

# Talking to Children After Tragedy

**voices**  
OF SEPTEMBER 11<sup>TH</sup>

When a tragedy occurs in your community, parents often struggle with talking to their children. Whether they see images on television or hear people talking, children are likely to know when something bad has happened. Events like these can make children feel sad or scared. Talking with them about their feelings can help.

## *Create a safe and reassuring atmosphere*

- When children are aware that something bad has happened, let them know they can talk to you about their feelings
- Asking them about what they have heard is a good way to start
- Children may be fearful that such things could happen to them or their families. Reassure them that you will keep them as safe as possible

## *Children need you to tell the truth*

- Answer their questions with honesty
- Explain events using words and ideas that they understand
- Don't overwhelm them with details, unless they ask for specific information
- It's OK to let children know that you too are feeling sad or anxious because of events

## *How can you deal with TV, internet, and other media?*

- Monitor younger children's TV and online viewing. Make sure they don't watch shows or visit sites with disturbing images
- For older children or adolescents, watching TV or online news or reading the newspaper may be appropriate. Be sure to talk about what they see and hear
- Ask questions like, "What do you think about what is happening? Are you scared? Do you feel sad or angry?"

## *Help them cope with their feelings*

- If it is hard for your children to talk about their feelings, encourage them to draw pictures, tell stories, or play with toys to express themselves and to find comfort
- During stressful times, stick to your child's regular routine. Children find comfort in what is familiar
- Doing something for the people affected by a tragedy can help children feel better. Suggest they draw a card to send, or participate in a fundraising effort
- Focus on the positive. Point out all the people who help others during an emergency

## *Look for signs of anxiety or fear*

- Watch for:
  - Loss of appetite, stomachaches, headaches or nightmares
  - Constantly talking about scary ideas or feelings
  - Increased fighting with friends, parents or siblings
  - Fear of leaving parents, or going to school
  - Persistent signs of stress or agitation
- If your child shows any of these signs for a long period of time, consider talking with a health care professional or doctor



# Feeling Safe in Your Community

**voices**  
OF SEPTEMBER 11<sup>TH</sup>



You may be struggling to understand how such a terrible thing could happen in your community. It is typical for people to experience a variety of emotions following 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. It often helps to speak with others who have shared your experience so you do not feel so different or alone.

## ***Striving 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. 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 re-establish 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***

Locate resources in your community on ways that 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.

# Talking to the Media

**voices**  
OF SEPTEMBER 11<sup>TH</sup>

Tragic events are often covered by news outlets in great detail and spread immediately through vast coverage. Local residents are often approached by the media for their personal perspective. Be aware that there are potentially positive and negative consequences of speaking to the media. A desire to speak out is important, but preparation is key.

## *Preparing for an Interview*

- If you decide to do an interview, set boundaries and prepare a statement in advance. Be cautious about what is recorded or filmed. Once an interview is recorded, a photograph is taken, or an event filmed, you have little control over how it is used.
- Ask the reporter what the story is about so you can be prepared to discuss the topic. When possible, ask a reporter to email questions to you in advance.
- Prepare some key talking points in advance and avoid making statements in the heat of the moment.
- Come up with 3 or 4 points you would like to get across, write them down, and say them right away during the interview. For example: "The one thing I really want to say is. . . ." Return to those messages and repeat them in different forms whenever you can. Do not let the reporter derail or distract you from your original points.
- You have the ability to control the information you share. You can set limits and tell the reporter you won't discuss some things. Once you have said something to a reporter, you cannot take it back or expect them not to use it.

## *Saying No Is Okay*

- You can refuse to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable. It is okay to say, "I cannot answer that at this moment."
- You can end an interview at any time. Try to be calm if you choose to cut the interview short.
- You can avoid a stressful atmosphere by speaking to only one reporter at a time.
- You can and should exclude young children from interviews.
- You can refuse to make your image public by conducting a television interview using a silhouette or doing a newspaper or radio interview without having your photograph taken.

## *Conducting the Interview*

- Relax and take your time. Speak slowly and clearly.
- Listen to the entire question and make sure you understand the question before answering. Think about your answer before speaking.
- Be honest. If you don't know the answer to something, say so. If you're unsure, you can always say, "I don't have enough information to fully answer your question."
- Be consistent with your information.
- Never give false information or lie to a reporter. Likewise, do not guess or speculate about the event. Stick to what you know as fact.
- When you talk to a reporter, remember that you are also talking to everyone in their audience— possibly thousands of people.
- You can audiotape or videotape all interviews to ensure the accuracy of what you say.
- Never speak "off the record." Everything you say during an interview is on the record. Do not say anything you would not be comfortable seeing in print. Once you have answered, stop talking.





# *Tips for Family Members*

## OF VICTIMS OF MASS VIOLENCE

**voices**  
OF SEPTEMBER 11<sup>TH</sup>

Family members who have lost a loved one as a result of mass violence, or who is missing during or after a mass violence event, will need guidance for what to do next and how to cope in the days ahead. This document provides recommendations based on what Voices of September 11th has learned from working with thousands of victims' family members since 2001.

### *If a Loved One Is Missing*

If a family member, friend, or colleague is missing, the first priority is to find out the status of your loved one. It is critical to find a trusted source for accurate information.

- Notify your family and friends.
- Contact the organization they are affiliated with, for example, the company, organization, airline, etc.
- Report your loved one missing to local authorities and federal agencies.
- Use social media channels to report.
- Provide your contact information to all of the above.



### *Find Resources at the Family Assistance Center*

In the immediate aftermath, a Family Assistance Center or Reunification Center will provide a safe place and central location for victims' families and survivors with streamlined access to timely information and organizations who are providing resources and services.

The Family Assistance Center helps with:

- Regularly scheduled briefings by official authorities
- Filing a missing person report
- Filing for a death certificate
- Providing DNA samples and information for victim identification
- Mental Health Counseling
- Health care and childcare
- Financial and legal support
- Referrals to other resources
- Victim assistance organization services

### *If You Live Outside the Area*

Make contact with the organization that can provide information and assistance in travel and access to resources, such as the airline, corporation, agency, or government official who has jurisdiction over providing assistance.

If you are outside the country, contact international organizations such as embassies, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, or local or international Victim Service Agencies.



# *In the Immediate Aftermath*

- Establish the whereabouts of your other family members and notify them about the situation.
- Identify an ongoing resource for accurate information.
- Identify trusted family and friends to serve as your intermediary and attend to your basic needs.
- Document important information, such as incoming phone calls, processes, and procedures.
- Talk to a counselor, clergy member, friend or family member that you can depend on for support.
- Limit overexposure to the media, including social media and television reports.
- Seek the help of a reputable attorney if you need legal advice.
- Seek a financial advisor to provide professional financial advice.

"The tragedy happens... we are in shock and we can't think. We're just so overwhelmed with information. . . . We are just so bombarded with information.

—Family member of 9/11 victim

## *If Your Loved One Is Missing or Presumed Deceased*

- File a missing person report.
- Provide photographs, identifying information, and details about what the person was wearing.
- Immediate relatives should provide a DNA sample and personal items such as a toothbrush, hairbrush, or dental records.

### *More Resources*

**Voices of September 11th**  
[voicesofseptember11.org](http://voicesofseptember11.org)



# Seek Help and Support

Everyone grieves differently and in their own time, even individuals from the same family. Be patient with yourself and your family members. Take small steps toward healing by seeking support that can help you feel better over time.

- Acknowledge and accept both positive and negative feelings.
- Allow plenty of time to experience thoughts and feelings.
- Confide in a trusted person about the loss.
- Express feelings openly or write journal entries about them.
- Participate in bereavement groups or peer-to-peer support groups with individuals who have experienced a similar loss.
- Seek professional help if feelings are overwhelming.

"Time doesn't heal. People heal in their own way in time."

—Dr. Suzanne Phillips, psychologist, psychoanalyst,  
and certified group therapist

## *Find Resources at the Family Assistance Center*

Some things can impede or slow down the healing process following a death or loss, including:

- Avoiding emotions
- Compulsive behaviors
- Minimizing feelings
- Overworking on the job
- Misusing drugs, alcohol, or other substances as a way to deal with emotional discomfort



# *What to Expect After a Sudden Death*

After suffering the sudden loss of a loved one, you may have strong emotional and physical responses because of the traumatic nature of the death. During the first four to six weeks following a sudden death you may experience strong emotional and physical responses.

## ***Common Emotional Reactions***

- Overwhelming shock manifesting itself as numbness, regrets, anger, despair, disbelief, guilt, anxiety, sometimes even relief
- Screaming or shaking
- Inability to talk or move
- Denial (this is not happening)
- Guilt for being alive, or self-blame
- Yearning to see the person again
- Restlessness, loss of concentration, loss of confidence, loss of interest in life
- Insomnia and nightmares
- Intrusive thoughts
- Inability to eat
- Anxiety and panic attacks
- Extended periods of crying and sobbing
- Irrational thoughts and actions
- Being terrified of being left alone, or not wanting others around at all
- Feeling that no one understands

## ***Common Physical Reactions***

- Fatigue
- Exhaustion
- General pains such as stomach ache or headache
- Nausea
- Lowered immunity
- Weight loss or weight gain
- Insomnia
- Diarrhea
- Stuttering
- Heart palpitations
- Jumpiness



## ***When to Seek Professional Help***

Emotional responses to the sudden loss of a loved one are common in the weeks after the loss. Seek professional help if symptoms continue for a prolonged period of time—months and years after the death.

Other reasons to seek professional help include drug abuse or increased use of tobacco or alcohol, suffering several losses, gaining or losing a significant amount of weight, experiencing uncontrollable anxiety, and failing to feel somewhat better after a year has passed.



# *Planning a Memorial Service or Funeral*

- **Consider whether you need financial assistance.** Victim Assistance programs often provide assistance with funeral expenses. Financial support may also be available from sources such as a church, a union, or a fraternal organization that the deceased belonged to.
- **Enlist relatives and friends to help.** Help may be needed with the funeral to serve as pallbearers, to create or design the funeral program, cook meals, take care of children or pets, or shop for items needed for the funeral or household of the deceased.
- **Select a headstone or urn.** Headstones and urns can often be purchased through the cemetery, funeral home, or from an outside vendor. Consult the cemetery about headstone rules, regulations, and specifications such as color and size.
- **Organize a post-funeral gathering.** Depending on your tradition, a wake can be held before the funeral or memorial service. Enlist the help of friends and relatives.
- **Prepare an obituary.** You may want to write the obituary yourself, or ask family and friends or the funeral home for assistance. Include information about the time, date, and address to send flowers, or identify a foundation for donations made in lieu of flowers.
- **Inform your relatives and friends.** Once a date and time has been set for the service, share the details with those on your contact list.
- **Keep a list of well-wishers.** Keep a record of those who send cards, flowers, and donations so you can send an acknowledgment later.

This document was produced by Voices of September 11th  
with a grant from Public Safety Canada.



Voices of September 11th has created several tip sheets with funding from Public Safety Canada. This document provides guidance about their use.

### *When Should They Be Given?*

The Tip Sheets are designed to be distributed in the immediate aftermath of an act of mass violence, including:

- Terrorism
- Mass shooting
- Other intentional event of mass violence

### *Who Were They Created For?*

The intended stakeholder groups for the tip sheets are defined in the table below.



Audience	Description
Victim's Family	Family member or close friend of a person who died as a result of the event*
Survivor	A person who experienced an event and may have suffered physical injury, witnessed death and violence, and/or lost a family member, friend, or colleague in the event
Responder	A person who responds to the event, for example, law enforcement, emergency medical services, fire service, emergency management, or recovery worker
Provider/ Practitioner	A mental health or medical professional who provides services to individuals affected by an event

\*Voices of September 11th does not refer to the living as victims. We reserve that term for those who died as a result of the event.

# Who Should Receive Each Tip Sheet?

The table below provides guidance about which tip sheets should be given to each stakeholder group.

Tip Sheet	Victim's Family	Survivor	Responder	Practitioner
Mental Health Considerations After an Act of Mass Violence	✓	✓	✓	✓
Considerations for Practitioners and Responders			✓	✓
Considerations for Speaking with the Media After Being Affected by Mass Violence	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tips for Family Members of Victims of Mass Violence	✓			
Tips for Survivors of Mass Violence		✓		
Tips for First Responders and Recovery Workers Responding to a Mass Violence Event			✓	
Tips for Health Care Practitioners Providing Care to Those Affected by Mass Violence				✓



# *Considerations for Speaking with the Media*

## AFTER BEING AFFECTED BY MASS VIOLENCE

**voices**  
OF SEPTEMBER 11<sup>TH</sup>

Events of mass violence are often covered by news outlets in great detail and spread immediately through vast coverage. Victims' families, witnesses, and survivors are often contacted by the media for their personal perspective. Those affected should be aware that there are both potentially positive and negative consequences of speaking to the media. A desire to speak out is important, but preparation is key.

### *Possible Benefits of Sharing Your Story with the Media*

- **Sharing Your Story:** Victims' families and survivors talking with the media provides an opportunity to share their personal perspective and honor the lives of those who died, rather than focusing on the perpetrator.
- **Public Awareness:** Mass violence takes a toll on the individuals and the community at large. Media coverage can build awareness about the physical, emotional, spiritual, financial, social, and psychological needs of those impacted.
- **Promoting Support:** Speaking with the media may increase public support for victim assistance initiatives, including financial aid, support services, and mental health care.
- **Inspiring Others:** Revealing your circumstances will help others understand that they are not alone and may encourage them to seek the support they need to promote healing and recovery.
- **Empowering Those Impacted:** Sharing details about your experience may help you feel you have regained control of your life, by building public awareness and influencing change.
- **Changing Public Policy:** Victims' families and survivors often engage in advocating for public policy changes to address inadequate government policies, in hopes of preventing other tragedies.



# *Possible Risks of Speaking Out in the Media*

- **Risks to Your Well-Being:** For some people, speaking publicly about what happened to them can intensify the trauma. It takes time to work through a traumatic experience, let alone cope with ongoing investigations, court processes, and intrusive media.
- **Unpredictability:** It is impossible to predict how your story will be covered, if at all, and there is a potential for some stories to get little coverage due to competing breaking news. The media will gather information from many sources, including opposing views.
- **Re-traumatization:** People may feel retraumatized when reporting is insensitive, inaccurate, or sensationalized, or when the reporter is intrusive in searching for information.
- **Loss of Privacy:** Keep in mind that any information or photo you provide of you or your loved one could be used continually in reporting, even months and years later. The media can also film or photograph your home from afar if they are not on your property.
- **Interference with the Investigation:** It is wise to refrain from commenting in the media if the crime is still being investigated. Speaking to the media during the investigation or trial could jeopardize a criminal case. If you are unsure, consult with victims' services staff.
- **Lack of Family Support:** Family may not support your decision to speak with the media and may not want to speak publicly about their grief. Take into consideration the impact that media reports can have on children and extended family.
- **Feeling Let Down by the Media:** In the immediate aftermath of the crime, the media are constantly present, and your story may be in the headlines. Eventually, other news begins to take precedence and you may feel abandoned and alone.
- **Aggressive Reporting:** Some reporters may seek interviews immediately after the crime, at funerals, trials, sentencing, parole hearings, and anniversaries. They may phone or email you, approach you in public, find you through social media, or visit your home or workplace.
- **Lack of Control Over Where Your Information Gets Posted:** Once you release a statement, your information can be published in many places, such as newspapers, television, or social media.



# Tips for Speaking with the Media

- Decide whether you wish to give an interview, read a prepared statement, or release a written statement.
- It is important to consider whether you wish to deal with the media yourself, use a spokesperson, or have someone with media experience speak on your behalf. Some families appoint one member to act as the media spokesperson to control what is being said.
- It might also be helpful to have a friend or family member search media reports to buffer family members who may be more vulnerable. If a report is particularly negative, they can choose whether they want to view it.
- If you decide to do an interview, set boundaries and prepare a statement in advance. Be cautious about what is recorded or filmed. Once an interview is recorded, a photograph is taken, or an event filmed, you have little control over how it is used.



## Preparing for Interviews

- You can select the date, time, and location for a media interview.
- Ask the reporter what the story is about so you can be prepared to discuss the topic. When possible, ask a reporter to email questions to you in advance.
- Prepare some key talking points in advance and avoid making statements in the heat of the moment.
- Come up with 3 or 4 points you would like to get across, write them down, and say them right away during the interview. For example: "The one thing I really want to say is. . ." Return to those messages and repeat them in different forms whenever you can. Do not let the reporter derail or distract you from your original points.
- You have the ability to control the information you share. You can set limits and tell the reporter you won't discuss some things. Once you have said something to a reporter, you cannot take it back or expect them not to use it.

### More Resources

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# Interviewing 101

## *Saying No Is Okay*

- You can refuse to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable. It is okay to say, “I cannot answer that at this moment.”
- You can end an interview at any time. Try to be calm if you choose to cut the interview short.
- You can avoid a stressful atmosphere by speaking to only one reporter at a time.
- You can and should exclude young children from interviews.
- You can refuse to make your image public by conducting a television interview using a silhouette or doing a newspaper or radio interview without having your photograph taken.
- You can ask to have a support person present with you during and after the interview.

## *Conducting the Interview*

- Relax and take your time. Speak slowly and clearly.
- Listen to the entire question and make sure you understand the question before answering. Think about your answer before speaking.
- Be honest. If you don’t know the answer to something, say so. If you’re unsure, you can always say, “I don’t have enough information to fully answer your question.”
- Be consistent with your information.
- Never give false information or lie to a reporter. Likewise, do not guess or speculate about the event. Stick to what you know as fact.
- When you talk to a reporter, remember that you are also talking to everyone in their audience—possibly thousands of people.
- You can audiotape or videotape all interviews to ensure the accuracy of what you say.
- Never speak “off the record.” Everything you say during an interview is on the record. Do not say anything you would not be comfortable seeing in print. Once you have answered, stop talking.
- Get the media on your side. They may have information you have not been told; ask what they know.

## *After the Interview*

- Ask for support from family or friends.
- Ask for a copy of the article.
- If you are misquoted or there is a problem:
  - Demand a correction.
  - If necessary, file a complaint with a media outlet.
  - Let victims’ services or law enforcement know if you feel harassed by reporters.

This document was produced by Voices of September 11th  
with a grant from Public Safety Canada.

# Mental Health Considerations

## AFTER AN ACT OF MASS VIOLENCE

voices  
OF SEPTEMBER 11<sup>TH</sup>

Following acts of mass violence, many people experience similar reactions. It is important to know what to expect, how you can cope, and when you should seek professional help. This document provides recommendations based on what Voices of September 11th has learned from working with thousands of individuals victims' family members, survivors, and responders since 2001.

### *Common Reactions to Trauma*

- **Intense or unpredictable feelings.** You may feel sad, anxious, or nervous. You may feel irritable, angry, or moody, or you may experience feelings of guilt or self-blame.
- **Strains on your relationships.** Increased conflicts with friends, family members, and colleagues can occur. You might feel isolated or disengaged from your usual social life.
- **Physical symptoms.** You may have trouble sleeping or sleep too much. You may not have an appetite or begin overeating. You could have other physical symptoms like headaches, stomach aches, and chest pain. Seek medical attention if these symptoms persist or become severe.
- **Flashbacks.** You might experience vivid memories of the event that can occur out of the blue and may lead to physical reactions such as rapid heartbeat or sweating. They can make concentration and decision-making difficult.
- **Higher sensitivity.** Triggers such as sirens, loud noises, or burning smells can bring back memories of the traumatic event, creating heightened anxiety that it will happen again.



### *Danger Signals*

Seek professional help if these symptoms persist:

- Thinking about suicide or self-harm
- Being alone too much
- Not being able to talk to other people about what you are feeling
- Sudden changes in weight
- Continued trouble sleeping
- Using too much alcohol or other drugs (including prescription drugs)

NATIONAL SUICIDE  
PREVENTION HOTLINE

US: 1-800-273-8255  
CANADA: 1-833-456-4566

# Coping Tips and Techniques

## Getting Through the First Few Days and Weeks

- **Remember that there is no one “right way” to deal with everything you are feeling.** What’s important is to find a way that works for you, and be patient with yourself.
- **Rely on a social support system.** Reach out to family and friends with whom you feel close, or connect with others who may have shared the stressful event or have had similar experiences.
- **Limit news consumption.** Constant replay of a traumatic event can increase stress and anxiety and cause you to relive the event. Reduce your exposure to the news and social media.
- **Avoid making major life decisions if possible.** Big changes like switching jobs or careers, selling your home, and moving can be stressful and are even harder to adjust to directly after experiencing a traumatic event.
- **Express your emotions.** Holding in your feelings can be unhealthy and can prolong the recovery process. Cry when you need to and know that it’s okay to have moments of joy even after a trauma. It does not mean that you are “forgetting” those who suffered or died.
- **Use spirituality, meditation, or relaxation techniques.** Prayer, meditation, yoga, mindfulness, guided imagery, and other relaxing activities can all be effective means of relieving stress.
- **Talk about the traumatic experience with empathetic listeners.** Reach out to family members or friends, a support group, a spiritual leader, a counselor, or others whom you can confide in.
- **Take care of your mind and body.** Engage in relaxing activities to help you heal. Eat healthy food. Try to get regular exercise and sleep, and spend some time outdoors in nature. Avoid over-using alcohol, drugs, and participating in risky behaviors. Avoid stimulants like caffeine, sugar, or nicotine.

“If I didn’t have my friends around me, I don’t know how I would go through this.”

—Family member  
of 9/11 victim





# Coping Tips and Techniques

## Getting Through the Long Term

- **Heal at your own pace.** Individuals grieve differently and in their own time. It may take weeks, months, and in some cases, years to fully regain equilibrium.
- **Resume your daily routines.** Reestablishing your normal routines can help you regain a sense of control over your life and reduce anxiety.
- **Join a local support group.** A support group, led by a trained professional, can provide a safe place for you to exchange your thoughts and feelings and learn techniques on how to deal with the trauma.
- **Make meaning.** Take small steps to healing by committing to doing something personally meaningful and fulfilling every day. Doing even small, simple things that are enjoyable can make you feel better.
- **Give back.** Offering to help others, such as through volunteer work, can give you a sense of purpose and a shared goal with individuals who have similar interests.
- **Participate in a peer-to-peer network.** Peer support can create an inclusive place for you to exchange ideas and provide support to others who have a shared experience, knowing you are not alone.
- **Remember that the road to recovery is not a straight line.** Even after time has passed, you may experience a reawakening of intense feelings when reminded of the tragedy.
- **Find a way to commemorate.** Gathering with other family members, responders, and survivors at commemorative events, or establishing memorials, scholarships, and foundations to honor those who have died provides a meaningful way to promote healing in the lives of those who survived.



"Now my life is divided into before 9/11 and after 9/11. . . . Everything is sorted around it."

—9/11 Survivor

# *When to Seek Professional Help*

It is normal to experience anxiety, fear, deep sadness, and even nightmares after a traumatic event. If these symptoms do not seem to be getting better after several weeks, it may be time to seek professional help. Only a mental health professional can diagnose conditions like PTSD, depression, or anxiety, but it is important for you to be aware of what to watch for, so you know when to seek professional help.

## ***Recognizing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder***

Seek professional help if these symptoms persist for more than one month:

- Recurring intrusive, distressing memories of the event, flashbacks, and nightmares of the trauma
- Increased arousal and feeling on edge, including inability to sleep, concentrate, or function normally
- Persistent avoidance of all reminders of the trauma
- Feeling detached
- Persistent feelings of anger, fear, guilt, horror, or shame



## ***Recognizing Major Depression***

Seek professional help if the symptoms below persist for more than two weeks, or if you have thoughts of suicide or self-harm:

- Sad mood almost all day, every day
- Loss of interest or pleasure
- Marked changes in appetite and weight
- Inability to sleep or sleeping too much
- Fatigue and loss of energy
- Feelings of worthlessness or guilt
- Poor concentration, inability to think, or indecisiveness

# When to Seek Professional Help

"I was feeling anxiety and had panic attacks after seeing the Paris attacks on television. People that weren't there don't get it and tell me to get over it."

—9/11 Survivor

## Recognizing Panic Attacks

Many panic attacks are sudden periods of intense fear that come on quickly and reach their peak within minutes. Talk to a mental health professional if any of the following panic attack symptoms persist or become troublesome:

- Heart palpitations
- Sweating
- Trembling or shaking
- Sensations or shortness of breath, smothering, or choking
- Feelings of impending doom
- Feelings of being out of control

## Recognizing Anxiety Disorders

Many types of anxiety disorders could develop or be made worse by traumatic events, such as panic disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, and phobias.

Talk to a mental health professional if any of the following symptoms persist or become troublesome:

- Excessive worry
- Irritability or outbursts
- Sleep disturbance
- Difficulty concentrating
- Restlessness or feeling on edge
- Muscle tension
- Fatigue

## More Resources

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# Tips for Health Care Practitioners

PROVIDING CARE TO THOSE AFFECTED  
BY MASS VIOLENCE

voices  
OF SEPTEMBER 11<sup>TH</sup>

Practitioners can greatly reduce survivors' fear and anxiety through compassionate communication and empathy. Understand that this is stressful work even for the well-trained. You may be exposed to scenes of human remains and suffering, massive destruction, and life-and-death decision making, all while you yourself are in harm's way. You may endure intense workloads and long hours with limited resources, often while being separated from your own family and support network.

## *Tips for Interacting with Survivors and Victims' Family Members*

- Make sure you have clear identification and explain your role.
- Give them a way to reach you so they feel connected to help.
- Speak clearly and offer to write things down on their behalf.
- Remember that no matter how global the event seems, it will be local and immediate to the one being impacted.
- Assess those impacted for immediate needs, and establish a sense of safety for the survivor.
- Act as a liaison or buffer between a survivor and the media if needed.
- Be sensitive to cultural norms and differences, including dietary needs.
- Understand that diverse geographic locations and multiple languages can present challenges.
- Be aware of the impact that the loss of colleagues can have on survivors.
- Don't ignore extended family relationships such as grandparents, adult siblings, cousins, and friends of the family.
- ALWAYS be truthful. If you don't know an answer, say so, and try to get information if it is possible.



### *More Resources*

**Voices of September 11th**  
[www.voicesofseptember11.org](http://www.voicesofseptember11.org)



# Assessing Immediate Needs

- Check for bodily harm and other medical needs.
- Ensure access to clean water and clean air.
- Determine whether the person has safe housing.
- Ensure that the person has adequate food.
- Help reestablish connections with other family members and pets.
- Observe other physical reactions, such as impaired speech or thinking and loss of clarity.
- Watch for sudden movement or shaking.
- Inquire about a need for a spiritual connection.
- Assess immediate financial needs.
- Determine whether the person had experienced any previous traumas.
- Determine whether the person is currently experiencing other life stresses, such as unemployment, a recent move, other deaths, or divorce.
- Try to determine if the person is in danger of hurting themselves or anyone else.
- Connect the individual with short-term resources such as FEMA, Red Cross, the medical tent (if remote), hospitals, mental health providers, and police or other law enforcement.



# Tips for Health Care Practitioners

## *Helping Survivors and Victims' Families Navigate the Legal Process*

It often falls on practitioners and responders to assist survivors and victims' families with complex legal systems relating to death and traumatic events.

- Coordinate with victim advocacy organizations that specialize in aiding survivors of traumatic events both on the Federal level, such as the U.S. Office of Victims of Crime, and the local or nongovernmental organization level, such as the National Organization for Victim Assistance (NOVA).
- Know the rules of death notification in your jurisdiction.
- Know the agencies that can help survivors and victims' families navigate the court system and legal proceedings for help with death certificates, financial liabilities, insurance, etc.
- Be prepared to provide support to those who need to testify, provide testimony, or prepare affidavits.
- Prepare for unexpected, and potentially negative, outcomes, such as release of a suspect or defeat of legislation aimed at providing compensation to those affected or preventing future similar events.

"The healing continues, and over time, the loss is more manageable. You need to know you can keep a space in your heart for the one you lost and leave it there, and you can go on with the rest of your life. You never get rid of the grief, but it does lessen over time."

—9/11 mental health practitioner

## *Managing Your Stress*

- Know your own signs of stress and practice methods of self-care.
- Foster a team culture.
- Establish scheduled peer-to-peer check-ins.
- Take time for yourself. Disconnect sometimes. Engage in hobbies.
- Take time to breathe and do physical activities.
- Practice healthy sleeping and eating habits.
- Have a debriefing plan and schedule, and stick to it.
- Limit work hours and shifts to manage exposure to highly intense situations.

# Taking Care of Yourself: Things to Watch For

## ***Vicarious Trauma***

If you interact with people who have experienced trauma, you could be at risk for developing what is known as vicarious trauma through your empathetic engagement with traumatized individuals. Symptoms of vicarious trauma are similar to those of PTSD listed above and may also affect your sense of safety, ability to trust, and self-esteem.

Reducing the number of hours you spend working directly with traumatized individuals may help reduce your symptoms. Seek professional help if symptoms persist.



After the Oklahoma City bombing, nearly 65% of mental health responders reported some level of psychological distress related to their professional role.

(Wee & Meyers, 2002)

## ***Compassion Fatigue***

Over time, some professionals in helping fields may experience an erosion of their emotions in which they begin to lose their ability to feel empathy after hearing or witnessing so many traumatic stories. They start to feel as if they have “nothing left to give,” and may develop a negative world view. This is known as Compassion Fatigue. Use the coping tips presented in the Mental Health Considerations tip sheet to reduce symptoms, and seek professional help if symptoms persist.

## ***Burnout***

Over time, you may grow weary from working in a highly stressful environment. You may feel emotionally exhausted and cynical, and you may lose interest in doing your best work. This is known as burnout. Some warning signs to watch for are:

- Fatigue
- Depression
- Negative feelings about work
- Increased cynicism
- Loss of hope
- Inappropriate sharing of personal material
- Using unhealthy coping skills
- Memory loss

## ***Ways to Prevent Burnout***

- Implementing and enforcing policies and procedures to prevent personnel from overworking themselves
- Engaging in positive self-focusing activities (hobbies, journaling, walking, exercise)
- Asking to be reassigned

# Considerations for the Long Term

The road to recovery for a community after a mass violence event is longer than most people would imagine. All stakeholders—including health care practitioners, first responders, elected officials, survivors, victims' family members, and other community members—should be involved in the process of rebuilding the community. In addition, there are other factors you must consider for longterm recovery, such as how to provide continuity of care in the vacuum left behind after voluntary organizations and government agencies leave the area, as well as how to take care of yourself.

- Participate in community building events, including anniversary and other memorialization activities. These events empower the community to establish a new normal.
- Acknowledge all stakeholders and their roles and objectives. There may be some inherent conflicts that need to be acknowledged and incorporated into practices developed.
- Know where to refer victims' families for services after the initial responders and service providers leave. Watch for signs of PTSD, which may develop in the months following a trauma.
- Beware of burnout for yourself or coworkers.
- Reach out for help if you are having trouble.
- Try to establish a sense of hope, safety, and comfort. The ability to link together services and connections with social support is critical to community resilience.



## *Recognizing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*

Seek professional help if these symptoms persist for more than one month:

- Recurring intrusive, distressing memories of the event, flashbacks, and nightmares of the trauma
- Increased arousal and feeling on edge, including inability to sleep, concentrate, or function normally
- Persistent avoidance of all reminders of the trauma
- Feeling detached
- Persistent feelings of anger, fear, guilt, horror, or shame

This document was produced by Voices of September 11th  
with a grant from Public Safety Canada.



# Tips for First Responders and Recovery Workers

## RESPONDING TO A MASS VIOLENCE EVENT

voices  
OF SEPTEMBER 11<sup>TH</sup>

In the aftermath of a tragedy or act of mass violence, responders from various levels of government and other organizations will immediately deploy. This includes, but is not limited to, fire, police, law enforcement, emergency management, medical services, and others who respond on location at the time of the event. The scene of a terrorist attack or other act of mass violence is a crime scene and must be protected as such.

Engaging in a response and recovery effort is stressful, even for those who are well-trained. However, actions can be taken to mitigate the long-term impact on those responding. This document provides recommendations based on what Voices of September 11th has learned from working with thousands of responders since 2001.

### *Considerations for Leaders*

It is common for responders to endure intense workloads and long hours with limited resources, often while being separated from their family and support network. They may be exposed to scenes of human remains and suffering, massive destruction, and life-and-death decision making, all while in harm's way.

Keep in mind there are limits to how many hours the human body can continue to function under these conditions.

- Immediately set up a chain of command
- Implement policies and procedures for logging workers into and out of the disaster site
- Ensure responders have the proper training for their job assignment
- Impose limits to manage responders' hours so they do not overextend themselves
- Incorporate required breaks into their work schedule
- Provide briefings for workers when they enter the site
- Conduct debriefings at the end of each shift
- Offer mental health support services when needed
- Hire outside law enforcement to manage protocols and security
- Educate responders about department policy regarding interacting with the media and politicians, and be aware of the risks



"A lot of the guys didn't even go home. They went to their house and showered, rested for a few minutes, and then went back to the site."

—Responder

# Managing Responders' Physical Health

Explosions, fires, and building collapses present unique hazards to first responders, who need to be protected from short- and long-term health effects.

- Provide personal protective equipment
- Provide wash stations and laundry facilities, if appropriate
- Follow decontamination procedures before leaving the site
- Take care not to contaminate respite areas and spaces where food is served
- Ensure communications equipment is functioning properly

## Managing Your Workload

Responders often work long hours and have increased responsibilities that require them to work multiple days in the rescue and recovery effort.

- Know the incident command system and protocols
- Familiarize yourself with your roles and responsibilities and ensure you have the proper training to fulfill your duties
- Participate in a daily briefing prior to the beginning of each shift
- Limit shifts to no longer than 12 hours
- Limit the number of consecutive days spent on the site
- Take regular breaks
- Work in teams and limit the amount of time spent working alone
- Create a buddy system and get to know each other's skills and expertise
- Take time for yourself
- Participate in a daily mental health debriefing at the end of each shift
- Stay connected with your family and friends, and separate your personal life from your work life
- Mentally disconnect from the disaster site as completely as possible during downtime
- Know your personal signs of stress and practice stress management
- Seek professional help if needed



"Psychologists . . . would come and speak to us, but they would come down and speak to us when we were in the cafeteria, which got kind of annoying. We just wanted to be left alone. A lot of times we would tell them, 'Look, guys, we are just in here trying to get a quick bite to eat, getting a little respite from outside. We don't really want to talk about this right now.'"

—Responder

# Managing Stress Levels

Responders have a high probability of developing mental health conditions, yet are often the last to seek help for work-related stress. They are especially at risk if they have experienced prolonged separation from loved ones, endured life-threatening situations, or have previously witnessed trauma. The best protection from stress is to be prepared for the job and strengthen stress management skills before responding to a disaster.

## Considerations for Leaders

It is critical for leaders to recognize that responders are at high risk for developing mental health conditions and to destigmatize mental health treatment and provide their employees with appropriate support, including:

- Confidential mental health counseling
- Chaplain/spiritual care
- Peer-to-peer support network
- Alternative therapies, such as massage, meditation, or reiki

## Tips for Managing Stress

- Know your personal signs of stress
- Plan how you will address major stressors associated with your response to disasters
- Take time for yourself and spend time with family and friends
- Practice healthy sleep behaviors
- Eat nutritiously and avoid excessive junk food, caffeine, and alcohol
- Engage in stress-releasing activities, such as stretching, walking, reading, or listening to music



Seek IMMEDIATE medical attention for any of the following symptoms:	Seek help if any of these signs persist or become severe:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Chest pain</li><li>• Difficulty breathing</li><li>• Severe pain</li><li>• Symptoms of shock (shallow breathing, rapid or weak pulse, nausea, shivering, pale and moist skin, mental confusion, and dilated pupils)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Physical effects, such as rapid heart rate, gastrointestinal distress, trouble sleeping, or nightmares</li><li>• Strong negative emotions like anger, fear, or deep sadness</li><li>• Confusion or disorientation</li><li>• Risky behavior, including increased use of alcohol or other drugs</li><li>• Social conflicts or isolation</li></ul>

# Taking Care of Yourself: Things to Watch For

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(Wee & Meyers, 2002)

## *Compassion Fatigue*

Over time, some professionals in helping fields may experience an erosion of their emotions in which they begin to lose their ability to feel empathy after hearing or witnessing so many traumatic stories. They start to feel as if they have “nothing left to give,” and may develop a negative world view. This is known as compassion fatigue. Use the coping tips presented in the Mental Health Considerations tip sheet to reduce symptoms, and seek professional help if symptoms persist.

## *Burnout*

Over time, you may grow weary from working in a highly stressful environment. You may feel emotionally exhausted and cynical, and you may lose interest in doing your best work. This is known as burnout. Some warning signs to watch for are:

- Fatigue
- Depression
- Negative feelings about work
- Increased cynicism
- Loss of hope
- Inappropriate sharing of personal material
- Using unhealthy coping skills
- Memory loss

## *Ways to Prevent Burnout*

- Implementing and enforcing policies and procedures to prevent personnel from overworking themselves
- Engaging in positive self-focusing activities (hobbies, journaling, walking, exercise)
- Asking to be reassigned



# Additional Considerations

## *Recognizing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*

First responders are more likely than the general public to develop PTSD. Seek professional help if these symptoms persist for more than one month:

- Recurring intrusive, distressing memories of the event, flashbacks, and nightmares of the trauma
- Increased arousal and feeling on edge, including inability to sleep, concentrate, or function normally
- Persistent avoidance of all reminders of the trauma
- Feeling detached
- Persistent feelings of anger, fear, guilt, horror, or shame

## *Training*

Studies from previous disasters have shown that being well-trained helps to protect responders' psychological well-being and resilience. Responders should have training in the following areas, as appropriate for their role, prior to being assigned to a mass violence response:

- Identifying victims
- Conducting compassionate death notifications
- Securing a crime scene
- Protecting evidence and the chain of custody
- Apprehending a suspect
- Rendering first aid

## *More Resources*

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[voicesofseptember11.org](http://voicesofseptember11.org)

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# *Tips for Survivors*

## OF MASS VIOLENCE

**voices**  
OF SEPTEMBER 11<sup>TH</sup>

Those who survive an act of mass violence may have witnessed horrific scenes of death, injury, and destruction. They may have narrowly escaped or been injured themselves. They will undoubtedly be changed by the experience and will need guidance for what to do next and how to cope in the days ahead. This document provides recommendations based on what Voices of September 11th has learned from working with thousands of survivors since 2001.

### *What to Do in the Immediate Aftermath*

- If you are or may be injured, seek medical help immediately.
- Find a safe place to stay.
- Contact your family and affiliates to let them know your whereabouts, and if you are safe or injured.
- Secure your identification and any other papers you may need, such as insurance, bank, property, and medical records.
- Notify local authorities, such as law enforcement and onsite response teams about your personal experience. It is important for survivors and witnesses to be accounted for and to provide details about the event that will aid in the investigation.
- Avoid speaking to the media right away. Media onsite often approach survivors to provide firsthand accounts at a time when they may be distraught following a life-threatening experience. These clips and images may be replayed for months to come. Consider speaking to media at a time when you can think more clearly.

### *After You Are in a Safe Place*

- Identify trusted family and friends to serve as your intermediary and attend to your basic needs.
- Identify an ongoing resource for accurate information.
- Document important information, such as incoming phone calls, processes, and procedures.
- Limit overexposure to the media, including social media and television reports.
- Visit the Family Assistance Center or Reunification Center to obtain accurate information, access to resources, and support services.
- If you left the scene without your personal belongings, file a police report with detailed descriptions of the items you left behind.
- Talk to a counselor, clergy member, friend, or family member that you can depend on for long-term support.



# Common Reactions to Traumatic Events

It is common to experience a range of emotions after experiencing a traumatic event, including fear, anger, anxiety, difficulty paying attention, depression, and disrupted sleep. It is important to monitor both your physical and emotional health.

Listed here are some of the most common reactions in the four areas where stress usually shows up. However, you should be alert for ANY unusual stress responses after a traumatic event, and seek professional help if symptoms persist or are troublesome.

## Common Emotional Reactions

You may feel:

- Anxious or fearful
- Overwhelmed by sadness
- Angry
- Guilty, even when you had no control over the event
- Heroic, like you can do anything
- Like you have too much energy or no energy at all
- Disconnected, not caring about anything or anyone
- Numb, unable to feel either joy or sadness

"I was eligible for leave, but I didn't take it, because I was like, 'I am here, and they aren't, and I shouldn't take that help,' and 3 to 4 years later realized I had pretty heavy survivor's guilt."

—9/11 Survivor



## Common Physical Reactions

- Stomachaches, nausea, or diarrhea
- Headaches or other physical pains for no clear reason
- Eating too much or too little
- Sweating or having chills
- Tremors (shaking) or muscle twitches
- Being jumpy or easily startled
- Trouble falling asleep, staying asleep, sleeping too much, or trouble relaxing
- Racing heartbeat
- Changes in sex drive
- Sensitivity to noises or smells



# Common Reactions to Traumatic Events

## Common Cognitive Reactions

You may experience problems in your thinking, such as:

- Trouble remembering things
- Difficulty thinking clearly and concentrating
- Feeling confused
- Worrying a lot
- Difficulty making decisions
- Difficulty talking about what happened or listening to others

"Individuals grieve in their own way and in their own time."

—Mary Fetchet, co-founder of  
Voices of September 11th

## Taking Care of Your Mind and Body

- Engage in relaxing activities
- Eat healthy food
- Try to get regular exercise and sleep
- Spend some time outdoors and enjoy nature
- Avoid over-using alcohol or drugs and participating in risky behaviors
- Avoid stimulants like caffeine, sugar, or nicotine

## Common Behavioral Reactions

- Noticing an increase or decrease in your energy and activity levels
- Using alcohol, tobacco, illegal drugs, or even prescription medications in an attempt to reduce distressing feelings or to forget
- Outbursts of anger, feeling irritated, and blaming other people for everything
- Difficulty accepting help or helping others
- Difficulty trusting others
- Problems at school or work
- Wanting to be alone most of the time and isolating yourself





# Coping Tips and Techniques

- **Remember that there is no one “right way” to deal with everything you are feeling.** What’s important is to find a way that works for you, and be patient with yourself.
- **Limit news consumption.** Constant replay of a traumatic event can increase stress and anxiety and cause you to relive the event. Reduce your exposure to the news and social media.
- **Express your emotions.** Holding in your feelings can be unhealthy and can prolong the recovery process. Cry when you need to and know that it’s okay to have moments of joy even after a trauma. It does not mean that you are “forgetting” those who suffered or died.
- **Use spirituality, meditation, or relaxation techniques.** Prayer, meditation, yoga, mindfulness, guided imagery, and other relaxing activities can all be effective means of relieving stress.
- **Resume your daily routines.** Reestablishing your normal routines can help you.



## Asking for Help

- **Rely on a social support system.** Reach out to family and friends with whom you feel close, or connect with others who have shared a similar situation.
- **Talk or write about your experience.** Express what you are feeling in whatever ways feel comfortable to you. Some examples are keeping a diary, engaging in a creative activity, or talking with people who are empathetic.
- **Don’t hesitate to contact professional help.** Trained professionals will be able to provide the support needed to promote healing and recovery in your life.
- **Speak with a financial advisor.** If you need help or advice in financial matters, reach out to a professional financial advisor to help guide your financial decisions and connect you with useful resources.

### More Resources

**Voices of September 11th**  
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