuck or have more difficulty managing intense reactions. A mental health professional can often assist in developing an appropriate strategy for moving forward. It can be especially important to get help if you feel hopeless or helpless or unable to function or perform basic activities of daily living. The Counseling Center may be a good place to start.

Recovering from such a tragic event may seem difficult to imagine at this point. Persevere and trust in your ability to get through the challenging times ahead, one day at a time. Taking the steps in this guide can help you cope with the demands. You do not need to feel alone or without support and understanding. They are available and they can make a difference.

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.