

Anxiety after Mass Shootings and Violence

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PEORIA - It is a situation that has become all too familiar in the U.S. – watching in horror as news of a mass shooting spreads. While public events in the United States remain safe more often than not, some high profile shootings, like the one at a grocery store in New York in May, or another at a Fourth of July parade in Highland Park, Illinois, are causing anxiety for many Americans, leading some to avoid public spaces or large gatherings altogether.

Last year [a survey](#) commissioned by Evolv Technology sought to quantify the mental toll gun violence takes. If the 2,000 Americans surveyed, researchers found one third

(31%) report increased anxiety when going into a large gathering, and 28% feel they are likely to encounter an active shooter in their lifetime.

This is concerning to mental health professionals, because while these acts of violence tragically do occur, they shouldn't dictate our lives or experiences.

“These are rare incidences. We don't want to be fixated on this all of the time. It's isolated, the numbers are small, but they do occur. We still want to have healthy, happy experiences. And that's something we need to continue to focus on,” says Cheryl Crowe, director of behavioral health for OSF HealthCare.

Crowe says anxiety is normal, but one way we can feel a little more in control of any situation is by communicating with our family and loved ones. She says making a “what if” plan prior to an event can help ease anxiety, but it should be done in an age appropriate way for children, and shouldn't be the main focus before attending.

“Maybe it's ‘if we get separated...’ It could be something as simple as that; this is our plan. But we don't want to make this the point of focus all the time, because that, to them, is frightening. These are isolated events, so we want to make sure that we put it in perspective and help them understand that,” advises Crowe.

The 24 hour news cycle and the constant availability of information can also add to anxiety. When violent images seem to be front and center every time a television or phone is turned on, it can directly impact someone's sense of safety.

Crowe says being inundated with violent images is not healthy, and taking a break from the news cycle or social media can help. She also suggests talking about your concerns with a trusted friend or your family, or even reaching out to a counselor or therapist to unpack unwanted feelings of anxiety or fear.

“Have those discussions with your family. Have those discussions with your physician. If it's something that you're having difficulty shaking it may be time to talk to a counselor just to process through that, and feel a little more secure, and feel a little more empowered,” she says.

And while no activity or event is truly risk-free, Crowe maintains that enjoying life and sharing time and experiences with friends and family is invaluable.

“We don't want to be paralyzed by these things. We still want to find the joy in life and have those positive experiences, and have our children have those positive experiences. So that's what we focus on,” urges Crowe. “Having a family meeting about ‘what do we do if...’ - there's nothing wrong with that, but we don't want to continue to ruminate on

those negative points. There's a lot of joy and a lot of wonderful things in our environments and we want to make sure that we experience those.”

If you want to reach out for assistance, OSF HealthCare offers free [behavioral health navigation services](#) to help understand all resources available in your area. [OSF Silver Cloud](#) is also available. The free mental health digital support tool is available in communities served by OSF.