

## Coping Tips To Help You Through Court Proceedings

If you are the victim or survivor of a mass violent incident or terrorist attack (MVI), and plan to attend the trial and any related court processes, it is helpful to develop a personalized, self-care plan to use before, during and after any court processes.

While there will be Victim Service Professionals (VSPs) to educate you and guide you through court process, you have important choices about what to include in your plan.

The following tips can help you create a personalized self-care plan to strengthen your feelings of control over your participation in court processes.

“Court processes” include pretrial hearings, the trial and, if there is a conviction, the sentencing and any appellate-level hearings.

The National Mass Violence Victimization Resource Center is located on the Medical University of South Carolina’s Charleston campus as part of MUSC’s Department of Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences, and receives funding from the Department of Justice’s Office for Victims of Crime

Learn more about us on [www.nmvvrc.org](http://www.nmvvrc.org)



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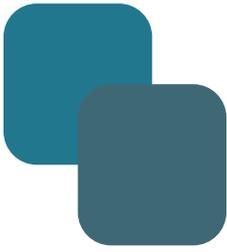


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## Things to consider including in your personalized self-care plan:

Identify support network

Plan routine check-ins

Plan to bring photo ID and dress comfortably

Consider bringing print photos, inspirational poems or religious readings

Download playlists, self-help apps onto your phone

Learn breathing strategies

Consider what part of court processes you want to attend and avoid

**Identify your support network:** ideally 3-to-5 people you can rotate reaching out to for support. This can include family members, neighbors, friends, co-workers, spiritual supporters, and/or VSPs. Depending on your level of need on any particular day, you may want one of your support network members to accompany you to the hearing. Check in with your VSP about who may be allowed access into the court proceedings. For larger MVIs, the judge may set up a prior credentialing process to ensure safety and accommodate space demands. Of note, VSPs will be always be available at the court hearings and will be there to assist you.

Other ways you may want to access support include **daily morning and/or evening check-ins**. Identify people you can rely on "to blow off some steam" and ones to talk through your emotions. When creating your support network, think about people you find nurturing, patient, emotionally-grounded, available to take your call or text when needed, calming, and ideally, not as directly affected by the event as you.

**Plan to bring a photo ID and dress comfortably.** Bring an extra layer of clothing – such as a sweater or shawl – in case the courtroom is cold.

Since many courtrooms do not allow cell phones, it may be helpful to **have print photographs** of yourself and/or your deceased loved one that you can slip in your pocket or purse. It may be helpful to have images of happier times readily available to look at. This is particularly true if you choose to remain in the courtroom during the viewing of crime scene and/or autopsy photos. Photos of happier times may help to serve as a reminder that you and/or your loved one are not only this incident. While you will likely be unable to view the photos on your cell phone during the proceeding, it will be helpful to have them readily available on your phone in an easily-accessible file for you to view during (if you step out) and after the proceeding.

**Load one or more playlists on your cell phone**, with music that you find soothing, calming and inspirational. You can also load a breathing/meditation app on your phone (for example, **apps like Calm, Headspace or Transcend NMVC**). While you will be unable to access these during court proceedings, it will be helpful to have them available for you to listen to if you step out of or after the hearing.

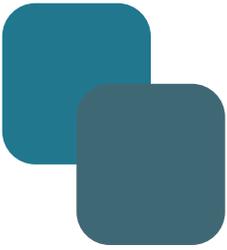
You may also want to **bring inspirational poems**, religious or sacred texts for encouragement and spiritual support.

**Learn and practice several different breathing strategies** to help calm your body when you may feel stressed during the trial. A simple one to practice is: Breathe in and slowly count to four; hold for four counts; and breathe out and slowly count to four.

Learn and practice two additional calming techniques (your VSP or a mental health professional can help you learn other helpful techniques). Our Tip Sheet, "[Managing Distress: Grounding Tips for Crime Victims, Survivors and Family Members of Mass Violence Incidents](#)" is available on the Center's website.

**Think about what parts and how much of the court hearings you want to attend.** Eyewitness accounts and crime scene photos may be a part of some processes and can be very difficult to see and hear. You may want to step out of the courtroom during these times. VSPs should be able to tell you this information prior to the actual proceeding. It's important to remember that you cannot un-hear descriptions or un-see images.





## Things your Victim Service Professional can do to help prepare you:

- Understand your rights under the law as a victim/survivor of a MVI. These include your rights to participate in all court processes.
- Visit the courthouse and courtroom prior to the beginning of the trial to become familiar with the space.

They can explain to you:

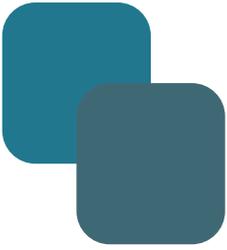
- Where you can park in a secure location, with escorts provided to you between the parking lot and courthouse.
  - Tips for getting through courthouse security with as little stress as possible.
  - The layout of the courtroom during court processes, including a schedule for seating MVI victims; where the alleged defendant will be sitting; where court security professionals will be located; and where the restrooms, victim/survivor “quiet room,” and other important amenities are located.
  - Where you will go for lunch (often, meals are provided by the VSP team).
- Identify any needs you may have for accommodations – including translation or interpreter services (be sure to discuss your needs with a VSP at least one month prior to the hearing to allow for the time needed to arrange required accommodations).
  - Address any special dietary needs you may have, and provide appropriate snacks and meals. Help you plan to bring with you any medication you might need to take during the time you will be at the courthouse. Trials can be very stressful, so be sure to speak with your doctor or healthcare provider prior to the trial. Court might go longer than expected, so it’s important to have enough medication you may need on hand for every court hearing.
  - Prepare a plan for what you are going to do daily after the hearing. Will you take a walk? Call your identified support person? Bake or cook? Go to the gym? Play with the dog? Play with your kids? Listen to music you really love?
  - Understand why it might be a good idea to avoid watching, reading or listening to news media or scrolling through social media coverage of the trial. Some media reports can be hurtful and retraumatizing. Take care of yourself by limiting this type of exposure.
  - If needed, identify resources available on-site in the courthouse, and after any court processes, for mental health support and assistance. Other victim-centered services such as emotional support animals may be available.

If your case is Federal, your U.S. Attorney has a Victim/Witness Assistance Program with experienced staff who can help you.

If your case is under state or local jurisdiction, your District Attorney (sometimes called “state attorney” or “prosecutor”) also has victim/witness staff to explain justice processes and help you prepare for them.

In many MVI cases, these justice system-based VSPs will also have mental and behavioral health professionals, and/or community-based VSPs, as part of a team to support you.





## Things to have/do throughout the hearing(s):

- Mints to put under your tongue (Altoids are recommended, as they are strong). Mint helps ground you.
- Water!!! Do not chug the water, but rather sip it throughout the day. Of course, you want to stay hydrated; but the other benefit to sipping water is that it also helps ground you and regulate your breathing.
- A seat cushion. Most courtroom benches are wooden and can be uncomfortable to sit on for extended periods of time. Bringing a cushion or lumbar support may be helpful.
- A blanket or an extra sweater as often courtrooms are chilly.
- Something for your hands to do. This will help release some of the energy that will be running through you. Silly Putty, stress balls and river rocks are good for this. A river rock is easy to place in your pocket and simply rub it when you feel the energy growing. For added benefit, put the rock in your freezer overnight. The cold temperature also helps with grounding.
- A notebook to write down questions about the hearing to ask the U.S. Attorney or prosecutor, or their VSPs.
- A journal to write or doodle in or have an adult coloring book.
- A packet of tissues.
- Practice your other grounding/calming techniques – read your favorite poem or scripture passage, or think about and visualize a positive experience.
- Do not discuss the case or proceedings in public spaces such as elevators, stairwells, bathrooms, hallways, snack areas, etc. Conversations can be overheard and misinterpreted.
- Your support team ready and your support person of the day available to you – in person, by telephone and/or online.



**You might need additional support. Do not be afraid to ask for mental health support should you begin to feel overwhelmed.**



## What if the trial doesn't end the way I think it should?

Prior to the trial, think about how you might feel if the trial does not end the way you think it should.

Talk this over with your VSP and/or mental health provider. They can help you process your feelings.

It is important to remember that although you and the other victim/survivors shared the same experience, you may not all agree about the outcome of the court event or proceeding. Nor does it mean that you all have the same feelings and thoughts about what should happen to the alleged or convicted defendant.

Talking this over with your VSP or mental health provider can be helpful.

Court proceedings can be stressful and difficult. Take pause and take care of yourself during this time. Know that you are not alone. Know that you have support to walk alongside you during this journey.

### **Additional resources:**

Our Tip Sheet: [Managing Distress: Grounding Tips for Crime Victims, Survivors and Family Members of Mass Violence Incidents](#)

