

The American Counseling Association's "Counseling Corner" Weekly Columns

Even Far-Away Tragic Events Can Affect You

from the American Counseling Association

We live in a world where, unfortunately, tragedy on a major scale occurs far too often. From natural disasters to random violence and even terrorism, learning about innocent lives lost has a profound effect on all of us even though we may not be personally connected in any way with what has happened.

A major tragedy is, to some degree, traumatizing and unsettling to us. It's known as "vicarious trauma." It's what we experience even though we aren't directly involved. More than just feeling upset, we can even experience powerful physical and emotional reactions. It's not unusual to feel confusion or dizziness, to find that you're suddenly sleeping poorly, having nightmares or perhaps finding it difficult to relax or concentrate.

It can be hard to understand why we might be affected in these ways, since we don't suffer personally or lose a loved one. But as caring human beings we identify with those people who were directly affected. It isn't hard to imagine the terror experienced as a plane plunged from the sky, or the unbearable sense of loss a parent suffers over the death of a young child.

But beyond that empathy for what those involved are suffering, we can also experience a real sense of frustration and helplessness because what occurred is so far beyond our control.

Those feelings, however, don't have to be overwhelming or leave us paralyzed. While none of us could have done anything to stop that tragedy or disaster from happening, there are things we can do after the fact to help meet our emotional and psychological needs through our personal actions.

A starting point is not to deny the emotional response we are feeling, but rather to acknowledge it and to actively address it. This means not hiding in depression or denial, but rather taking positive steps for a healthy life. Get plenty of rest, eat healthy foods and exercise regularly. It almost always helps to discuss with others what you're feeling.

It's also a time to do something positive to help make the world a better place. Volunteering locally, making a financial donation, giving blood, writing letters of thanks to first responders or undertaking some other positive action can make you - and others - feel better.

After terrible events happen, acknowledge your feelings, recognize them as normal, and take real steps to turn such feelings into positive actions.

"Counseling Corner" is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to ACAcornet@counseling.org or visit the ACA website at www.counseling.org.

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words: 397