

# Chaos at the Capitol: How Do You Cope When You Witness Violence and Trauma - Even From Afar

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*The mob terrorizing the Capitol exposed lawmakers to a trauma that most had never experienced. Patrice Harris, MD, offers advice on how to handle the events.*

NEW YORK, NY, USA, January 8, 2021 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Images of a dangerous mob climbing scaffolding and breaking windows to storm the United States Capitol, demanding that the presidential election be overturned, were broadcast around the globe.



The mob terrorizing the Capitol exposed lawmakers to a trauma most had never experienced. Though there are many variables that are out of our individual control, there are steps we can take to cope."

*Patrice Harris, MD*

It was the first time the Capitol had been breached since the British attacked it during the War of 1812.

As it played out, several lawmakers, still rattled, recounted the frightening events they'd experienced to television reporters.

Meanwhile, most of America watched the chaos play out

from a distance via cell phones, tablets, and TV screens.

Many might assume that only those who directly experienced the event would experience trauma. But they would be wrong.

While directly experiencing violent events in person is traumatic, simply witnessing them virtually can be disturbing enough to lead to distressing thoughts, feelings, and even physical symptoms, including headaches and stomachaches.

The hopeful news is that we humans are incredibly resilient and have the capacity to work through the stress elicited by these experiences. And we are not helpless. There are steps we can take, both individually and collectively, to cope.

Know That You Experienced Something Real

[Watching traumatic events](#) unfold directly or indirectly (on TV) gets processed by the brain in the same way. It's important to note that sometimes the signs of distress occur immediately, and

sometimes they can be delayed — even by years. Signs of response to trauma include sustained sadness, anxiety, depressed moods, impaired function in daily life, poor appetite, weight loss or gain, and sustained feelings of hopelessness or helplessness.

### Tune Out

It's important to not overconsume the images. Watching these events repeatedly on television, or following every twist and turn on social media, will just reignite the trauma.

### Don't Pretend It's Not Happening

We've all witnessed stress-producing events: the pandemic, the recent election, police brutality. First give yourself permission to experience all that you are feeling. These feelings are your own, and they are valid, so give yourself the grace and space to deal with them. Are you angry, afraid, anxious, sad, or frustrated? Acknowledging and identifying these feelings can help you begin to address them.

### When It Comes to Coping, Find What Works Best for You

I often say we are all in the same storm, but we're not in the same boat. Different people have different lived experiences, different vantage points, and different needs. There is no one right way to cope, and no one way to work through the anger, stress, and trauma. Use your usual coping skills: Meditate, pray, exercise, connect with and spend time with a loved one, or take extra "me time."

### Skip the Urge to Self-Medicate

While it may be tempting, this is not the time to have an extra glass of wine or use food, drugs, or tobacco to manage your emotions. Relying on these things can leave you with other problems when this crisis passes.

### Make Sure You're Accurately Informed

Make sure you are getting accurate, factual information about new developments and events from reputable sources. Getting bogged down by rumors and conspiracy theories will needlessly add to your anxiety.

### Stick to Your Routine

Following an established routine can make things feel more normal and calming, whether that's having dinner at the same time, watching your favorite TV show, or going for a walk with a friend. In the midst of the pandemic, routines may be new, but they are still important. It allows us to control what we can.

### Words Matter

When describing traumatic or disturbing events, using accurate and appropriate words is key. Truth telling, transparency, and trust building allow informed dialogue — dialogue that respects the moment. Instead of describing the events at the Capitol as a protest by patriots, call it what it was: an attempted coup by a lawless mob. Youth and families from communities of color also

see how language and law enforcement behavior differ based on race.

### Ask for Help

There's no shame in acknowledging you need help. You can start with a trusted friend or your faith leader. But don't delay if you think you may need professional help. Therapists, counselors, psychologists, and psychiatrists are all trained to help, especially in these difficult times.

### Allow Children to Talk About Their Feelings, and Help Them to Process Events

It's not uncommon for a child to become fearful, distressed, or confused after a traumatic event. The good news is that children are emotionally resilient. In the meantime, here's how you can help them deal with the trauma.

Take their concerns seriously. Your child's fears may be unrealistic, but they are real to them. It's important to listen and respond without mockery in an open, honest, and supportive manner. Remember to use age appropriate language. Be in tune with your child's unique needs. Our children are already dealing with the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic; many of them are grieving their "normal" lives, missing friends and family, and anxious about the future. Daily check-ins to discuss thoughts and feelings, and talking about stress, can be helpful.

Don't make assumptions.

Instead of saying "I know you're angry or frightened," let them tell you what they're feeling. It allows them to be honest about their emotions instead of trying to meet your expectations.

Explain the reality. As adults, we understand that news outlets will run the same B-roll of the traumatic event over and over, but your child may believe it's a new event each time. Explain that the traumatic event is over, and find something more age appropriate for them for them to watch. I lean on one of my many favorite quotes from Mr. Rogers: "Look for the helpers." There are people who are working on the situation.

Don't medicalize normal reactions. Like adults, it's normal for children to experience negative emotions after a traumatic event, so don't overreact and possibly exacerbate their negative experiences. If the feelings persist, however, consider professional help.

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