



Coping With Large-Scale Trauma and Tragedies

Events like the pandemic, natural disasters, and the war in Ukraine are some examples of large-scale trauma that can impact the well-being of whole communities. Even when we're not directly impacted by the traumatic event, being exposed to constant distressing media coverage can take a toll on our mental health. We can feel like the world is an uncertain, unfair, and terrifying place. Realizing our vulnerability as humans and that we can't always control what happens to us can feel overwhelming.

During the pandemic, for example, aspects of life that were predictable and stable were suddenly disrupted. We couldn't engage in a lot of the activities and self-care practices that made us feel grounded and able to cope. With the ongoing war in Ukraine and other global tragedies, many people feel helpless, sad, and angry about ongoing injustice. When the adults in our lives are worried and stressed, we can often take on their concerns as well as our own.

Acknowledging these fears and feelings of loss and injustice is an important part of coping. When we feel like the world is out of our control, finding small actions that we can take can improve our sense of safety and wellbeing. Below are some tips for how we can cope with living through, witnessing, or hearing about large scale trauma:

It's understandable to feel upset:

First of all, remember that it's completely natural to feel upset after learning about traumatic global events. Even if something is happening on the other side of the world, we can feel angry, or helpless to stop what's happening. Make space for these feelings to come up. It's easy to judge these feelings and think, "Well other people have it worse, so I shouldn't feel this way." But feeling empathetic and sensitive to the pain of others is a positive trait, and trying to stop yourself from feeling what you're feeling won't make those emotions go away.



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Spend time in familiar and safe places:

When the world is full of uncertainty, it can be helpful to think about what is constant in your life and makes you feel safe and grounded. Perhaps that's a beautiful park or hiking trail, a cozy room in your house, the company of a close friend, or even a favourite book or movie. Experiencing or witnessing large-scale trauma can put our bodies into a survival state, which increases adrenaline and heart rate. The brain can't tell the difference between real danger that's happening now or perceived danger. So even if we've witnessed or heard about something traumatic on the news, it's important to find ways of making our body and mind feel safe.

Take breaks from media exposure:

Staying informed is very important, but so is protecting our mental health. If events in the world seem too intense, take a break from news and social media, especially before bed. Try doing something relaxing or fun instead, such as taking a walk, cooking a nice meal, hanging out with friends or family, or doing something creative that takes your mind off the event. Seeking hopeful and uplifting stories to counter the upsetting news can also be helpful.

Take small actions and don't keep it all inside:

Talk about what you're going through with those around you. They are likely feeling similarly and might have some good coping strategies to share. If you find that all you can talk about is the distressing event, perhaps switch to a lighter conversation for a while. There are small actions that you can take together. For example, you can organize a fundraiser for Ukrainian refugees, or support a friend who is isolating with covid by sending them funny videos or letting them know you can keep them up-to-date with schoolwork. Perhaps you can help organize a beach clean-up or encourage your school to adopt more sustainable practices. Focusing on small actions like this can increase your well-being while also making a positive impact.



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Pay more attention to your mental health:

When we are exposed to large-scale trauma, this exposure can increase or even cause mental health struggles. Make sure you're getting enough sleep, eating well, surrounding yourself with kind and supportive people, and doing the things that make you feel good and bring you joy and wellbeing. Focusing on all the things you're grateful for can also draw your attention to what's going well in your life.

Seek professional help if needed:

If your thoughts and feelings about the traumatic event are taking over your life and making it hard to function, it's probably time to seek professional help. You can reach out to a school counsellor, your GP, a therapist, or an online mental health organization or app. While finding the right form of support can sometimes take a few attempts, having a treatment plan or talking to the right professional can make a world of difference.

While we are still dealing with the impacts of the pandemic, there are additional large-scale events happening that are traumatic and distressing. While it's common to feel upset, anxious, and angry, there are actions that we can take to regain a sense of control over our lives. Spending time in places, or with people that make us feel grounded and safe, taking breaks from distressing news and media, and sharing your worries with others are all helpful strategies. If you have the time, find small actions you can take that support your community, or those who are struggling. And remember to pay extra attention to your mental health and seek support when needed.