



Taking Care of Yourself After a Workplace Shooting

A shooting in the workplace is often traumatic. Whether the violence was directed at you or you were a witness, it is still reasonable to feel like your life was in danger. When we experience a traumatic event our brains try to make sense of what happened. This may result in a variety of unpleasant reactions, but these are a normal response to an abnormal event. In this guide are some common reactions, things to keep in mind, and coping strategies you may find useful.

COMMON REACTIONS

- Shock and disbelief - feeling that this is "unreal" or could not have happened
- Anger
- Going over and over the event in your mind
- Wondering "what if" - thinking about how things might have been if you acted differently
- Fear and anxiety - about what happened and about it happening again in the future
- Poor concentration or difficulty thinking clearly
- Depression or sadness
- Preoccupation or worry - about those who may have been injured, and a desire to reach out to help
- Feeling unsafe - regardless of whether there is a current threat
- Irritability - may be on edge or quicker to anger
- Hyper-vigilance/hyper-sensitivity - any sight, sound, or smell that reminds you of the incident may trigger reactions similar to when it happened
- Guilt - may be over own survival, or ideas about what you could have done differently
- Physical reactions, such as: rapid breathing, increased heart rate, headache, stomach ache, or difficulty sleeping or eating

THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND

- During a traumatic event, our body's natural survival mechanisms kick in. Our brain sends chemicals of survival. Our brain also stores the memory of the threat, so it can react more quickly if a similar event is encountered. Keep in mind:
 - Anything that reminds our brains of the threat, such as a sight, sound, or smell, can trigger our adrenaline and survival mechanisms, even if there is no real threat present
 - Our brain will try to figure out the event by way of flashbacks, dreams, and thinking about the event over and over again - don't be alarmed if this happens
 - Adrenaline and cortisol may tell our body to freeze, temporarily taking away our ability to react to the event in the way we may have wished
- Because our brain is trying to make sense of the traumatic event, it can slow down the recovery process if we try to deny our feelings or fight reactions. It may be helpful to realize that if flashbacks or dreams occur, it is a normal part of recovery and will usually diminish over time. If we are able to accept our reactions and not fight them, they typically go away faster.
- Everyone reacts to trauma in their own way and with varying intensities. Factors that impact how we react, include: previous experiences with violence and/or trauma, physical

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Employee Assistance Program

(866) 579-4684

and mental health status prior to the event, relationship to others involved in the event, relationship to others involved in the event, the specifics of the event (how threatening or dangerous, presence of a weapon, degree of injury caused, etc.), social supports and coping strategies, religious beliefs, and other life stressors.

- Although asking "what ifs" or questioning how you reacted during the incident is common, there is no way to know if you could have done anything to prevent what happened. It is not fair nor realistic to judge your actions during the event, based on what you now know after the event. Focusing on "what ifs" takes away from processing what did happen and can lead to stress over what did not actually happen.
- Expect recovery. With the help of social supports and coping skills most people begin to feel better within a few weeks. It takes time to recover so be patient with yourself, but know that most people who experience a traumatic event do not develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).
- Avoid using alcohol or drugs to cope, as they prevent your ability to work through the thoughts and emotions brought up by the trauma. They also interfere with sleep, which makes it harder for your body to recover from stress.
- Be cautious of consuming caffeine and other stimulants, as they can increase anxiety and interfere with sleep.
- Don't be surprised if some reactions reemerge around the anniversary of this incident, this is normal, and the reactions will typically diminish.

COPING STRATEGIES

- Eat healthy and drink lots of water - your body and mind need the nutrients to recover from stress and expel the stress chemicals
- Engage in regular exercise - this helps to boost chemicals that improve mood, reduce stress, and improve sleep
- Try to maintain your usual sleep routine - if having trouble sleeping, get up and do a relaxing activity for a little while to distract your mind from worries
- Help someone else - be a support to your coworkers
- Do some things you enjoy - part of taking care of yourself is making time to relax and have fun; this gives you a break from grieving and helps to maintain balance
- Talk to someone - family, friends, coworkers, a counselor, faith mentor, or anyone else whom you feel comfortable sharing your feelings with and is helpful to you
- Return to routine - as soon as you are able to, engage in your normal routine; this may help you regain your sense of control and predictability of life
- Think about other times - when you have coped with difficult situations. What positive coping strategies worked for you then? Can you practice those now?

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