

# Coping with Fear of Violence

In an era where active shooter events or other terroristic threats are commonplace in the news, it is natural for us to react in fear. Unfortunately, the 24/7 news cycle and constant access to social media means that there is a disproportional focus on active shooter events to their likelihood. For example, someone is much more likely to be struck by lightning than killed by an active shooter, but we hear about and worry about mass shootings much more than we hear about or worry about lightning strikes.

News of this kind of violence, though statistically rare, can leave people with a sense of fear or dread. Additionally, for anyone who has experienced personal or systemic violence, it can also trigger strong emotions or memories of past trauma. Fear of violence, even when unproven, can have a significant mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual impact. It can sometimes lead to a trauma response. Trauma is defined as exposure to actual or threatened death or serious injury causing significant distress or impairment. Reactions may include:

- re-experiencing (flashbacks nightmares)
- avoidance (of thoughts, people, or situations)
- negative thoughts or mood (such as fear, blame, or guilt)
- reactivity (irritability, difficulty concentrating, sleep issues).

These symptoms can intensify if the threat is repeated or ongoing, or if you are already living with other stressors in your life, such as health concerns or the recent death of a loved one. If you experienced previous violence such as childhood abuse, workplace violence, war, or domestic violence, recent threats are likely to trigger past memories and responses. When old trauma memories are activated, the emotions you feel today may be just as intense as those you experienced during a previous traumatic event.

## Building resilience in the face of fear

- Set boundaries around when and how often you consume media. Constant access to news and social media means that we can easily become overloaded by bad news. You might make a conscious choice not to watch the news right before bedtime. You might decide to leave your phone charging in another room so you don't check social media from bed. You may want to set a timer and limit access to newsfeeds to limited blocks of time.
- Practice mindfulness. Fear tends to pull us away from being present in our lives—when triggered, it causes us to relive the past or to worry about what might happen in the future. You can start by downloading a free mindfulness app and doing short breathing exercises or guided meditation.
- Try movement. It's not just that exercise can help us feel physically better. Trauma tends to "get stuck" in our bodies. Choosing to move, whether that is a walking work meeting, a lunchtime yoga class, or a weekend hike with loved ones, can help.
- Practice gratitude. [Research shows that gratitude can help us cope with crisis.](#)
- Be gentle with yourself. Know that you are not alone in experiencing strong reactions to these events. Don't despair if you are having a hard time concentrating at work or keeping your cool with your partner or kids. What's one thing you can do to be kind to yourself today?

If you feel distressed or triggered, know that these are normal responses. Consider support through the EAP.



Washington State EAP is accessible, free, and confidential.  
Contact us today at **877.313.4455** or **eap.wa.gov**