



OVC Handbook for

Coping

After
Terrorism

A Guide to Healing and Recovery

September 2001

Office for Victims of Crime
OVC
Advocating for the Fair
Treatment of Crime Victims

**U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Justice Programs**
810 Seventh Street NW.
Washington, DC 20531

John Ashcroft
Attorney General

**Office of Justice Programs
World Wide Web Home Page**
www.ojp.usdoj.gov

**Office for Victims of Crime
World Wide Web Home Page**
www.ojp.usdoj.gov/ovc

For grant and funding information contact
U.S. Department of Justice Response Center
1-800-421-6770

OVC Resource Center
1-800-627-6872
(TTY 1-877-712-9279)
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www.ncjrs.org

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MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

The terrorist acts of September 11, 2001, have deeply shaken our sense of safety, security, and emotional well-being. Every one of us has been changed forever by this horrible tragedy, but we are a resilient Nation, strong in our patriotism and determined in our resolve to find ways to cope with our losses.

It is difficult to try to comprehend these heinous acts that were perpetrated against innocent people going about their daily business. It is hard to accept the profound sense of loss, and it is difficult to cope with the raw emotions felt in the wake of this devastating act of inhumanity.

We at the Office for Victims of Crime will never understand the depths of your despair, but we have relied on the experiences of other terrorism victims and the expertise of mental health, crisis counseling, and victim assistance professionals to prepare this handbook for you.

Our office grieves with all who have lost loved ones. We pledge our determination to be sensitive to your needs and to seek justice on behalf of all who were injured or killed as a result of the attacks on Americans and our country's way of life.

John W. Gillis, Director
Office for Victims of Crime

COPING AFTER TERRORISM

The information in this handbook is intended to help you understand your reactions to an act of terrorism or mass violence. It is not intended to be a substitute for the role of professionals with expertise in counseling trauma victims.

Nothing in life can prepare you for the horror of an act of terrorism that robs you of your sense of security and, in some instances, a loved one. No one expects such a thing to happen. Violent crime is an abnormal event, and terrorism is even more rare. The normal reactions to this type of traumatic disaster include a wide range of powerful feelings that may feel abnormal to the person having them or seem strange to those who have not gone through such a disaster. You may feel like something is wrong with you and that the terrible pain will never ease up.

Recovering from a traumatic event will take a long time and will not be easy. Everyone responds differently to trauma. No one reacts in a right or wrong way—just differently. It will help your recovery process if you do not expect too much of yourself and of others.

Reactions to a Traumatic Disaster

Shock and Numbness

At first you may be in a state of shock and may feel numb and confused. You also may feel detached—as if you are watching a movie or having a bad dream that will not end. This numbness protects you from feeling the full impact of what has happened all at once.

Intense Emotion

You may feel overpowered by sorrow and grief. As shock begins to wear off, it is not unusual to feel intense grief and cry uncontrollably. While some parts of our society frown on emotional behavior, this emotional release is an important part of grieving for most people. It is unhealthy to hold back or “swallow” your painful feelings and can actually make the grieving process last longer. If you are uncomfortable with these feelings, you may want to seek help from a counselor or minister or other victims who understand what you are going through.

Fear

You may feel intense fear and startle easily, become extremely anxious when you leave your home or are alone, or experience waves of panic. Someone you love has been suddenly and violently killed while going about his or her daily life. You had no time to prepare psychologically for such an incident, so you may feel intense anxiety and horror. You may be afraid that the terrorist will return and harm you or your loved ones again. Crime shatters normal feelings of security and trust and the sense of being able to control events. Once you have been harmed by crime, it is natural to be afraid and suspicious of others. These feelings will go away or lessen over time.

Guilt

Victims who were injured in the traumatic disaster want to understand why the crime happened, and families wonder why they lost a loved one. Some people find it easier to accept what happened if they can blame themselves in some way. This is a normal way of trying to once again feel a sense of control over their lives. Victims often feel guilt and regret for things they did or did not say or do and that they should have protected a loved one better or have done something to prevent his or her death. Survivors spend a lot of time thinking, "If only I had . . ." This guilt does not make sense because the circumstances that lead to terrorism usually cannot be controlled and are hard to predict. Get rid of imagined guilt. You did the best you could at the time. If you are convinced that you made mistakes or have real guilt, consider professional or spiritual counseling. You will need to find a way to forgive yourself. Feelings of guilt can be made worse by people who point out what they would have done differently in the same situation. People who say such things are usually trying to convince themselves that such a tragedy could never happen to them.

Anger and Resentment

It is natural for you to be angry and outraged at the tragedy, the person or persons who caused the tragedy, or someone you believe could have prevented the crime. If a suspect is arrested, you might direct your anger toward that person. You may become angry with other family members, friends, doctors, police, prosecutors, God, or even yourself and may resent well-meaning people who say hurtful things and do not understand what you—as a victim—are going through.

Feelings of anger may be very intense, and the feelings may come and go. You also may daydream about revenge, which is normal and can be helpful in releasing rage and frustration.

Feelings of anger are a natural part of the recovery process. These feelings are not right or wrong; they are simply feelings. It is important to recognize the anger as real but to not use it as an excuse to abuse or hurt others. There are safe and healthy ways to express anger. Many people find that writing down their feelings, exercising, doing hard physical work, beating a pillow, or crying or screaming in privacy helps them release some of the anger. Ignoring feelings of anger and resentment may cause physical problems such as headaches, upset stomachs, and high blood pressure. Anger that goes on a long time may cover up other more painful feelings such as guilt, sadness, and depression.

Depression and Loneliness

Depression and loneliness are often a large part of trauma for victims. It may seem that these feelings will last forever. Trials are sometimes delayed for months and even years in our criminal justice system. Once the trial day comes, the trial and any media coverage means having to relive the events surrounding the traumatic disaster. Feelings of depression and loneliness are even stronger when a victim feels that no one understands. This is the reason a support group for victims is so important; support group members will truly understand such feelings.

Victims of traumatic disaster may feel that it is too painful to keep living and may think of suicide. If these thoughts continue, you must find help. Danger signals to watch for include (1) thinking about suicide often, (2) being alone too much, (3) not being able to talk to other people about what you are feeling, (4) sudden changes in weight, (5) continued trouble sleeping, and (6) using too much alcohol or other drugs (including prescription drugs).

Isolation

You may feel that you are different from everyone else and that others have abandoned you. Terrorism is an abnormal and unthinkable act, and people are horrified by it. Injury by terrorism carries with it a stigma for the victim that can leave him or her feeling abandoned and ashamed. Other people may care but still find it hard or uncomfortable to be around you. You are a reminder that terrorism can happen to anyone. They also cannot understand why you feel and act the way you do because they have not gone through it.

Physical Symptoms of Distress

It is common to have headaches, fatigue, nausea, sleeplessness, loss of sexual feelings, and weight gain or loss after a traumatic event. Also, you may feel uncoordinated, experience lower backaches and chills/sweats, twitch/shake, and grind your teeth.

Panic

Feelings of panic are common and can be hard to cope with. You may feel like you are going crazy. Often, this feeling happens because traumatic disasters like terrorism seem unreal and incomprehensible. Your feelings of grief may be so strong and overwhelming that they frighten you. It can help a great deal to talk with other victims who have had similar feelings and truly understand what these feelings are all about.

Inability To Resume Normal Activity

You may find that you are unable to function the way you did before the act of terrorism and to return to even the simplest activities. It may be hard to think and plan, life may seem flat and empty, and the things that used to be enjoyable may now seem meaningless. You may not be able to laugh, and when you finally do, you may feel guilty. Tears come often and without warning. Mood swings, irritability, dreams, and flashbacks about the crime are common. These feelings may come several months after the disaster. Your friends and coworkers may not understand the grief that comes with this type of crime and the length of time you will need to recover. They may simply think it is time for you to put the disaster behind you and get on with normal life. Trust your own feelings and travel the hard road to recovery at your own pace.

Delayed Reaction

Some individuals will experience no immediate reaction. They may be energized by a stressful situation and not react until weeks or months later. This type of delayed reaction is not unusual and, if you begin to have some of the feelings previously discussed, you should consider talking with a professional counselor.

Practical Coping Ideas

Other victims and survivors of traumatic disasters who have been where you are have offered some practical suggestions of things you can do to help you cope and begin to heal:

- Remember to breathe. Sometimes when people are afraid or very upset, they stop breathing. When you are scared or upset, close your eyes and take deep, slow breaths until you calm down. Taking a walk or talking to a close friend can also help.
- Whenever possible, delay making any major decisions. You may think a big change will make you feel better, but it will not necessarily ease the pain. Give yourself time to get through the most hectic times and to adjust before making decisions that will affect the rest of your life.

- Simplify your life for a while. Make a list of the things you are responsible for, such as taking care of the kids, buying groceries, teaching Sunday school, or going to work. Then, look at your list and see which things are absolutely necessary. Is there anything you can put aside for a while? Are there things you can let go of completely?
- Take care of your mind and body. Eat healthy food. Exercise regularly, even if it is only a long walk every day. Exercise will help lift depression and help you sleep better, too. Massages can also help release tension and comfort you.
- Avoid using alcohol and other drugs. These substances may temporarily block the pain, but they will keep you from healing. You have to experience your feelings and look clearly at your life to recover from tragedy.
- Keep the phone number of a good friend nearby to call when you feel overwhelmed or have a panic attack.
- Talk to a counselor, clergy member, friend, family member, or other survivors about what happened. It is common to want to share your experience over and over again—and it can be helpful for you to do so.
- Begin to restore order in your world by reestablishing old routines at work, home, or school as much as possible. Stay busy with work that occupies your mind, but do not throw yourself into frantic activity.
- Ask questions. You may have concerns about what types of assistance are available, who will pay for your travel and other expenses, and other issues concerning compensation and insurance. Find out what will be expected of you in the days to come so you can plan ahead for any new or stressful circumstances.
- Talk to your children, who are often the invisible victims, and make sure they are part of your reactions, activities, and plans. Involve them in funerals and memorials if they want to be involved.
- Organize and plan how you will deal with the media. It may be helpful to include family, friends, or other victims or survivors in your planning process. You do NOT have to speak to the media. It is up to you to decide how much, if any, involvement you will have with the media. Any contact should be on your terms.
- Seek the help of a reputable attorney if you think you need legal advice. Take time to make decisions about insurance settlements, legal actions, and other matters that have long-term consequences.

- Rely on people you trust. Seek information, advice, and help from them. Remember that although most people are honest and trustworthy, some unscrupulous individuals will try to take advantage of victims in the aftermath of a disaster.
- Avoid doing upsetting things right before bed if you are having trouble sleeping. Designate 30 minutes sometime earlier in the day as your “worry time.” Do not go to bed before you are tired. Write down your fears and nightmares. Put on quiet music or relaxation tapes. If you still cannot sleep, do not get mad at yourself and worry about not getting sleep. You can still rest by lying quietly and listening to relaxing music or by reading a good book. If your sleeping problems continue, you may want to see your doctor.
- Find small ways to help others, as it will help ease your own suffering.
- Ask for help from family, friends, or professionals when you need it. Healing grief and loss is similar to healing your body after an illness or accident. Just as there are doctors and nurses who are trained to help heal the body, there are professionals who are trained to help people recover from loss and cope with emotional pain.
- Think about the things that give you hope. Make a list of these things and turn to them on bad days.

It is important to remember that emotional pain is not endless. It does have limits. The pain will eventually ease, and the joys of life will return. There will be an ebb and flow to your grief. When it is there, let yourself feel it. When it is gone, let it go. You are not responsible or obligated to keep the pain alive. Smiles, laughter, and the ability to feel joy in the good things of life will return in time.

Victims are forever changed by the experience of terrorism. They realize that although things will never be the same, they can face life with new understanding and new meaning. Many things have been lost, but many things remain. Overcoming even the greatest tragedies is possible and can help bring about change and hope for others.

Finding Help

Whatever you are facing or feeling at the moment, it is important to remember that each person copes with tragedy in his or her own way. Trust your own feelings—that what you are feeling is what you need to

feel and that it is normal. Do not act like things are fine when they are not. Healing begins by talking about what happened with people you trust—people who support you without being judgmental or giving unwanted advice about what you should do or how you should feel.

Most people find it helpful to talk with a professional counselor who has worked with other crime survivors. Sometimes just a few sessions with a trained counselor will help you resolve the anger, guilt, and despair that keep you from recovering. Also, talking with other victims of violent crime may help you feel better understood and less alone.

If you feel overwhelmed by your emotions and think you may hurt yourself or others, **immediately** ask for support and guidance from family, friends, a minister, or a professional counselor. For crisis counseling, contact the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) Victim Assistance Center at 1-800-331-0075. In addition, contact OVC at 1-800-627-6872 for a list of the victim assistance programs it funds in your area. The same information is available on OVC's Web site at www.ojp.usdoj.gov/ovc and at www.ojp.usdoj.gov/ovc/terrorismvictimassistance. (The second Web address is intended for victims and family members only and will be password protected in the near future.)

Victim Benefits and Assistance Contacts

Organization	Contact Information	Assistance Offered	Eligible Victims
Office for Victims of Crime Victim Assistance Center	1-800-331-0075 (inside U.S.) 00-1-414-359-9751 (call collect outside U.S.) 1-800-833-6885 (TTY)	Emergency transportation, information, and referral	All victims for information and referral, transportation assistance for victims not covered by airline, military, or other sources
Bureau of Justice Assistance Public Safety Officers' Benefits Program	1-888-744-6513	Financial and emotional assistance	Families of federal, state, and local public safety officers (police, fire, EMS) killed in the line of duty



Coping After Terrorism

For copies of this handbook and/or additional information, please contact:

Office for Victims of Crime Resource Center (OVCRC)

P.O. Box 6000

Rockville, MD 20849-6000

Telephone: 1-800-627-6872 or 301-519-5500

(TTY 1-877-712-9279)

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