

When Our World Is Shattered

By Coy Webb

Tragically, we live in a world that continues to witness increasing acts of violence in schools, churches, and other public places. These shocking events often leave communities reeling, and in need of spiritual care.

As the community tries to recover, things will normalize but will be forever different from how things were before. "Different" in this type of tragedies is an understatement. According to the National Center for PTSD, 77% or more who witness a school shooting may develop post-traumatic stress disorder. Symptoms of PTSD include pervasive and disruptive anxiety, nightmares, sleep difficulties, flashbacks, aggression, emotional detachment, social withdrawal, on-going emotional distress, and even physical pain symptoms.

These responses are often temporary and ease with time. However, some individuals may need psychological and spiritual counseling to be able recover and cope with PTSD. What can the church do to help those who have gone through and survived such a terror-filled event?

1. **Observe behavior of those affected.** Are they demonstrating symptoms of PTSD or behavior that demonstrates need of help?
2. **Be there.** People often do not need wisdom or advice; they just need to know that they are not alone and someone cares.
3. **Acknowledge their pain and confusion.** Let them know that you understand that this is a painful, overwhelming, or hurtful time. Assure them that they are having a normal reaction to an abnormal event.
4. **Let those affected know that grief, numbness, emotional pain, and a sense of loss are normal reactions to trauma.**
5. **Intentionally listen.** Focus on the person. Follow what the person is saying. Be conscious of body language. Maintain eye contact. Fixate on what you can do, not what you cannot help with. Listen more than you talk.
6. **Actively offer comfort.** Be with them. Listen to them. Walk alongside them. Shield them from further harm. Help them discover resources to help.
7. **Promote calming.** It is OK to weep with those who are grieving but seek to focus on their needs not your own. Seek to help them reestablish normal activities and routines, such as eating, sleeping, exercise, etc.
8. **Allow them to grieve and express their grief.** Grief takes time and most people pass through several stages of grief before ready to move on from the grief event.
9. **Hugs and appropriate physical touches** can offer healing and comfort.
10. **Pray with those hurting.** Do not underestimate the healing that God often gives through prayer.
11. **Do not try to answer the why questions or offer theology lessons on how God acts in certain events.** In the crisis, people need to know you care, not what you may or may not know.
12. **Remind those affected that God has not abandoned them.**
13. **Offer spiritual help and care when appropriate.** Those with spiritual foundations recover from disaster events in healthier and more positive ways than those who have no spiritual roots. Remember to express how God has helped you in crisis times and share your faith not force your faith on those who are vulnerable in their distress.
14. **Coordinate a Memorial Prayer and Worship Service.**

*"Lord, be merciful to us! We wait for you. Give us strength each morning!
Deliver us when distress comes." (Isaiah 33:2)*