

COPING WITH DISTRESSING CURRENT EVENTS

Managing the Impact of Chaotic Civil Unrest

Witnessing civil disorder and violence, live or on the news, can be an intense experience that brings up a range of emotions. We may struggle with a sense of disbelief and shock watching events unfold. The actions can feel like an assault on our beliefs, values, and sense of security. There can be an unsettling disruption to our sense of stability and confidence in our established institutions. It can trigger feelings of outrage, frustration, and powerlessness. We can worry about the future and what might happen next. This impact can be traumatic in the moment and continue to leave us feeling distressed or disillusioned as we move forward with daily life.

Coping with difficult emotions

Having a range of emotions in this situation is a normal reaction. Fears related to safety are hard-wired into the brain. Situations that seem dangerous and out of control quickly trigger those fears. We may feel a sense of panic or a rush of adrenaline and a strong need to reclaim a sense of safety. The unpredictability can be hard to process and deepen our anxiety.

For some, there can be a numbness. In a time that is defined by uncertainty, stress, and the unprecedented challenges of a pandemic, we may find ourselves feeling sad, disappointed, and weary.

There can be a deep sense of loss – loss of beliefs about the world, about order, fairness, and our sense of security. Others may respond to this loss with feelings of intense anger and frustration. There may be a confusing mix of thoughts and emotions. For example, we may understand that persons are acting out of overwhelming frustration, but at the same time, we're faced with processing the images of destruction and the meaning of that destruction.

Building up a sense of stability and managing the stress can be helpful as you work through these difficult or conflicting emotions.

Strategies

- **Allow and express your feelings.** Acknowledge emotions and concerns. Remind yourself that this is a normal reaction in this situation. Voice your feelings out loud with people who support you. Share ideas for how to start to feel better and stronger. You might want to take a break from others who are highly emotional and make it harder for you to regain a sense of calm.
- **Notice and respond to your emotional needs.** Try to notice what is triggering discomfort and what makes you feel better. What is happening when your emotions start to grow out of control? Ask yourself, "What can I change in this moment?" Maybe it's turning off the newsfeed, maybe it's taking a calming walk, or thinking of what is positive in this moment. Emotions can feel overwhelming, remind yourself that you have the power to reshape or reduce them.
- **Pay attention to your thoughts.** If you notice that your emotions are being triggered by your thoughts, you may want to find ways to take a break from them. Consider activities that pull your attention away from distressing thoughts. It may be physical activity, something creative, reading words of inspiration, connecting with others, or something else that will work for you.

- › **Focus on what you can control in your own environment.** The images we see, along with the stories we hear and our own thoughts can increase our stress and sense of powerlessness. Think about what you can control. Keeping to routines can help create feelings of stability. Completing tasks, even something small, such as washing the dishes, can be reassuring. Tidying and organizing can reduce feelings of anxiety.
- › **Take care of yourself.** Make sure you get enough rest and eat a healthy diet. It can be easy to forget that these are essential ways to feel more resilient. Avoid overuse of alcohol and/or substances. Relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing or meditation may be helpful. These gentle techniques can help you get control over the physical symptoms of anxiety and calm your thoughts.
- › **Monitor media use.** Stay informed, but be aware that constant exposure may add to feelings of distress. Notice how you are impacted by news coverage and limit viewing as needed. You might try setting a timer to put boundaries around your social media scrolling. Watch out for stories that key on worst case scenarios. Try to seek out stories about positive, constructive, helpful responses. These can help bring some balance. Use multiple sources to gather information and vet them carefully to be sure the information is accurate and complete. Continue to be aware of directives from state and local authorities related to safety in your area.
- › **Be honest, but reassuring with children.** They know when we're avoiding, hiding, or downplaying, and that can make events feel scarier. Share only as much information as they're requesting and at an age-appropriate level. As part of the conversation, reassure them that your family is safe, and you're doing what you need to in order to continue to keep them safe. Also, monitor their exposure to news stories. Repeated images can seem to a child as if the event is happening over and over again in the present time.
- › **Be aware that your child is watching you** to understand how to process this experience. Be honest with words, feelings, and actions, but be mindful of *how* you are communicating them. It can be frightening for a child to feel that you are overwhelmed.

Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is here to help.

If you're struggling with your thoughts and feelings, you may want to seek help or support services. Your EAP can help you get connected. We're available 24/7.

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