

# When disasters and emergencies are caused by community violence

## Guidelines for organisations for providing psychosocial support following community violence

Extreme and distressing events like public shootings and stabbings, car violence, hate crimes, terrorist threats, violent racist demonstrations, murder-suicides, are examples of acts of community violence. These events are powerful and upsetting incidents that intrude into daily life, have significant community impact, and can challenge our sense of safety and trust. The 24/7 online media environment can further magnify the impacts of these events on the community, even if the violence occurred in private, and make them seem even more overwhelming or distressing.

Organisations, workplaces, local governments and others in a disaster-affected area or working with disaster affected people are usually wondering how to respond to events like this. These guidelines provide suggestions about responses that might be helpful to help reduce distress and promote recovery and coping in the days, weeks and months following an event involving community violence.

# A

## Immediate

### Providing psychological first aid after community violence



Providing coordinated psychosocial support in emergencies is now recognised around the world as a critical part of preparing for, responding to and recovering from an emergency. Psychological first aid is an approach to helping people affected by an emergency, disaster, or traumatic event, which is based on basic principles of support to promote natural recovery. Psychological First Aid aims to reduce initial distress, meet current needs, promote flexible coping and encourage adjustment. PFA supports recovery by helping people to identify their immediate needs and their strengths and abilities to meet these needs.

#### Five elements of psychological first aid

There are five basic elements to providing psychological first aid that have been drawn from research on risk and resilience, field experience and expert agreement.

The elements of psychological first aid are to promote:

- safety (remove from harm, help them meet basic needs)
- calm (stabilise people who are upset, listen, provide information, be warm and compassionate)
- connectedness (help them to connect with loved ones, link people with appropriate services)
- self-efficacy and group efficacy (reassure people that their reactions are normal, help them meet their own needs)
- hope (convey expectancy that people will recover, be there and willing to help).

#### Who delivers psychological first aid?

Psychological first aid should be delivered by appropriate agencies as part of state, regional/district or local emergency management plans. This means that responses can be undertaken in a coordinated manner and that psychosocial support is provided as a key part of the emergency response. In Australia, this coordinated response could include: health and allied health professionals, teachers and other education professionals, members of the clergy and other faith-based organisations, Red Cross, Centrelink, Lifeline volunteers and other trained responders from community organisations, and local government staff.

The principles of psychological first aid mean that it can be offered by a wide variety of people in the community – from emergency personnel to neighbours and volunteers – in addition to trained responders.

Refer to: **Psychological First Aid: An Australian Guide to Supporting People Affected by Disaster** for more information about PFA following disasters like extreme weather events.

#### Additional considerations in delivering PFA following community violence

There are certain characteristics of community violence events which make them different from natural disasters.

#### What are you likely to see?

- Horror, anger, fear within the community, plus strong sense of injustice.
- Shock that this terrible event could happen.
- Strong identification with the victims and the locations where the attacks took place.
- Fear of further violence; anxiety about going about their everyday lives.
- Strong need to know why this violence happened and to make sense of the event.
- People tuning into media coverage of the event more than usual.
- High numbers of people who might need referrals for ongoing psychological support.

## The incident is likely to have different kinds of 'victims'

- Those who were caught up, or witnessed the violence itself.
- Those who relate to the victims or the place.
- Those who have an association with the suspected perpetrator or the victim(s).

## The following key points can be helpful

- Remember that the same key principles for delivering PFA apply as in the aftermath of a natural disaster.
- Focus on people's grief and loss.
- Reassure people that the police and emergency services are working hard to make sure everyone is safe.
- Acknowledge people's shock that this terrible event could happen. The fact that we are so shocked means that it is uncommon, which also means that our world is mostly a safe place, and that people are usually good.
- Help people to manage their need to understand why the violent act was committed by acknowledging that need, and how normal it is to try to make sense of events. Unfortunately, we don't always end up with an explanation that makes sense. In the acute phase, this information is most likely not even available.
- Help people to focus on the helpers and heroes who are busy restoring comfort and safety.
- Validate people's feelings of identification with the victim's and/or the location.



# B

## Ongoing

### Providing ongoing psychosocial support for affected people following community violence events



Following a community violence/collective trauma event there are certain things that agencies and organisations need to consider in providing for the ongoing psychosocial needs of the people affected by the event, beyond the first days and weeks following the event when PFA is most useful. Support may be needed not just by the people who were directly affected by the event, but also those who were affected indirectly but are nonetheless coping with significant distress. One of the characteristics of a collective trauma event is that they affect a wide population, far beyond those who were on site at the time of the event.

#### Ensure there are longer term psychosocial support services available

Whilst recovery is the norm following traumatic events, there will be a significant minority of people who will need ongoing support to recover. The impacts of collective trauma events may be long lasting and complex. It is also often the case that people affected by these events are geographically dispersed, meaning that services need to also be available for them in their home communities when they return.

Organisations may need to consider a range of longer-term support services for people affected. This could include:

- Case-management services – this is useful for people who face multiple challenges following a traumatic event, like psychological distress, physical injury, being a victim of crime, etc.. Case management is often warranted following community violence events.
- Different levels of mental health care are based on the level of distress experienced.
  - Level 1: Early response, advice and support, psycho-education, PFA
  - Level 2: For people with more persistent mild to moderate mental health problems, e.g., simple, brief and practical psychological strategies, support groups.
  - Level 3: For people with more persistent and severe distress, including those with diagnosable mental health conditions, formal evidence-based psychological and pharmacological interventions.

#### Provide easily accessible information for affected people

Having access to credible, relevant, clear information is crucial after a community violence or collective trauma event.

The chaotic aftermath often means that coordination is challenging and there are multiple points of information which may conflict, adding to the distress of those impacted.

- Have an open, centralised approach for people to find the information they need, via a website or page set up for this purpose, likely via a State Government website.
- Provide numbers for the Government agencies that can help support victims, like the TAC for transport incidents, or WorkSafe for work-related incidents, or Victims of Crime services.
- Provide numbers for a range of emergency psychological support services like Lifeline, Beyond Blue, Griefline, and other relevant emergency hotlines.

#### Provide psycho-education for the affected community

Local organisations often look to mental health experts following disasters. It can be helpful for mental health experts to use these invitations as an opportunity to provide the agency or organisation with up-to-date information about what support is best at which stage following the disaster.

Useful advice includes:

- Explain that psychological research has shown that most people will be able to cope after a disaster with the right support.
- Remind people of their own ability to manage, and reminding them of their inner strength and resilience.
- Steer people towards helping themselves and others, without giving them a sense of being pushed away.
- Remind people of the importance of re-establishing routines. This might include getting children back into a school routine, and adults back to work.





- Promote the importance of re-establishing connections with family and friends.
- Let people know that it can be helpful to talk about thoughts and feelings about what happened at a level that the person feels comfortable with, or not to talk at all if that's what they prefer.
- Let people know that there is no right or wrong way to feel after a disaster.
- Remind people to take a break from watching, reading or listening to the media coverage of the event.
- Provide information about referral pathways for people who might be needing further support after several weeks if they are still feeling upset or fearful most of the time.

### Support children

Children are not able to express complex feelings in the same direct way that adults do and therefore do not often show the same reactions to stress as adults, but distressing events can still have a profound impact on them. Helping children to recover and providing support is very important. Psycho-education for parents, carers and schools about the importance of providing comfort, reassurance and support for children can include the following:

- Listen to children's thoughts and feelings, and let them know that understand how they feel.
- Correct any misconceptions that children might have about the community violence.
- Point out the fact these events are rare, that we do live in a safe community and point out the helpers who are there to comfort and provide safety.
- Parent as normal, and try to establish daily routines including returning to school as soon as possible.
- Spend time with children and provide them with plenty of affection.
- Let children be more dependent on you for a while if they are needing this comfort.
- Shield them from the media coverage.

### Support people in their workplaces

Collective trauma events often have broad impacts on people in workplaces nearby the event because colleagues may have died, been injured, lost family members and friends, or witnessed horrific scenes.

- Educate yourselves and your staff about typical reactions that people have following stressful events, and be reassuring about how these are normal reactions to an abnormal event, and for most people these stress reactions will subside over time. (E.g., see <https://www.psychology.org.au/for-the-public/Psychology-Topics/Trauma>; <https://www.phoenixaustralia.org/recovery/fact-sheets-and-booklets/>).
- Acknowledge the stress and losses that members of the workplace may have experienced (e.g., via an email or letter to all staff, or a face to face meeting in smaller organisations).
- Provide affected employees with time off work in the immediate aftermath of an event, but don't expect all will take it. When employees return to work, make sure that some staff members (e.g., line managers) have talked with them about how they would like to return, and what support they would like from colleagues.
- Anticipate key stages in the process post-event that may be triggering for people affected such as anniversaries, inquests and other stages of legal processes.
- Give permission for employees to talk about the event if they would like to without forcing them to if they don't want to.
- Communicate your encouragement for the wellbeing benefits of employees returning to work as early as they feel able. In general, the quicker people return to work and resume their routines, the better their recovery and mental health. This of course has to be balanced with recognising that some people may be feeling too distressed to return to work too early.
- Recognise that people's grief will often continue long after the media and public has lost interest. It will still be a very significant event for the people affected.

### Manage temporary and permanent memorials

Temporary memorials and shrines are often set up in the aftermath of a collective trauma event, and these spontaneous expressions of the public's grief are now considered to be the norm. They can provide a safe space for the expression of individual and communal grief and can be an important step in the grieving process, helping also to build solidarity with other



people, reclaim the physical space where the crisis occurred, and begin the healing process (Red Cross, 2017; 2018).

Some key things<sup>1</sup> to consider include:

- Be inclusive – temporary memorials should be open to anyone who wishes to visit
- Be supportive – some people use temporary memorials to seek support for their distress. Skilled psychosocial support personnel should be in place to help them make sense of the experience.
- Make sure they are in a location that is safe (e.g., not on the edge of a cliff) and where possible minimises the risk of them being targeted or damaged.
- Be respectful - People working at, or involved in the removal or preservation of, the memorial must be respectful of those who choose to participate and mindful of how this experience can help others in managing their grief.
- Make sure the removal process is thoughtful, considered and appropriate.

Permanent memorials are also often established in honour of those who died.

Some additional key things to consider include:

- Be consultative: Consult with the victims' families, but also with other people. Collective trauma events have wide reaching impacts. More people than those directly impacted will feel affected and wish to contribute to the memorial process. Make sure a wide range of people have the opportunity to engage with the process.
- Also consult with members of the local communities in which permanent memorials are planned.

### **Manage commemoration events, anniversaries**

Commemorative events are also becoming common following community violence events. These often involve a gathering at an appropriate place to conduct services, give speeches, share stories or poems, acknowledge victims and survivors, have a moment of silence, or share other symbolic gestures with others members of the community. They might also be held as anniversaries of the disaster.

Some key things to consider include:

- Make sure that commemorative events are held at safe locations and that support services are available. For example, rather than hold an event at the scene of the crime or tragedy (like a bridge), plan to have it in a safer place in the community.
- Include those impacted in the development, planning and management of these events.
- Have PFA providers (and even counsellors) there and available if people want to talk.
- When a larger community group is being unfairly stigmatised – for example, for sharing perpetrators' ethnic, religious, or other personal attributes – it can promote social cohesion to invite some of the members of the larger group to which the perpetrator belongs, to include them in the public mourning and shared denouncement of using violence and fear as a way of solving problems.
- Make sure you give permission to victims to not attend memorial events if they would prefer to stay away. This doesn't mean that they don't care about who was lost or affected by the event. There are no right or wrong ways to grieve.
- Be prepared for trolling at healing ceremonies and memorials. By this we mean nasty and destructive comments or behaviour from some people who are using the occasion to spread fear and fuel bad feelings. Be prepared to intervene assertively, e.g., by posting a notice of CC TV recording of the memorial site, with prosecution of vandals.

### **Provide support during investigation and coronial processes**

Following collective trauma events, there is often a lengthy investigation of the incident through the courts. This can take place sometime after the event, which can prolong or reignite people's distress.

- Provide support for witnesses and family members attending court.
- Use websites to keep the public informed of details and events to help keep the public informed and connected.
- Provide information about helplines in case people need extra support.

<sup>1</sup> These tips are drawn from two Australian Red Cross documents: Australian Red Cross (2018). Best Practice Guidelines: Supporting Communities Before, During and After Collective Trauma Events; and Australian Red Cross (2017). Psychosocial guidelines for temporary memorial arrangements. <https://www.redcross.org.au/getmedia/9569a682-8867-438f-be1b-331b6e79a314/2017-Psychosocial-guidelines-for-temporary-memorial-management.pdf.aspx>

# C

## Wider Community

Principles to help the wider community cope with community violence/collective trauma



One of the features of community violence/collective trauma, whether they be local events or overseas events, is that the impact often ripples through the wider community. Either the event itself, or threats, or the subsequent response to community violence, can undermine a sense of safety and community cohesion. Of grave concern is the risk of an increase in prejudice and racism and harmful negative attitudes towards groups who may share characteristics with a perpetrator of the violent event (e.g., religion or ethnicity) which then flows on paradoxically to beget even greater extremism. There is also a risk of communities becoming divided on how best to respond to mass violence, which may exacerbate tensions and prolong recovery.

Finding ways to build social cohesion is as important in the aftermath of community violence events as it is at any other time. Building social cohesion means increasing people's sense of belonging, inclusion, participation, recognition and legitimacy in their communities, and reducing the threat of racism and prejudice. In so doing, we can support ourselves, secondary victims who are being unfairly stigmatised after an attack, and the broader community.

### Acknowledge feelings, but appraise risks realistically

It is frightening to imagine random acts of violence or destruction that might hurt ourselves or our families, or our communities or other innocent people. However when we are fearful we often react in unhelpful ways. Often, fear leads to increased calls for law and order solutions that unfortunately create more divisions in our society.

A balanced response to the feelings that can arise in relation to terrorism is to acknowledge and manage these feelings so that we can respond in constructive ways and build resilient communities, rather than fearful communities.

- Talk about your fears with other people you trust to offer comfort and perspective.
- Think about what underlies your fears, which is often a set of important needs and wants like wishing to be safe, secure and happy. Most likely you share these needs with many others around you. Keep your eye on these important shared values, and look for positive ways of acting them out.
- Assess threats realistically. It can help to remind yourself that the threat of violence in Australia is very low. As a population we are much more likely to be harmed through overeating highly processed foods, drinking alcohol, rising inequality, or from ongoing reliance on coal for electricity, than we are from community violence.

### Speak up or act when you hear racist comments

Speaking up when you see racism and prejudiced behaviour is a very effective way to combat racism.

- One of the most effective things you can do when confronting someone about racism is to simply disagree.
- Let people know that anti-racist views are widely supported in the community.
- Bystander action also benefits the victim in the immediate situation. They end up feeling supported and included in the larger group of people who don't tolerate racist behaviour and who value diversity and acceptance.

### Support initiatives that are aimed at supporting secondary victims

Identify and support groups who may be targeted and harassed in the aftermath of a community violence event because they share characteristics with a perpetrator of the violent event (often called 'secondary victims').

- Participate in or begin social media campaigns that offer support for victims of racist attacks like the #Illridewithyou campaign, or #notmyaustralia.
- Stand or sit alongside targets of racist comments in a supportive gesture, or ask them if they are ok. (Public





transport is good for this – it often becomes a site for racism). You could also help targets of racism to report it to the police or a person in charge, or even support them to make a complaint to the Australian Human Rights Commission if they wish.

- Sign petitions and make donations to support victims personally or as a group, or organisations that advocate and work with perpetrators.
- Raise awareness about how media reporting of crimes have a tendency to stereotype the perpetrator (e.g., the over-reporting of community violence in by some cultural groups in the media).

### Define the ‘problem’ group of perpetrators narrowly

When community violence is perpetrated by people claiming to be acting on behalf of a particular group, it is important to define the ‘problem’ group narrowly. The dangerous influence of individuals and groups that promote hatred and violence can all too easily escalate when the ‘problem’ group is too widely defined by the community. Indeed, one of the intentions of small groups of violent extremists is to make themselves seem bigger and more powerful than they actually are.

It is actually more useful socially to define the problem group narrowly. You can then identify yourself as part of the much larger group of respectful people who oppose the problem group, and your communications are then directed towards this majority, to which you belong.

- E.g., describe the group as ‘a few young angry men’ rather than broadly (e.g. ‘all men, all people from \_\_\_ background’).
- Show that the people or group claiming responsibility for the crime is a very small minority of people who chose violent ways of making a point.
- Try to separate angry thoughts and feelings about specific people who behave in cruel ways from the larger cultural or religious group to which those people may belong.
- Remind people that there are extreme elements in all groups, but most people (e.g., religious, cultural, young) are not violent.
- Help people to see that it is the violent act which is problematic, rather than the person’s background characteristics.

### Find trusted leaders from different cultural groups to denounce violence and promote social cohesion

- Bring together local cultural groups to condemn the attack and reassure the community that their community is not violent and give examples of ways in which they are working in peaceful ways.
- Invite religious leaders from various faiths to face the media together to show a united front denouncing violence.
- Promote ways in which people from different cultural groups are contributing to peace-building in our communities.

### Counter narratives that provide a narrow analysis of the violent event or solutions

- Be critical about politicians and media exploiting the event for a particular gain (e.g., more votes, more publicity).
- Use critical thinking and questioning: Are there alternative explanations/ perspectives about the event or solutions which minimise the negative implications for already marginalised groups? Which people/groups are likely to gain/lose from this narrow analysis?

### Deal with perpetrator labels following community violence events

In community violence events, the person(s) responsible for the violent crime are usually identified. The media is often quick to describe them using characteristics like their race or religion, or their mental health, or gender. This can give rise to unhelpful stereotyped views of people sharing these characteristics, or belonging to the same groups, which can lead to an increase in hostility and prejudice towards people who have similar characteristics, and sometimes further outbreaks of violence towards them.

### Mental illness

If the person who committed the violent crime has been named and reported in the media as having a mental illness, this can lead to faulty, inaccurate beliefs about people with mental illness which are harmful and stigmatising. It can also increase people’s concerns about their own mental health, or that of people they know.





### The following key points can be helpful

- Redirect the conversation to focus again on people's grief and loss.
- Remind people that it is probably too early for us to know why the person acted the way they did, until a proper investigation has been undertaken.
- Counter myths about people with mental illness. E.g., note that the vast majority of people with a mental illness are generally not violent; and that most people with a mental illness are able to get treatment, can go on and have productive and normal lives, and that recovery is possible.
- Be aware of how this might impact on those living with a mental illness. They may fear negative reactions from others because of their own mental health status. The event may increase their own fear or trigger reactions related to their illness.
- Link people to additional support during this time (e.g., helplines, family/friends, reminding them of their usual coping strategies, their GP, Lifeline etc).

### Religion/ethnicity

If the person who committed the violent crime has been named and reported in the media as belonging to a particular cultural or religious group, some reactions might include fear of, and/or anger towards the whole culture or religion or group to which the perpetrator belonged, rather than just the people responsible for the violence. This can unfairly lead to an increase in negative stereotypes, harassment and discrimination towards members of this group, creating secondary victims in the community.

### The following key points can be helpful

- Counter stereotypes about people from particular cultural group or religious backgrounds. E.g., Remind people that most people from religious groups are peaceful and loving.
- Show that the people or group claiming responsibility for the crime is a very small minority of people who chose violent ways of making a point.
- Remind people that the majority of people from this background are also shocked and horrified by violent actions too.
- Remind people that there are extreme elements in all groups, but most people (e.g., religious, cultural, young) are not violent.

- Help people to see that it is the violent act which is problematic, rather than the person's background characteristics.

### Male violence

Another common characteristic of perpetrators of community violence is that it is committed by a man. If the person who committed the violent crime has a history of violence, this may trigger fears for some in the community about their (and their children's) own safety in their relationship or home, and women's generalised anxieties about their safety around men. There is also a risk that some men may feel stigmatised and get defensive and react negatively to messages about male violence.

### The following key points can be helpful

- Communicate messages that effective interventions exist in family violence and families can heal. Link people to resources that can help families cope with distress and strife; or to effective programs that work with male perpetrators.
- Encourage people to talk to their family and friends about their emotions.
- Link people to information on warning signs that a relationship is becoming acutely dangerous or that a family member is becoming seriously unwell (key indicators of acute risk of homicide include choking, hospitalisation, and leaving).
- Offer hope that the shock and outrage experienced by the public may lead to more positive changes in society' attitudes towards violence, e.g., by more and more men actively participating as allies against male violence, joining in white ribbon campaigns.

### Talk about how to treat others

Use these events as a chance to have discussions about how to treat others, and to share values about what sort of a society you want to have.

- Use it to open up a frank discussion about realities in society, and the ways in which some people who live in this country are treated. Hate and prejudice are not innate but learned. No one deserves any act of violence for their race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, culture, or other beliefs.
- Show people that you all share many of the same values and that together you are part of a large group of people who



share concerns about a safe society and are searching for solutions to the problems that shock and disgust you.

- Show that it is the majority view in Australia to desire open-minded, accepting and inclusive societal values. Indeed, more than 75% of Australians have always shown strong community support for multiculturalism and even larger numbers of people agree that something more should be done to minimise or address racism in Australia.
- Be wary of talking about how widespread racism is. This can backfire and inadvertently support people's views and make them believe that they are with the majority in being prejudiced, or that racism is "normal".

### Help people to feel that they matter

An important part of social cohesion is the feeling that people belong and matter. The feeling that you count and that you are important, that you are acknowledged and recognised, and that what you do makes a difference in the world is a very human need. Psychologists sometimes describe this as 'mattering'. Belonging to a group helps us to feel valued, understood, needed, accepted and safe. People feel better about themselves when they have a sense of belonging, and that they matter.

- Help people to feel that they belong to the broader community by being warm, open and welcoming to the diverse people around you.
- Help people to embrace their own cultural group.
- Show interest in other people's cultural activities and join in where you can.
- Talk to other people about your own upbringing, and your annual rituals and celebrations.

### Foster hope

In the aftermath of community violence events we can also be reminded of the goodness of people. We need to remember that the world is largely a safe place, people are usually good, and that life is worth living.

Look for the positive changes that come from distressing or tragic events, for example:

- Increasing the motivation for us to turn the tide of violence and fear and work harder to build a better, safer and respectful society.

- Increasing people's desire to help more and show acts of kindness to others in their community or in other parts of the world.
- Having increased appreciation for relationships and loved ones.
- Becoming allies to other people and minority groups who might be in need of support, including those of which you are not a member.
- Find something positive to do in response to distressing world events, so you feel like you can make a positive difference in the world, like:
  - Volunteering in the community to help others.
  - Donating money to emergency organisations.
  - Standing up and speaking up for others who you see being bullied or targeted.

### Seeking further help

While most people will bounce back after a traumatic event, some people may show prolonged distress and could benefit from professional assistance. Those who are at risk of developing more lasting problems are those who have experienced significant disruption and losses, and those who have previously developed problems in response to other traumas.

A qualified mental health professional such as a psychologist can help such children and their parents or caregivers to understand and deal with any thoughts, feelings and behaviours associated with the disaster.

Speak to your GP about a referral to a psychologist or phone the APS Find a Psychologist service on 1800 333 497. Alternatively, you can locate a psychologist in your area by visiting the APS Find a Psychologist website – [www.findapsychologist.org.au](http://www.findapsychologist.org.au).

### Family Violence

If community violence events raise issues or concerns for those who are experiencing family violence there is a National Sexual assault, domestic and family violence counselling service – 1800 737 732 or visit [www.1800respect.org.au/](http://www.1800respect.org.au/)

### APS Disaster Recovery

For more information about the APS disaster recovery resources please visit [psychology.org.au/topics/disasters/](http://psychology.org.au/topics/disasters/)