

# Helping students cope with random community violence

From the Office of Student and Community Services, Department of Student Services  
MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS, Rockville, Maryland

The following information may prove useful as you help students cope with difficult situations.

## Common emotional reactions

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Reactions may vary in nature and severity from student to student, based on age, temperament, personality and previous experience. These are normal reactions to an abnormal situation. Regardless of differences, there are some commonalities that exist in how students and staff feel when their lives are disrupted by random acts of violence in the community.

## Loss of Control

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Random acts of violence may trigger feelings of vulnerability or loss of control in individuals of all ages. Structure and routine help bring comfort and a sense of safety.

## Loss of Routine

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The response to random community violence often necessitates a change in routine which students may find disruptive or unsettling. Try to return to a normal school routine as quickly as possible, for familiar routines are reassuring.

## Self-centered Reactions

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It is normal for people of all ages to react to violent incidents with fear for their own safety. They may be intensely worried about what will happen to them. Young children and those students whose lives have been directly affected by the incidents may be especially focused on safety concerns. It is important to provide repeated reassurance regarding safety.

## Common Stress Symptoms

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ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	MIDDLE SCHOOL	HIGH SCHOOL
<p>Regressed behaviors</p> <p>Irritability and agitation</p> <p>Anger, aggression, tantrums</p> <p>Clinginess</p> <p>Poor concentration</p> <p>Withdrawal from friends and activities or an increased need for contact with friends and family</p> <p>Sleep difficulties, including nightmares and bedwetting</p>	<p>Physical complaints such as headaches and stomachaches, loss of appetite</p> <p>Poor school performance</p> <p>Withdrawal from friends or an intensive desire to be only with friends</p> <p>Sleep disturbances</p> <p>Increased frustration, anger and/or conflict with parents and peers</p> <p>Regressed behavior</p>	<p>Agitation</p> <p>Lack of energy</p> <p>Lessened interest in peers or an intense desire to be only with peers</p> <p>Irresponsible or delinquent behavior</p> <p>Physical complaints</p> <p>Sleep disturbances</p> <p>Eating difficulties</p> <p>Poor concentration</p> <p>Frustration, anger or aggression towards parents or peers</p>

## How adults can help

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- Share the facts in a calm and caring manner.
- Provide a vehicle for expressing fears and anxiety, such as journal writing or drawing.
- Ensure that the information you give is appropriate to the developmental level and is stated in a vocabulary the child(ren) can understand.
- Clarify misconceptions and restate information as necessary.
- Allow opportunities to talk about the situation. Listen closely to fears and concerns.
- Control panic among your students by remaining calm yourself.
- Be flexible and allow time in your routine to address concerns as they arise.
- Reassure students that their emotional responses are normal responses to an abnormal situation; to some extent, every one of us is afraid. It's all right to be afraid and to talk about it.

- Assure students that many adults are working together to insure everyone's safety.
- Ask students what things they have done in the past to help them through difficult times. List them and encourage the use of these strategies.
- Talk about how students can support one another.
- Encourage students to make healthy choices in what they eat and drink and to allow more time for sleep and relaxation.
- Tell students that it is okay to turn off the TV or to change the channel so that they don't become overloaded with details of the incident.
- Be alert for students whose reactions seem especially intense or unusual. Consult with the school counselor or school psychologist if you have concerns or questions.

## Sources and resources

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The [Montgomery County Crisis Center](#) is a free resource available 24 hours/7 days each week. Call **240-777-4000**.