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Taking Care of Ourselves, Our Families and Our Communities

*Responding to the Stress of
Terrorism and Armed Conflicts*

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Taking Care of Ourselves, Our Families and Our Communities

Terrorist attacks, acts of war, and sudden violent events such as disasters challenge our coping skills, even if we only witness them on television. If they touch our lives more closely (for example, if they occur near where we live, or affect people we know) they can cause a lot of distress, fear and anxiety. We worry about our own safety, the safety of our loved ones and our community.

Events of this kind can also stir up memories and feelings about violent or painful events that we may have experienced in the past: the death of a family member or friend in an accident; a serious illness or injury; the loss of a job; family violence or sexual assault. And of course, the stress of a large-scale disaster can make any stressful circumstances we are currently facing more difficult to handle.

It is important to be aware that stressful feelings are normal when our lives are touched by violent acts, and that there are steps we can take to feel better.

Things to Keep in Mind

It is important for you as a parent, caregiver, teacher, or community leader to know that:

- People of all ages are strong and resilient, and most recover within a short period of time.
- You have knowledge and experience that can help your family and your community cope with the stresses triggered by violent events.
- Reassuring people about their safety and explaining what measures are being taken to protect them is an important step in helping them cope.
- Parents', caregivers' and community leaders' own responses to an event strongly influence children's and community members' ability to recover.

- The basic information provided below will help you help others.

Feelings and Reactions to Violent Events

In the wake of violent events such as a terrorist attack, a disaster or other stressful event, our reactions can:

Affect us physically: For example, we may have headaches, back pain, stomach aches, diarrhea, problems with sleeping, tightness in neck and shoulders, low energy or general tiredness, loss of appetite or tendency to eat more "comfort foods" or use more alcohol, drugs and tobacco.

Affect us emotionally: For example, we may feel sad, angry, guilty, helpless, numb, confused, discouraged, worried and anxious about the future, and afraid that a similar event may reoccur. Feelings can come and go like the tides, building up then fading away, only to come back and fade away again. They can also come out of the blue when we least expect it.

Affect our thinking: For example, it may be hard to concentrate, to stop thinking about the events, hard to remember day-to-day things. Memories of other sad or difficult events from the past may surface. Thoughts, like feelings, can also come out of the blue, while reading, talking, having a meeting, driving, etc.

Affect our sense of safety: For example, we may find it hard to leave home or loved ones; we may tend to overprotect our children; or, we may be nervous about travelling by plane.

These reactions are normal in situations of stress

Most of us have had some of these reactions. Some of us may feel them more strongly or more often than others, but it is reassuring to know

that these are common reactions when people experience a very stressful event. In other words, you are not alone.

Stressful events, even major crises, are part of life. In most cases, our life experience has given us the strengths and skills we need to gradually work through our feelings and reactions. Friends and family can help. Here are some healthy ways of looking after both ourselves and one another:

Taking care of ourselves

- Take breaks from the media reports and from thinking and talking about the events.
- Take time to relax and exercise. This will help decrease stress and tension and help you be more alert, sleep and eat better, and get back on track.
- Talk with friends, relatives, co-workers, teachers or leaders of your faith community. Talk about your thoughts, feelings and reactions. Comfort one another. Talking with others can make you feel less alone and help you sort out reactions to the events. Remember to talk about the normal issues and pleasures of your life as well - don't let disaster take over every conversation.
- Some may be quite affected by these events, others less. Patience and understanding with one another are two of the best ways to help.
- Be careful about making major decisions if you are very upset. Give yourself a chance to think it over.
- Get back to your daily routine. Do things you enjoy to help restore a sense of safety and control.
- Watch what you eat. Eat healthy foods. For ideas, see Canada's Food Guide, <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/nutrition/>.
- Be physically active, doing something you enjoy. (For ideas, see Canada's Physical Activity Guide, www.paguide.com or call 1-888-334-9769.)

- Don't use alcohol or drugs to numb your feelings. This can set up an unhealthy pattern and can lead to more serious problems down the road.
- Get a good night's sleep.

Taking care of our families

- Reassure family members who may be worried about their safety and about the future.
- Take time to talk about the events.
- Everybody needs to be heard and understood.
- Relax together. For example, go to a movie or for a meal. Go bowling. Remember, taking time out is not a cop-out.
- Visit with relatives and friends.

Taking care of children and teenagers

Children and teenagers will need our help. Other pamphlets in this series, "**Helping Your Child Cope**" and "**Helping Your Teens Cope**," offer some helpful hints on what to expect and what to do for children and youth.

Taking care of older relatives

Today's seniors are an independent, resourceful group who have weathered many storms. Terrorist incidents and news about war may trigger memories of previous painful experiences. Some may be concerned about their safety and about the future. Others may feel sad, confused and disorganized for a while. Coping may be more difficult for seniors suffering from depression, thinking and memory problems, those living alone or those with few social supports.

You can help by:

- Visiting older people: parents, friends, relatives, neighbours.
- Talking with them about their thoughts, feelings and reactions.

- Including them in social and recreational activities.
- Reassuring them that you are available should they want to talk or need help.

Taking Care of Our Communities

- Take part in information meetings about the events.
- Attend memorials, candlelight vigils.
- Attend inter-religious events.
- Don't let racism poison your community. When people are afraid or angry, they often want to blame and punish someone.

Some things you can do to help fight racism:

- Reflect on your own feelings and attitudes. Make sure that none of your words or actions give the impression that you approve of racism.
- Show your children and adolescents through your words and actions that racism is not okay, and that having people from different backgrounds and religions in a community enriches it.
- Confront racism in a way that promotes acceptance and understanding in your community. For information and ideas, see the Multiculturalism program at the Department of Canadian Heritage (www.pch.gc.ca/multi/).
- Help any group you are part of to be fair, accepting and understanding.

Delayed Reactions

Some of us react strongly at the time stressful events happen. Others react later, after a few days or even a few weeks. Delayed reactions can be confusing. Remember, not everyone reacts the same way. Following the tips on self-care given above will help you deal with delayed reactions.

Community Resources to Call on for Help

If you have tried these suggestions and you still feel overwhelmed and unable to cope, it may be time to speak to a health professional such as a psychologist, family doctor, psychiatrist, social worker or nurse.

Other Booklets in This Series

Responding to the Stress of Terrorism and Armed Conflicts: Helping Your Child Cope

Responding to the Stress of Terrorism and Armed Conflicts: Helping Your Teens Cope

Responding to the Stress of Terrorism and Armed Conflicts: Self-Care for Caregivers

Acknowledgments

This pamphlet was developed following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, using information from Health Canada together with input from a network of professional and voluntary associations concerned about mental health and the stress arising from terrorism and armed conflict.

Network Members

- Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists
- Canadian Association of Social Workers
- Canadian Healthcare Association
- Canadian Medical Association
- Canadian Mental Health Association
- Canadian Nurses Association
- Canadian Paediatric Society
- Canadian Pharmacists Association
- Canadian Psychiatric Association
- Canadian Psychological Association
- Canadian Public Health Association
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