



Helping Families Cope with Violence and Disaster



A UNITED SIKHS Guide for Families Exposed to Violence or Disaster

Violence (such as war or shootings) and natural disasters (such as hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes and tsunamis) can be very traumatic and distressing for a family, and especially for children.

The UNITED SIKHS Emergency Response Team works with families and communities on an international and local scale to assist them in coping with and overcoming the trauma after violence and disaster occur.

The constituents of our team includes Trauma Counselors and Volunteers who help the community members overcome post traumatic stress related effects of these events.

This fact sheet offers steps that parents, caregivers, communities, Gurdwaras and the general public can take to help their members cope with violence and/or natural disasters:

1. Staying safe on site of an event involving violence.
2. Coping in the first days and weeks after violence and/or disasters.
3. Reaction of children to trauma.
4. Actions parents and caregivers can take.
5. Preparing your family for a disaster.
6. Preparing for an act of Terrorism.
7. What to do if you get a threatening phone call or package.
8. Actions that the Gurdwara can take.
9. Additional Resources

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Staying Safe when you are on site of a disaster

Assess the Situation

STAY CALM AND ASSESS THE SITUATION

- This will allow you to figure out what is happening, what the threat level is, and the proximity of the perpetrator(s).

GET OUT

- Can you safely escape?
- DO NOT try to gather your belongings. You may be tempted to grab your purse/bag, car keys or cell phones, but you may be wasting valuable time.

HIDEOUT

- Is there a good place to hide? Find a hiding spot that will protect you from gunshots. Examples of such spots include: brick walls, large trees, retention walls, parked vehicles or any other protective covers that may stop bullet penetration.
- Is it a safe place to hide out for an extended period of time?
- Spread out and do not huddle or all stand/hide in one area. Groups are an easy target and being crowded in a limited space can make it difficult to escape.
- Try to keep calm and quiet to avoid alerting the perpetrator(s) of your location/whereabouts.

If you are outside when the shooting occurs

- Drop to the ground immediately, face down as flat as possible. If you are within 15-20 feet of a safe place or cover, duck and run to it.
- Move or crawl away from gunfire. Try to utilize objects as obstructions between you and the gunfire. Please keep in mind that many objects that are used for cover may conceal you from sight but are not bulletproof.
- When you reach a place of relative safety, stay down and do not move. Do not peek or raise your head in an effort to see what may be happening. Wait and listen for directions from public safety and/or law enforcement personnel.

Assess the Situation

Remember **S.A.F.E.**

- **S**tay Calm
- **A**ssess the situation
- **F**ind a place to hide
- **E**xit out/Evacuate

Tips for Staying Safe

- Run to a room if you are in the open
- Secure the room after getting every one in safely
- Stay away from windows and doors

Staying Safe on Site of a Disaster:

Call for help

- DO NOT assume someone else must have done it already. Be proactive.
- If you are outside and you hear gunshots inside the building, call 911 immediately and keep them informed of the situation.
- Be calm in providing the police with the information they need. In doing so, law enforcement members will be more efficient and quick in their response to help you.

Information to provide law enforcement :

- Provide location of incident: building name, floor level, room number
- Describe briefly what is happening (i.e. man or woman with a gun shooting)
- Provide your name and phone number
- Provide suspect physical description
- Give a description of the weapon being used.

Information for the Police

Remember **L.A.W.**

- **L**ocation - Provide location information
- **A**bout - Brief description of what's going on
- **W**ho - Give your name and phone number, provide the suspects physical description, describe the weapon

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If you are Trapped

- Try to call for help. If you cannot speak leave the phone line open so the police can hear what is going on.
- Make a collective plan for survival (when possible).
- If you are trapped with the perpetrator and he/she isn't physically harming you, do as they say. Do not do anything to provoke them. Do what they ask and do not make any sudden moves.
- If he/she is shooting or begins to shoot, run in zig-zags away from him or attack back, if you are able to do so safely.
- Attempting to overcome the suspect with force is a last resort that should only be considered in the most extreme circumstances. Only you can decide if this is something you should do.

Coping in the First Days and Weeks

Natural disasters and violence can cause mental and physical trauma that requires additional support and guidance to recover from. The physical trauma that occurs, can range from physical injury to nervous muscle twitching. The emotional trauma may manifest itself as sleep disturbances, irritability, lack of concentration, anxiety, bed-wetting in children, and a fear that the incident may occur again.

The response exhibited may depend on a number of factors, including :

- Exposure to the event: Seeing injured or dying people, being exposed to a direct threat to your life, or sustaining an injury yourself.
- Displacement because the event may lead to losing contact with family, living in temporary housing or having a financial burden.
- Previous experience with such disasters
- Personal loss

Depending on an individuals reaction, the recovery can take a long time. Some individuals may recover within weeks, while others may need longer time to recover especially in incidences where someone is grieving. Some individuals may need help from a trained mental health professional.

You can help others by:

- Finding a safe place to live
- Finding food
- Getting help if you need it
- Keeping children safe
- Staying calm and hopeful
- Connecting to family members and friends

Avoid the following:

- Asking for personal details
- Asking for stories of losses
- Making promises you cannot keep
- Giving negative comments about help provided or suggesting how people should feel or act.

Children's Reaction to Trauma

Children are very easily traumatized. They also have a wide variance in their response to trauma, that may occur immediately or many weeks and months after the incident. Their reaction to such events may manifest itself as a physical change: bed wetting or nightmares, or through emotional changes: they may become easily irritable or angry and cry constantly. Such events are very frightening to children and so it is important to provide them with positive support from their parents or caregivers to help them overcome their fears.

Listed below is a summary of the most common responses among children of differing age groups:

Ages birth through 5

- Increased irritability, constant crying or screaming more than usual
- Clinging to caregiver or parents.
- Regressing in learned behaviors such as thumb sucking, bedwetting, and being afraid of the dark.

Ages 6 through 11

- A preoccupation with loss: constantly wanting to talk about it.
- Isolating themselves, being quiet or depressed.
- Behavioral changes: outbursts of anger, being aggressive, problems with sleep, and nightmares.
- Refusing to go to school and/or performing poorly in school.

Ages 12 through 18

- Engaging in risk-taking behaviors such as reckless driving.
- Drug or alcohol use and abuse
- Behavioral changes: being disrespectful, disruptive or destructive
- Physical complaints
- Depression or suicidal thoughts

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Actions Parents and Caregivers can take:

Do not assume that the child does not know anything about the incident:

News and social media expose children to multiple reports and updates about the events. The children know more than you may think they do.

Encourage the child to talk

Let the child know that you are available to discuss any concerns that they may have. Be alert to any behavioral changes in the child and bring up the conversation. Let them know its okay to discuss the event. Listen to them and answer their questions honestly.

Reassure them about their safety

After the exposure, the child may fear the re-occurrence of the disaster. Reassure them that they are safe. Involve them in planning and practicing your family's disaster plan. Be ready to answer their questions.

Let them express their feelings

Children may feel that they must hide their pain, anger and grief. Be patient and allow them to express the full range of their emotions. Be a patient and active listener. Avoid discouraging comments.

Take proactive actions

Write a letter, get involved in volunteering with relief organizations, or collect a donation. Let the child proactively pick what they would like to get involved in.

Seek professional help

Seek professional help if you feel that you are overwhelmed or unable to help the child cope with his/her feelings.

Preparing your Family for a Disaster

News reports, live coverage with real-time images, social media frenzy can add to the fear. Limit the exposure of media to the child. Sit together as a family and discuss your family disaster plan.

Do a risk assessment

Call your local government offices and ask about what local risks exist for you and your family (make sure to check up on risks at your work and school as well). Seek information on community warning systems, community disaster response plans, community evacuation plans and routes. Make note of nearby designated disaster shelters.

Create a family disaster plan

- Discuss what you have learned above.
- Determine a location while you are away from your home and at your workplace or school, where you plan to meet in the event of a disaster.
- Also determine a location near your house where you plan to meet following emergency situations such as fire.
- Contact a family member or friend who lives outside your area to be your emergency contact to call and stay with, in case you are unable to return home.
- Do not forget about your pets. They need to have a place to stay in case of an evacuation.
- Practice and maintain the plan. You can also have a written copy in place where it can be periodically read.
- Test your smoke detectors routinely, conduct fire drills, and practice your emergency evacuation plans.
- Assemble a disaster supply kit and have it updated routinely and readily available at all times.

Preparing for an Act of Terrorism

Stay vigilant of your surroundings

- Stay informed of what is going on in your neighborhood.
- Report any suspicious activities or packages to local authorities.
- Have an emergency plan in place for alerting people in case of a threat.

To get local FBI field office information go to <http://www.fbi.gov/contact-us/field/field-offices>

In case you receive a Bomb Threat

- Keep calm
- If the threat is made on the phone, ask the caller to repeat himself and record all details diligently. Pay attention to background noises or any clues of the caller's location.
- If the threat is in the form of a letter, save all materials including the envelop. Place it in a plastic bag to avoid smearing fingerprints.
- Get accurate information regarding the location of the bomb.
- Report the threat immediately to local law enforcement agencies, ATF, and FBI.
- Evacuate the building and wait for the authorities to arrive.

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If you Get a Threatening Phone Call or Package

What to do in case of a threatening call:

- Take note of the calling number if possible.
- Ask the nearest person to call 911 and inform them of the situation. This can simply be done by writing "call 911" on a nearby piece of paper or even mouthing the words quietly.
- Try to keep the caller on the phone as long as possible so an accurate trace can be made on the call. Try to ask the caller as many questions as possible. Make sure to keep a list of questions regularly near the phone in addition to this guide.
- Write down as accurate a description of the call as possible, including the exact time of the call. Listen closely for background noises, tones, and accents.

When Encountering Suspect Letters and Packages:

- The following may cause you to suspect a letter or package:
 - If name and title of addressee are not accurate.
 - If there is no return address, or the sender is not known to the addressee.
 - If the handwriting is distorted.
 - If the packaging is unprofessionally wrapped, uneven, bulky, or lopsided.
 - If the package/letter contains bulges or soft spots.
 - If the poorly wrapped package is marked "Fragile-Handle With Care," "Rush," or has unusual restrictions such as "Personal" or "Private."
 - If there is an excess amount of postage.
 - If there are any protruding wires or tin foil.
 - If the package makes a buzzing/ticking or unusual noise, a sloshing sound or emits an odor.
- Do not attempt to open the package. Call the local law enforcement agencies or 911.
- Isolate the package and evacuate the building

Actions for the Gurdwara

Prevent the threat

It is advised to increase awareness about Sikhism in your surrounding communities. Involve your community in your activities, and stay active in various town, school and state activities. Be a part of the community you live and worship in.

- Organize tours of the Gurdwara.
- Host joint learning activities for Sikhs and non-Sikhs alike.
- Create a volunteer group that is responsible for reaching out to the community.

Take Precautions

- Be wary of any unusual or suspicious persons, packages, or activity.
- Designate safety zones within the Gurdwara and nearby for people to move to in case of an emergency.
- Communicate and educate your community of the emergency exits, evacuation plans, and designated safety zones.
- Consider investing in security cameras, exterior lighting or a burglary alarm system.
- Request additional patrol by police or security guards in the vicinity of the Gurdwara, especially during busy times.
- Replace hollow core doors with solid doors.
- Build strong relationships and open communication with your local law enforcement and other officials.
- Ask the local police departments community relations officer to give suggestions for further security.

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Safety Checklist

- Evacuation Plan
- Designated Safety Zones
- Make sure unused doors stay locked
- Ensure compliance with all fire and safety requirements for the building
- Have a plan to contain the perpetrator(s) in one area to minimize casualties

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Additional Resources

Get more information about UNITED SIKHS at www.unitedsikhs.org or email us at contact@unitedsikhs.org

The list below includes agencies that may have additional information on helping families cope with Violence and Disasters:

Center for Mental Health Services

Information is available online at :

<http://www.mentalhealth.org/cmhs/emergencyservices/index.htm>

American Psychological Association (APA)

750 First Street, NE Washington, DC 20002-4242

Phone: 202-336-5500

Web site: <http://www.apa.org>

Center for Mental Health Services (CMHS)

Emergency Services and Disaster Relief Branch

5600 Fishers Lane, Room 17C-20, Rockville, MD 20857

Phone: 240-276-1310

Web site: <http://www.mentalhealth.org/cmhs/emergencyservices/index.htm>

National Institute of Mental Health

Toll-free information service line at 1-866-615-6464

Information is also available online at :

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/anxiety-disorders/index.shtml>

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)

500 C Street, SW Washington, DC 20472;

Phone: 202-566-1600

Web site: <http://www.fema.gov>