

How to cope with fear of public places after mass shootings

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With the rise of mass shootings happening at night clubs, music festivals, schools and even grocery stores, it seems nowhere is safe anymore. In the wake of these tragic events, many people have developed a heightened awareness of potential danger in public places.

"With all these shootings we are hearing about...it's terrifying that we really do have to expect the unexpected when we're out in public," said FIU alumna Nelvis Ponce '16. "Doesn't matter if I'm going out to watch a movie with my husband, an event or even a night out with a couple of friends, that anxiety is always there."

This onslaught of gun violence has taken a toll on our psychological well-being. Recently, a motorcycle backfiring in Time Square had people there panicking and running for cover as they believed the sounds were gunshots.

"It was disheartening to see the automatic assumption...fireworks [and] motorcycles can't go off anymore without people assuming the worst, and that's really sad," said rising senior Sarah Mccaffrey, a psychology and women's and gender studies major.

Ponce says she will continue to go out, though not so much to highly populated areas, but that she will remain hypervigilant of her surroundings. So how do we cope with the lingering worry or sense of hopelessness that the next mass shooting could happen the next time we go to the movies or attend a concert?

Nicole Fava, a trauma expert and professor in the School of Social Work, offered some advice for anyone who is feeling scared and powerless right now.

1. Understand that your fear response is normal. This is especially true if you identify with victims of gun violence. The more that victims remind us of ourselves, the more we feel that what happened to them could happen to us or someone we love. Know that it is normal to feel like the world is less safe now.
2. Realize that danger is not always imminent. Just because something bad can happen, that doesn't mean it will. "The

statistics don't support that these events are probable, only that they are possible. You're still more likely to get struck by lightning or die in a [traffic accident](#) than you are to be in a K-12 school and get shot," said Fava, who is affiliated with the Center for Children and Families and offers trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy to children, teens and caregivers. "That doesn't mean it isn't scary when it happens, but we need to have these check-ins with reality to [reduce] our anxiety," she added.

3. Practice self-care. It's important not to isolate yourself. Don't stop living as you normally would. Continue to take part in activities that bring you joy. Fava quotes grief and trauma expert David Kessler, who said, "fear doesn't stop death; it stops life." In addition, make time to rest, exercise, eat well-balanced meals, or engage in relaxation practices like meditation/mindfulness to help reduce stress and anxiety.
4. Seek help as needed. While it is common to feel a range of emotions such as anger, sadness, anxiety, and depression after an event like a [mass shooting](#), be aware of the [warning signs](#) of needing extra help coping. These signs may include changes in sleep habits, excessively relying on alcohol and other substances to cope with emotions, withdrawing from social life and increased anxiety lasting more than one week that impedes your normal daily routine. "Give yourself time to feel these emotions and recover from them, just like you would from a physical injury," suggests Fava.
5. Limit media exposure. We don't want to live under a rock, of course, but research shows that overexposure to news media can increase stress in the aftermath of traumatic events. "Balance your desire for information with self-care," Fava said.
6. Get involved. Actively participating in the change process can help us gain a sense of control and helping others can be therapeutic. Being part of the solution can mean writing to your representatives to let them know your concerns about rising gun

violence or joining an organization that fights to prevent these incidents from happening. "Every year, our social work students take a trip to the State Capitol to talk with different legislators, and we bring certain issues to their attention," Fava said.

Provided by Florida International University

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