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Schools supporting students following shootings ^[1]

Dear Alice,

How are schools dealing with the emotional feelings of the students, fear, safety during this upsetting time [following recent school shootings]?

Answer

Dear Reader,

For those who directly or indirectly experience an act of gun violence, the emotional aftermath and healing process varies from person to person. It's likely that the process will be challenging, and it may take a while for those affected to feel safe and go about their typical activities again. When such an act occurs at a school, students, parents, educators, administrators, and others have multiple tools to choose from that help with processing a traumatic event. Since 2013, there have been over 300 school shootings in the United States. However, research on gun violence as a whole has been limited and the discussion around funding and support for this research has been an ongoing conversation among researchers and policymakers alike. That being said, there are also steps individuals can take if they want to enact broader change as it relates to gun violence.

There's no one "normal" way to respond to an act of violence — emotions may be any combination of shock, sadness, anger, grief, guilt, numbness, and anxiety. These emotions may be accompanied by behavioral changes such as difficulty going about daily routines (eating and sleeping, for example), difficulty concentrating, or socially withdrawing from people and places. It's possible that a person's reaction is influenced by their age, background, and proximity to the event, and potentially the severity of the event. To help manage these emotions and behavioral changes, individuals may consider employing these strategies:

- Talking with friends, family, or loved ones.
- Seeking support from a mental health professional.
- Prioritizing self-care in the form of eating balanced meals, engaging in physical activity, and getting plenty of rest.
- Avoiding alcohol and other drugs.
- Focusing on positive memories and experiences to help balance the negative ones

associated with the event.

- Accepting and validating their own feelings rather than ignoring them.
- Turning off the news and taking a break from media coverage about the event.
- Helping others who are affected by engaging in advocacy efforts.

List adapted from the [American Psychological Association](#) [2].

On the institutional level, many high schools and universities have offered resources, allowed for additional accommodations, and enacted policy change to help their students. Some of these include increased counseling services and support, therapy animals, class time dedicated to discussions about the event, shortened school days, and increased security measures. For students who choose to engage in advocacy efforts, some high schools and colleges have offered their support by not penalizing students for missing school to attend advocacy events.

On the community, city, and state levels, many policy ideas and changes have been suggested or enacted for gun violence prevention. These policies are varied in how they address potential roots of gun violence, of which there are a few schools of thought. At this time, some advocate for increased security, such as more violence prevention training for students and staff, more communication between schools and law enforcement, arming teachers and other school staff, increased sheriff or security presence, and increased security infrastructure such as metal detectors and security cameras in schools. Others advocate for increased mental health resources and support — though it's worth noting that those with mental health issues are more likely to be victims of violence rather than perpetrators of violence. Lastly, there is also interest and support for increased gun control regulations, such as raising the legal purchasing age, more thorough background checks, implementing waiting periods prior to purchase, and prohibiting the sale of firearms to higher-risk groups. Different states and cities have different laws pertaining to firearms in public and at schools (such as concealed carry being permitted on campus), so being aware of those can inform further safety and prevention discussions. Individuals interested in supporting such efforts can reach out to various gun violence prevention organizations to learn how to be more involved. Reaching out to local, state, and federal representatives and voting in upcoming elections is also a way to impact public policy, support representatives taking action on this issue, and push for further prevention and safety measures both in schools and communities.

Just as there are varied emotional responses to an act of gun violence, there are many resources and solutions that schools and communities may choose to use to help their students feel safer. To figure out which resources and policies will help you personally and your community, try talking with a teacher, professor, mental health professional, administrator, or your trusted friends about these concerns to see what your school is doing and what actions you're able to take. These sources of support will likely be able to offer some helpful guidance on how to be involved and how to manage your emotional well-being during these difficult times.

Alice!

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