

# In the face of trauma, distance helps people find clarity, study shows

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In the wake of tragedies such as the Sandy Hook school shooting, the Boston Marathon bombing and the devastating explosion in the Texas town of West, people are often left asking, "Why did this happen?"

According to new research from The University of Texas at Austin, the best way to make sense of tragedy is to turn away from detailed reports in the news and social media and adopt a more simplified understanding of the event.

The study, published online in *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, shows that in the wake of a negative event, people are more likely to find clarity by considering the larger picture. Such a firm understanding helps to diffuse [negative emotions](#) and the feeling of a lack of control, says Jae-Eun Namkoong, marketing graduate student in Red McCombs School of Business and lead author of the study.

"Certainty about what causes tragic events not only helps people feel better, but also gives them a [sense of direction](#) for action," Namkoong says. "People launching petitions for [government actions](#), constituents voting for policies, or even consumers boycotting against products that malfunction are all motivated by their certainty of the causes behind negative events."

As part of the study, the researchers presented 196 participants with information about the Sandy Hook shooting and altered their sense of time by framing the incident around different reference points. For

example, the shooting appears to be much more recent when compared with the Sept. 11 attacks of 2001. But in comparison with a similar incident that occurred just two weeks prior, the Sandy Hook shooting seems much farther away.

According to the results, the participants who perceived the shooting as farther away in time were more confident in their understanding about why the event happened.

"As time passes, people naturally gain more certainty about events," says Marlene Henderson, assistant professor of psychology and co-author of the study. "If you're trying to give yourself a feeling a meaning, you can distance yourself from the incident with time and space. And this also applies to personal problems, such as troubles at work, a broken appliance, or even a bad breakup."

In another experiment, the researchers presented 202 participants with a list of potential causes of the Sandy Hook shooting that were frequently mentioned in the media and public discourse (e.g., suspect's poor social support, weak security in elementary schools, shooter's personality disorder, loose gun control). They were then asked to assign a percentage value to each cause.

The results: Those who perceived the shooting as a distant memory were likely to attribute the event to one or two possible causes. However, the participants who perceived the incident as much closer in time associated the causes to a multitude of factors.

The results from the study have important implications for mental health professionals, as well as for the media, Henderson says.

"It's in the media's interest to keep coming up with new reasons because these things are novel and exciting," Henderson says. "But reporters

could actually help bring people comfort by incorporating a sense of distance in their reports."

**More information:** [spp.sagepub.com/content/early/.../16/1948550613499240](https://spp.sagepub.com/content/early/16/1948550613499240)

Provided by University of Texas at Austin

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