

Trauma Cues Related to Mass Violence Incidents

A trauma cue is a reminder of a previous potentially traumatic experience, such as a mass violence incident (MVI). Trauma cues can cause you to feel strong reactions like fear or anxiety, which can seem to come out of the blue and sometimes can be frightening. As a victim or survivor of a MVI, you may be surprised by the sudden intense feelings and emotional reactions that trauma cues can bring about related to your initial trauma or MVI.

Trauma cues can be obvious or hidden, and often are all around you. These trauma cues can be internal (anything that happens within your body), or external (anything that happens outside your body):

| Examples of Internal Cues | Examples of External Cues |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feelings such as anger, anxiety, frustration, sadness • Feeling abandoned, lonely, or vulnerable • Feeling out of control • Memories of the MVI • Physical pain • Muscle tension • Racing heartbeat, sweaty palms, shortness of breath • Intrusive thoughts – these are negative thoughts that force their way into your thinking even when you are not purposefully focused them | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sights, sounds, or smells that remind you of your own MVI experience • Anniversary or memorial of the MVI • Holidays or other special days • Viewing a movie, TV show, news report, or social media content that remind you of your own MVI experience • A new MVI • Victim/survivor services that are reminders of the MVI • An investigation update • Court proceedings |

What causes me to experience fear related to trauma cues?

When you experience increased stress, you are more likely to experience more intense responses to trauma cues. Once someone has experienced a MVI – as a victim, surviving family member of somebody who was killed, witness, first responder or victim service professional – other MVIs that occur *anywhere* and *at any time* can become a negative cue. This is especially true if there are similarities in the MVIs. The feelings of extreme fear that were experienced during the initial MVI can come flooding back, even if you are in a safe place and space.

How can I tell if my reactions are being impacted by a cue?

Many people are unaware that the intense and sudden reactions or emotions they are feeling are in response to a trauma cue. It may be helpful for you to look back to what was happening just before your sudden trauma-related symptom. For example, were you reading or watching specific media or imagery that unconsciously reminded you of the MVI? Were you feeling some physical sensation like what you experienced during the MVI? Did you feel like you were in danger? What exactly were you feeling? And were these feelings out of the blue or perhaps caused by an unrecognized cue?

How can I tell if trauma cues are negatively impacting me?

Reactions to trauma cues related to a MVI in another community can look and feel similar to reactions you had following your initial MVI, which can include changes in mood, sleep, eating habits; increased irritability or anger; or heightened anxiety and depression levels. Trauma cues can cause you to feel overwhelming sadness, anxiety, or panic, as well as experience flashbacks or nightmares.

What can I do when I experience trauma cues?

While trying to avoid trauma cues may seem like the best way to avoid the negative feelings, it may not be the best way of coping in the long-term. Although difficult, exposure to and learning to manage responses to these cues are the more effective ways of coping. So even though you may not be able to totally control the world around you, there are ways to lessen your potential responses to trauma cues. The more strategies you have for managing them when they do occur, the healthier your coping with them may be. As with initial trauma responses, reactions to trauma cues often lessen on their own. But it may be helpful for you to have a safety plan, or a plan of action you can turn to if you begin to feel overwhelmed.

Some activities that you can incorporate into your safety plan and engage in to manage trauma cues include:

- When you experience a trauma cue, write down what you were doing at the time; how you reacted; and any challenges you felt in responding to the cue. You may begin to see *patterns* in your personal cues, that are helpful to prepare for future trauma cues.
- Identify potential expected cues and prepare yourself ahead of time with a coping plan.
- Talk to somebody about your trauma cues – a family member, trusted friend, victim services professional, or mental health professional. Let them know what you are going through and ask for their support.
- Engage in deep breathing, grounding, mindfulness, and/or relaxation exercises. Read [here](#).
- Practice self-compassion with yourself and compassion to those around you.
- Lean on social support or activities that you enjoy.
- Know that feelings and reactions to trauma cues are normal and okay, as long as they are not destructive to yourself or others.

- Give yourself time to recover after experiencing a cue.
 - Twelve Self-help Tips for Coping in the Aftermath of Mass Violence Incidents. Read [here](#).
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Some activities to avoid when experiencing a trauma cue

- Isolating yourself from others
 - Avoiding the cue and its negative impact
 - Using alcohol or other drugs to cope
 - Self-harm behaviors
 - Violence towards others
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In conclusion

Being more aware of cues can help you become more cognizant of and understand your potential traumatic reactions. This in turn can positively impact your mood and overall well-being. Always remember the importance of social support from family members, friends or helping professionals who can help you develop your safety plan, develop effective coping strategies, and mitigate the harmful effects of trauma cues.

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