

Fear or Anxiety: Reactions to Mass Tragedies, Violence and Trauma

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Short Communication

Erica Ives*

Specialized in treatment of Eating Disorders, Trauma and Addiction

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Corresponding author

Erica Ives

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist (MFT# 34566) since 1997

Specialized in treatment of Eating Disorders, Trauma and Addiction

CEO and Clinical Director at Mindfulpath Inc.

528 Arizona Ave., Suite 220

Santa Monica, CA 91401

USA

Telephone: 424.307.5640

E-mail: erica@mindfulpath.com

When people experience something traumatic and/or have PTSD, they may feel as though danger is lurking around every corner and believe the world is not a safe place [1]. With all of the mass tragedies, violence, and trauma we have been experiencing as a nation, so many are left feeling a lack of psychological and physical safety [3]. Following a traumatic event, almost everyone experiences at least some of the symptoms of PTSD. When your sense of safety and trust are shattered, it is appropriate to feel crazy, disconnected, and even numb. With all of the violence and mass tragedies that have occurred, these moments will stay with those directly affected for the rest of their lives. The aftermath is significant on so many levels leading to a ripple effect that takes place where more and more individuals directly affected by tragedy itself are suffering from traumatic reactions. So many are psychologically injured to some capacity. If the crisis is the result of a terrorist act, reactions might be led by anger, outrage, and fear, compared with a natural disaster where no one is to blame and sadness might be a more common reaction [9].

The level of mass tragedies, violence, and trauma we as Americans have been experiencing is immense. These recent mass tragedies are very relatable in that it can happen anytime and anywhere, from the places we go every day including school, Walmart, places of Worship, the mall, and festivals. While being aware and cautious of our surroundings is essential to keep us safe, awareness and cautiousness lie on a continuum and too far, either way, can be counter-productive. Too little can lead to a false sense of security and impulsive behaviors that lead to dangerous situations that could have otherwise been prevented. Too much can

lead to living in fear and even to the belief that the world is an unsafe place. Either extreme is simply not a sustainable way to live. However, a normal response to trauma can become PTSD when you become stuck.

There are subtle differences between anxiety and fear, but both can be an adaptive response when one is faced with an event that threatens their survival. Anxiety and fear activate our nervous system in high gear and helps us respond to this real or perceived threat by fight, flight, or freeze. The fight-or-flight response is clearly helpful in escaping from the danger as it allows a great deal of bodily energy to become available in a short period of time. Unfortunately, our bodies cannot always tell the difference between real or imagined threat and result in this involuntary physical response of fight, flight, or freeze. This response has to do with our interpretation of the situation as threatening. What may be threatening in reality to one individual, may not be to another. However, when a senseless act of violence occurs, we all respond.

According to the American Psychological Association, anxiety is a normal reaction to stress and can alert us to dangers [1]. Anxiety is what you experience leading up to a dangerous, stressful, or threatening situation. The Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5, 2013) defines anxiety as anticipation of future threat. Anxiety can also help us prepare and pay attention to our surroundings [2]. A certain amount of anxiety is healthy and can lead to success and keep you alive, thriving, aware, and empowered. It can help one become more prepared for what may be planned and lies ahead. For example,

anxiety leading up to an exam, before to a public-speaking event, or attending a large social event. Anxiety also helps us to think or prepare for any potential consequences of a situation. Heightened anxiety following a traumatic event is common, appropriate, and expected and usually described as fear. However, when it becomes prolonged, disconnected from reality, and negatively affects your life, then it can become pathological and turn into a specific and chronic fear or phobia [4].

Fear differs from anxiety in that it is an emotional response to a specific, observable danger, or a known or understood threat. It is the emotion you experience when you are actually in a dangerous situation. “Fear is the emotional response to a real or perceived imminent threat” (DSM-5, 2013) [2]. Fear is anxiety attached to a specific thing or circumstance, such as in this case mass tragedies, violence, and trauma [4]. Think of the difference this way. You are climbing up the cliff to do a cliff jump with your peers and thinking about what lies ahead. Anxiety is what you feel climbing up the cliff, looking down the steep jump, and hearing all of your peers screaming as they jumped down before you. This is the anxiety you experience leading up to a dangerous, stressful, or threatening situation. The anxiety continues when you reach the top, stare down into the body of water, and are actually about to take the jump. Fear is that feeling you experience when you take the jump and begin your fall into the water.

Both anxiety and fear can keep us safe and protect us from danger. When the news covers the aftermath of a mass tragedy, media is understandably responding to an overwhelming sense of fear. We are in it and it feels like it is currently happening to us. Unfortunately, once the fear subsides, the conversations begin to diminish and actions that are spoken of to prevent this atrocity from happening again, fade with the fear. However, even though time passes, the effects of anxiety or fear people are left with can range from the slight to extremely severe and debilitating.

Some of these symptoms include [1]:

- Shortness of breath or smothering sensation
- Palpitations, pounding heart, or accelerated heart rate
- Vision may narrow
- Muscle tenseness
- Chest pain or discomfort
- Trembling or shaking
- Feeling of choking
- Sweating
- Nausea or stomach distress
- Feeling unsteady, dizzy, lightheaded, or faint
- Feelings of unreality or of being detached from yourself
- Fear of losing control or going crazy
- Fear of dying
- Numbness or tingling sensations
- Hot or cold flashes
- Fear of fainting
- Hearing may become sensitive

A meta-analysis led by Wilson examining PTSD symptoms among more than 8,000 participants found that those who were most directly exposed to the shooting—those who were physically injured, those who saw someone else get shot or lost a friend or loved one—as well as those who perceived that their own lives were in danger, are at much greater risk for long-term PTSD symptoms and other mental health consequences than survivors who may have been hiding nearby or otherwise farther from the incident. Prior trauma, a pre-existing mental disorder, support systems, and many other factors determine how each individual will heal from mass tragedies, violence, and trauma.

Some positive ways of coping with heightened anxiety, fear, and intrusive thoughts include:

- Become educated about trauma and PTSD
- Find support to know you are not alone
- Learn and practice relaxation techniques
- Connect with nature if you find that to be soothing
- Confide in someone you trust
- Spend time with positive people
- Avoid alcohol and drugs
- Stay active
- Take medications as prescribed
- Get necessary rest

It is so important to note that the anxieties or fears you may be experiencing following mass tragedies are normal and to be expected. The other news is that over time, with a healing environment, support, faith, community, true action being taken and resulting in real changes, they will slowly dissipate. However, this does not take place alone and it is not something we can wish away. Instead, we must choose to be active participants in the healing process and for ongoing sustainable change for ourselves, the ones we love, our communities, and future generations.

We are one people. And we are ready to come together to start healing this environment.

If you believe you or someone you love is suffering with anxiety or trauma related symptoms, it is important to seek help right away. See a doctor and contact a specialist to be further assessed. If you try to numb yourself and push your memories away, post-traumatic stress disorder will only get worse. The sooner you confront this, the easier and more likely it is to overcome. Psychology Today is an excellent resource to find local mental health professionals. If you are having thoughts of harming yourself or others, please call 911 or visit your local emergency room.

Reading and Resources

- APA's advocacy efforts around gun violence prevention <https://www.apa.org/advocacy/gun-violence/index>
- APA's Clinical Practice Guideline for the Treatment of PTSD www.apa.org/ptsd-guideline/index.aspx
- National Center for PTSD www.ptsd.va.gov
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network www.nctsn.org
- Disaster Mental Health Interventions: Core Principles and Practices HalpernJ & Vermeulen, K Routledge 2017

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