

Tip-Sheet for Coping with the Mental Health Impacts of Peaceful Protests and Civil Disturbance

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Purpose: The purpose of this tip-sheet is to provide evidence-based information about behavioral health considerations in the context of non-violent resistance or action (witnessing or participating) and provide some best practices for mental and emotional health and safety.

A **peaceful protest**, also known as **nonviolent resistance** or **nonviolent action**, is the act of expressing disapproval through a statement or action without the use of violence. Protests have been used to advocate for a number of different causes, including human rights issues, anti-war campaigns, and expressing disapproval of various governmental policy issues. Some general methods include boycotting certain products, participating in a march, sit-in, or virtual event through social media, displaying a particular symbol, and handing out flyers.¹

A **riot** occurs when a group intentionally or recklessly engages in **violent behavior** causing or risking **public terror or alarm**.²

Because of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic over the past several years as well as increased social divisiveness, emotions and emotional responses to current events may be even more heightened. The stress related to ongoing social divisions is only intensified by the ongoing injustices in our communities. These heightened emotions, such as fear, frustration, anger, love, surprise, sadness, and grief, may play a role in how individuals express themselves in their behaviors. Some may respond in an active or very expressive manner, while others may withdraw.

People who participate in or experience collective actions, such as protests or riots, can experience a wide range of emotions. Within peaceful protests, some people may feel a greater sense of connection, less social isolation, and empowered by showing up as part of a movement and contributing to positive change.

On the other hand, some people may have negative emotional responses, particularly if the protests become violent. These negative responses can include worry, anxiety, depression, trouble sleeping or nightmares, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Some people are more vulnerable to these harmful emotional impacts. **You may be at greater risk for emotional harm if:**

- **You see someone injured by violence or looting, or are injured yourself.**
- **You live or work close to where protests are occurring.**
- **Your organization or home is targeted by protestors.**

- You struggle financially to support yourself and your loved ones.
- You have fewer social supports, such as friends, family, community, religious, and social groups.
- You spend a lot of time viewing or engaging with media coverage, including social media.

Protecting your Mental Health in Times of Protests

If you choose to participate in protests or other collective actions, consider the following:

While some people who participate in protests may have an entirely positive experience, there are some possible emotional impacts to consider if you choose to participate:

- Your personal history of anxiety, depression, or trauma may be worsened as a result of becoming involved in a protest. Weigh factors of [personal, physical, and emotional health](#)ⁱ risks.
- Plan for the possibility of exposure to violence. Consider the additional emotional toll these exposures may have on you following the stressors of the COVID-19 pandemic. Common emotional responses can include worry, anxiety, and trouble sleeping or nightmares.
- Determine what emotional factors will be your sign for leaving the protest. Monitor yourself for signs of increased fear, anxiety, or panic. These might indicate increased psychological risk.
- Reduce your exposure to media and social media.
- Reach out to friends and family members to maintain connection, share information, and support each other.
- Consider the potential need for mental or behavioral health support after an event. Plan for how you will engage support services, if needed.

Protecting your Mental Health in Times of Protests

If you or your organization is the target of peaceful protests or acts of aggression, consider the following:

- Behavioral health outcomes following collective actions such as protests, riots, and sociopolitical events can be like those following natural disasters, terror attacks, or armed conflicts.
- Protests, even nonviolent, can be associated with negative behavioral health outcomes.
- Reduce your exposure to media and social media.
- Reach out to colleagues, friends, and family members to maintain connection, share information, and support each other.
- Consider the potential need for mental or behavioral health support after an event. Plan for how you will engage support services, if needed.

ⁱ <https://medium.com/wadepthealth/risking-your-health-to-fight-racism-thank-you-7a528a692f81>

Tips for protecting yourself from harmful emotional impacts:

- Maintain a regular schedule of eating, sleeping, and daily routine if possible.
- Gather community support. Reach out to friends and family members to maintain connections, share information, and support each other.
- Reduce exposure to media and social media, particularly if you notice decreased mood, increased irritability, or difficulty with sleep or concentration.
- [Talk with children](#)ⁱⁱ about current events at a level they can understand. Explain what is happening, and reassure them that you will keep them safe. Regularly engage children in [mindfulness practices](#)ⁱⁱⁱ to help protect them from trauma.
- It is **okay** to reach out for help with your mental health.
 - Pay attention to signs that you are experiencing increased anxiety or depression and reach out to your healthcare provider for assistance if you become concerned that the way you feel is having a significant impact on your daily behavior or choices.
 - If you or a loved one is having a crisis, call 866-4-CRISIS.

To request this document in another format, call 1-800-525-0127. Deaf or hard of hearing customers, please call 711 ([Washington Relay](#)) or email civil.rights@doh.wa.gov

References

¹ <https://study.com/academy/lesson/peaceful-protest-definition-examples.html>

² <https://definitions.uslegal.com/r/riot/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.apa.org/topics/journalism-facts/talking-children>

ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/sites/default/files/pubs/FS_0040.pdf