Help Starts Here.

Washington State Employee Assistance Program

COPING WITH FEAR OF VIOLENCE: SCHOOL SHOOTINGS

Mass shootings are horrific for the people and communities directly impacted, but they also evoke strong emotions in those who learn about them through news and social media. You may have a range of feelings, including grief, numbness, fear, anger, or disillusionment. These are all normal responses to unspeakable events. You may find it hard to show up at work for "business as usual," especially if you or a loved one has a shared identity with the targets of hate and violence.

Additionally, for anyone who has experienced interpersonal or systemic violence, current events can trigger strong emotions or memories of past harm. Fear of violence can have a significant mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual impact. It can sometimes lead to a trauma response. Trauma is defined as exposure to actual or threatened death or serious injury causing significant distress or impairment. Reactions may include:

- Re-experiencing (flashbacks, nightmares)
- Avoidance (of thoughts, people, or situations)
- Negative thoughts or mood (such as fear, blame, or guilt)
- Reactivity (irritability, difficulty concentrating, sleep issues).

These symptoms can intensify if the threat is repeated or ongoing, or if you are already living with other stressors in your life such as health concerns, racism, or the recent death of a loved one. If you experienced previous violence such as childhood abuse, workplace violence, war, or domestic violence, recent threats are likely to trigger memories and past responses. When these memories are activated, the emotions you feel today may be just as intense as those you experienced during a previous traumatic event.

If you feel distressed, the Washington State EAP is a place to seek confidential and caring support.

Suggestions for caring for yourself and your loved ones during these times:

Acknowledge your thoughts and emotions. It is common to experience a wide range of emotions following a violent event. Avoid self-talk about what you "should" be feeling.

Be attentive and responsive to how children may be experiencing this news. Seek trusted resources for advice. See our Resources section for supportive information.

Set boundaries around when and how often you consume media. Constant access to news and social media means that we can easily become overloaded by bad news. You might make a conscious choice not to watch the news right before bedtime. You might decide to leave your phone charging in another room, so you don't check social media during a meal, at work, or from bed. You may want to set a timer and limit access to newsfeeds to limited blocks of time.

Identify things within your scope of influence. It is easy to feel helpless in overwhelming situations, so it can be useful to focus on what you *can* do. How can you most directly and positively make an impact? This could include actions like: join an advocacy group, donate to a cause that is working toward solutions, write a letter to your representatives, check in on someone you feel concerned about, or teach and model empathy and nonviolence to a child in your life.

Take care of your physical health. Remember to move. It's not just that exercise can help us feel physically better. Trauma tends to "get stuck" in our bodies and choosing to move can help shift hard feelings. Try a walking work meeting, a lunchtime chair yoga class, a weekend hike with loved ones or alone, or any other movement that works for your body. Eat healthy foods, and get sleep.

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Practice mindfulness. Fear tends to pull us away from being present in our lives—when triggered, it causes us to relive the past or to worry about what might happen in the future. You can start by downloading a free mindfulness app and doing short breathing exercises or guided meditation.

Focus on gratitude. Research shows that gratitude can help us cope with crisis.

Be gentle with yourself. Know that you are not alone in experiencing strong reactions to these events. Don't despair if you are having a hard time concentrating at work or keeping your cool with your partner or kids. What's one thing you can do to be kind to yourself today?

Guidance for supervisors/managers — supporting employees

- Acknowledge the event.
- Acknowledge the pain employees might be experiencing.
- Offer and demonstrate flexibility with work schedules and deadlines.
- Create a space for open and safe dialog.
- Ask "How can I help and support you?"
- Listen.
- Provide support and resources.

Resources for schools and teachers

- National Center for School Safety (NCSS) –improving school safety and violence prevention
- Returning to School After a Crisis: A Guide to Addressing Traumatic Events at School –guide to support school educators, staff, students and communities when returning following a crisis
- School Shooting Resources – from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN)
- National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (NCSSLE) — resources for teachers on building resilience in students and practicing trauma-informed self-care
- Translated Safety and Crisis Resources (nasponline.org)

Resources for parents

- Mass Violence Resources (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, NCTSN)
- Restoring a Sense of Safety in the Aftermath of a Mass Shooting (CSTS) — tip sheet
- Helping Children and Adolescents Cope With Traumatic Events (NIH) — tip sheet
- Talking with Children About Tragedies and Other News Events (AAP)
- Firearms in the Home (Seattle Children's) — safe storage and talking to children about safety
- Teen Link (call/text 866-833-6546) – support for teens or concerned parents/adults

General resources

- Managing your distress in the aftermath of a shooting (APA)
- Restoring a Sense of Safety in the Aftermath of a Shooting: Tips for Parents and Professionals (National Child Traumatic Stress Network)
- Incidents of Mass Violence (SAMHSA) — who is most at risk for emotional distress from incidents of mass violence and where to find disaster-related resources

Crisis support

- Crisis Connections – 24-hour crisis line, call 866-427-4747
- Crisis Text Line – to connect with a crisis counselor, text "heal" to 741741
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline – call (800) 273-8255

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