



## **Shattered Comfort Zones**

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The mass shooting at the Century 16 movie complex in Aurora, Colorado on Friday, July 20, 2012 has shattered the sense of security felt in communities around the country. The basic assumption that families and friends can relax and enjoy a summer evening at the movies without fear is gone. While any traumatic event has a significant impact on the lives of those involved, when the event occurs in an environment where violence is not expected, it can be particularly shocking. Soldiers and their families have an expectation that violence is a part of the job and even law enforcement officers recognize that there is an increased level of danger in their line of work. However, when violence occurs in schools, churches, shopping centers, or as it did on Friday, in a movie theater, peoples' basic assumption, that these places are safe, is shattered. The healing process after such a traumatic event includes processing the event and rebuilding basic assumptions. We offer the following in an attempt to assist those impacted by Friday's events, who may have questions or concerns about what they or their loved ones are experiencing and how they can move forward.

### General Response Pattern Following a Traumatic Event:

Shock: Psychological shock is often the initial response to a traumatic incident and is comprised of a host of discernable reactions, including denial, disbelief, numbness, giddiness, bravado, anger, depression, and isolation. Psychological shock reactions, although common following trauma, are not limited to trauma. They can occur in response to any significant event. For example, football players who have just won the Super Bowl frequently respond to questions during post-game interviews by saying, "I can't believe it" (disbelief) or "It hasn't sunk in yet" (no impact). These same statements of disbelief and shock are common following a traumatic event as well. In this most recent mass shooting, we have heard many of those that were in the theater say, "I thought it was part of the movie" or "I just couldn't believe that was really happening."

Impact: After the passage of some time (the amount of time differs for different people) there is the impact stage. Impact normally involves the realization that, "I could have been killed" or "This was a horrible tragedy." These thoughts and the feelings that accompany them can be overwhelming and difficult to cope with.

Recovery: With proper support and time to process, impact slowly makes way for recovery. Individuals can experience varying degrees of recovery. While some individuals experience no or little recovery after experiencing a traumatic event, others



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experience full recovery. Full recovery involves disconnecting the memory of the incident from any disabling emotional responses, and placing the incident into psychological history. Part of the recovery process includes accepting the “emotional roller-coaster,” where some days you may feel like you are getting stronger and moving forward, while on other days you may be short-tempered and irritable and want to isolate from family and friends.

### Emotional Recovery

Crisis recovery begins even in the midst of the crisis. First responders involved in the Aurora shooting should be commended for their quick and coordinated response, which saved many lives that night. For all those effected that are now beginning the journey to recovery, we realize this can often be a struggle. Survivors frequently talk about “racing thoughts” and the “loop” in their brains, which references the continuous cycling of memories that they cannot seem to turn off. This occurs as the brain attempts to organize and process the experience and move the memory from short-term memory into long-term memory. Talking about the experience and reactions to what happened is one way to organize the experience for the brain. An effective alternative to talking about the event is to write about the experience. Both talking and writing about experiences and reactions to traumatic events allows memories to move from short-term to long-term memory areas of the brain and decreases the likelihood that the experience will continue to “loop” in the mind. We encourage people to seek professional assistance if they get “stuck” if they don’t feel like themselves, or if loved ones notice dysfunctional responses or behaviors.

### Rebuilding Shattered Comfort Zones

Following emotional recovery is the process of dealing with shattered comfort zones. After 9/11, many people said they would be afraid to fly in the future. Following the shooting at Columbine High School, the initial reaction of many parents around the country was to consider pulling their children out of school for fear that a similar tragedy would happen in their schools. Many individuals have already said that they do not want to go to a movie theater again. Experiencing fear is certainly a natural first reaction to having comfort zones shattered and avoidance is a very natural coping mechanism for dealing with traumatic events. Avoiding people or places that trigger memories of a trauma decreases the likelihood of re-experiencing fear or anxiety. Unfortunately, avoidance cannot be the only coping strategy used in the recovery process as an individual’s world will become very small if every place that may be a target of violence is avoided. Instead, it is important to develop a variety of coping strategies for dealing with the reality that violence is a part of our world and often hits closer to home than we were expecting. While you cannot always control events, you can control your response. Part of this process is learning to be vigilant of your surroundings and teach yourself and your loved ones to engage in “anticipatory thinking.” Anticipatory thinking or “what if” thinking represents the process of recognizing and preparing for potential risk even before any risk is encountered.



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### Conclusion

Violence is unfortunately becoming more of a reality even if it is relatively rare in relatively safe communities. In the wake of this crisis, the community needs to come together to in order to recover and rebuild.

*The staff at Nicoletti-Flater Associates will be keeping the families, friends, and first responders involved in this devastating tragedy in our thoughts and prayers.*