

# Living with threats of violence

People who are frequently exposed to violence or live with threats of violence may experience psychological, emotional, and physical effects. Whether the threat of violence is the result of living in a dangerous neighborhood, dealing with a local disaster or being involved in an abusive relationship, common reactions include fear, depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. These stress reactions are normal but can seriously interfere with everyday life and the ability to function at home, work, or school.

## Common reactions

If the threat of violence and conflict is constant and unpredictable, people may operate in “survival mode” and find it difficult to focus on anything but the looming threat. For most people, being physically threatened is a traumatic event. Emotional and physical responses to traumatic events may include:

- Shock, confusion, and intense fear
- Anxiety and sadness
- Physical reactions such as headaches, stomachaches, chest pains, racing pulse, dizzy spells, trouble sleeping and changes in appetite
- Being easily startled
- Feelings of anger, guilt, despair, and self-blame
- Difficulty concentrating
- Withdrawal from family and friends
- Loss of interest in activities one previously enjoyed
- Avoiding reminders of the trauma
- Hopelessness and suicidal thoughts

## Coping with stress and anxiety

Living with the threat of violence is an unfortunate reality for many people around the world. Ways to manage stress and anxiety include the following:

- Take care of yourself first. Eat healthy foods, get enough rest, and exercise on a regular basis. Physical activity can relieve anxiety and promote well-being.
- Talk about your concerns with people you trust. A supportive network is very important for emotional health.
- Avoid excessive use of caffeine, alcohol and nicotine.
- Balance work and play. Make time for hobbies and activities you enjoy or find interesting volunteer work. This can be a healthy distraction from everyday stressors.
- Limit your exposure to upsetting news coverage on TV, radio, and social media.
- Practice mindfulness and relaxation techniques such as meditation and deep breathing.

## Recognizing the signs of post-traumatic stress disorder

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental health disorder that can occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event such as a natural disaster, a serious accident, a terrorist act, war/combat, rape, or other violent personal assault. While it is normal to have stress reactions after a traumatic event, usually these reactions fade over time. PTSD, which is a medical diagnosis, has a set of symptoms that last longer than three months, disrupt work and home life, and cause an individual great distress. There are four key symptoms of PTSD:

1. Reliving the event (also called flashbacks or re-experiencing symptoms). The person may have a vivid sensation of going through the event again, have nightmares, or experience “triggers” that evoke memories of the event. News reports, seeing an accident, or hearing a loud noise can all be triggers.
2. Avoiding situations that are reminders of the event. This may extend to avoidance of talking about or thinking about the event.
3. Negative changes in beliefs and feelings. The person may lose trust in other people, feel that the world is a dangerous place, and shy away from relationships.
4. Feeling jittery and ‘keyed up.’ Also known as hyperarousal, this feeling of jumpiness can result in insomnia, difficulty concentrating, feeling easily startled, moody, and being always on the alert for something bad to happen.

PTSD symptoms usually start soon after the traumatic event, although for some people, they may not happen until months or years after the trauma. Symptoms may come and go over many years. Professional help from a qualified physician or therapist trained in PTSD can relieve symptoms and help the person return to normal functioning.