

It's Hard To Not Be Anxious When Nowhere Feels Safe Anymore

Following two mass shootings in public spaces, therapists share guidance for overcoming this new kind of fear.



MARK RALSTON VIA GETTY IMAGES – Mourners visit a memorial for the victims of the mass shooting in El Paso, Texas.

As the tragic news of mass shootings in El Paso, Texas, and Dayton, Ohio, dominates the news cycle, Americans confront a rising sense of unease. Sources of the anxiety include issues like white supremacy, gun control, terrorism and the way our society views mental illness.

But there's also a personal mental health component.



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Whenever I'm in a public space, I think about what would happen if a mass shooting broke out. It's a constant, low-level anxiety that follows me everywhere. I wonder if it's just me. I don't think it is.

A recent BuzzFeed report described a “new kind of anxiety and fear” in our era — a feeling that wherever you go, you might be making yourself unsafe and vulnerable to a mass attack. This is a natural response to highly publicized traumatic events.

“It is a core principle of human psychology that we need to feel like our world is relatively orderly and predictable,” Dr. Victor Schwartz, chief medical officer at the Jed Foundation, a New York-based mental health organization, told HuffPost.

“We look for patterns in our experience to help us organize things so that we are able to navigate day-to-day life,” he said. “People and our environment are supposed to behave in more-or-less expected ways: People drive their cars on the street in the way we expect, the days and months follow predictable patterns allowing us to know what to wear at different times of the year.”

When events like mass shootings disturb our sense of order and expectations, this disrupts the notion that the world is a safe and orderly place with people behaving the way they're meant to. This can cause major anxiety.

“One of the reasons we call these events ‘terrorism’ is that their perpetrators are trying to frighten us,” Schwartz said. “They are terrible tragedies but just as much, the actions are meant to scare us into not trusting each other and not caring for each other. So it is not surprising that people will feel not only frightened of recurring events but also our sense of the way things are meant to work; our sense of our world being safe and supportive gets disrupted, as well.”

So what can you do when you feel like no place is safe? Schwartz and other mental health experts discussed with HuffPost the best ways to cope with this kind of anxiety.

Talk About It

It may feel tempting to isolate yourself when you're feeling anxious, but reaching out and connecting with others can be very helpful.

"Talk about and process the event with people who can offer you support. This should be someone who will listen like a good friend, family member or even your therapist," advised Christen Sistrunk, a licensed professional counselor in Texas who specializes in treating anxiety disorders.

He added, "Don't reach out using technology, make sure to connect with people face-to-face."

Michelle Riba, a professor of psychiatry and associate director of the University of Michigan Depression Center, noted that communities like religious groups or school groups often band together in the aftermath of traumatic events to send well wishes to victims, pray and even discuss related issues like white supremacy or mental health. Engaging with the communities in your life is another great way to cope with negative feelings.

"These are complicated issues," said Riba, a former president of the American Psychiatric Association. "It can help us all to talk about them and envision some clear pathway forward."

Take A Break From The News

Just taking an hour or two away from the constant updates and information on TV and social media can be very beneficial. You're not an awful person for needing a reprieve, you're human.

"When tragic events happen, they tend to be all we hear about on the news and even flood social media," Sistrunk said. "We can literally be overwhelmed with a constant reminder, keeping these events and the anxiety and fear in the forefront of our minds."

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- DR. VICTOR SCHWARTZ

Schwartz said it's important to recognize that while these events are terrible tragedies — and feeling sad, angry and scared is very normal — the odds that you will personally experience a mass shooting remain low.

"The psychological distress comes from both the recognition of the tragedy but also the scope — many people killed or injured at once completely out of the typical order of things," he said.

Schwartz compared this fear to the way many are afraid of flying, even though airplanes are extremely safe and air travel is less risky than driving. Plane crashes are bigger news stories than car accidents, so reading about those rare events makes it harder to put them in perspective.

"With this in mind, while it is sensible to keep updated about the news, watching repeated reviews and portrayals of the events tends to be unhelpful and just feed our sense of sadness and fear," he said. "So limiting our exposure to news reports can be helpful. So can limiting the visual images from the locations or of the events."

Go Out And Do Things

If everyday activities like going to the store or movie theater make you feel anxious, it may be tempting to avoid those things, but this is actually counterproductive.

"It's better to get out and start doing things as opposed to avoiding people, places things or situations," said Sistrunk. He added that the best way to take care of yourself is to continue to live your life and do things that make you feel happy.

"One way to maintain a sense of personal order and enhance our sense of control is to try to maintain our personal routines as much as possible: Working, eating healthfully, sleeping and exercising will all help us feel well and maintain our sense of balance and control," Schwartz said.



MARIO TAMA VIA GETTY IMAGES

Be Aware Of Your Thoughts

While it's good to remind yourself that your feelings are valid, you don't want to let your emotions direct your life in an unhealthy way.

"I would encourage everyone to support themselves by taking deep breaths and becoming an observer of their thoughts," said Nicole Bentley, a licensed therapist and intake coordinator at Cityscape Counseling in Chicago. "Noticing our thought patterns gives us the freedom to respond to our thoughts in more helpful ways. If there are no signs of danger but one's mind is racing in fear, they can choose to re-focus their attention on something in the present moment."

Bentley recommended practicing mindfulness by purposefully paying attention to the present moment in a judgment-free way and engaging in breathing exercises like exhaling longer than you inhale.

You can also try some grounding exercises if you find that you're starting to

panic. Mentally take stock of your surroundings. For example, notice what color the ground is or make a note of what type of outfit you're wearing. Do this until you feel like you're brought back to the present moment.

Get Involved

It's natural to feel powerless after traumatic events like mass shootings, and this can feed into a sense of anxiety about going into public spaces. But there are ways to overcome that feeling of no control.

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- SCHWARTZ

"If you can take action to address issues related to the tragedies, it can help dispel the feelings of helplessness," Schwartz said. "Become involved in a volunteer or organization or activity, donate time and money to groups working to address related social and political concerns."

He added, "It was comforting to note so many citizens of El Paso who lined up to donate blood after the shooting there. This was not only the civically responsible thing to do but likely made the people donating feel better — more in control — that they could 'do something.' Helping others and not being helpless helps us too."

Take Note Of Your Surroundings

Another way to reassume a sense of control is to take stock of the things within your power when you go into public spaces.

"It behooves us all as we go into crowded places to look where the exit signs are," Riba said. "Just like when you get on planes and they tell you what to do in an emergency, it's probably helpful to think about that in other places. It can help people to think through different scenarios — What would I do? Who would I call?"

Reach Out For Help

Schwartz said that while it's "natural to feel sadness, anger, anxiety and general distress after tragedies such as these, if the feelings are not easing as time passes, or are getting worse or are significantly interfering with your ability to concentrate, sleep, work or relate to others, you might be struggling with a more serious difficulty like post-traumatic stress."

If you're experiencing any of these difficulties, it's important to seek professional help. Many employers and communities offer mental health resources. If you're feeling as though you might act in a way that harms yourself or someone else, call a support line like the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-8255) or Crisis Text Line by texting "start" to 741-741.

Source:

https://www.huffpost.com/entry/anxiety-public-unsafe-shootings_l_5d487286e4b0acb57fd0f018

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