

Discrimination During Times of Crisis and Uncertainty

Overview

Understanding discrimination and ways to confront it during times of crisis and uncertainty.

- Understanding discrimination
- Understanding and coping with feelings of anger
- What to do if you experience discrimination
- Staying strong during difficult times

Hijackings, bombings, and other acts of violence and terrorism can leave us feeling powerless. During times of crisis, our fears are heightened, we feel a sense of helplessness, and there is the natural tendency to want to find something or someone to blame. We want quick answers and conclusions to painful and complex problems. But it's more important than ever during difficult times to remain clearheaded, in control of your feelings and actions, and not to rush to judgment.

Understanding discrimination

Discrimination -- or the unfavorable treatment of others based on prejudice -- occurs more frequently during times of crisis and raises our levels of fear and uncertainty. It can distract us from taking actions that ultimately lead to healing and resolution. Discrimination can have serious legal consequences for those who participate in it.

During times of crisis and uncertainty, there are steps you can take to confront discrimination. You can

- *Resist making judgments without complete information.* Your friends, relatives, and co-workers, and commentators on the radio or TV may have theories about who is responsible for the act of violence or terrorism. But until accurate information from a trustworthy and reliable source is available, resist the rush to judgment. It is often weeks or months before authorities know for certain what individuals or organizations are responsible for acts of terrorism or violence.
- *Avoid attributing the acts of violence or terrorism of a few individuals to an entire race, religion, or group of people.*
- *Avoid listening to or spreading rumors.*
- *Learn more about people of other races, religions, and cultures.* Many acts of discrimination or harassment are a result of a lack of understanding or knowledge of a culture that's different from our own. Accurate information about people of other races, religions, political systems, and cultures will help you better understand today's changing world. Read articles from reputable newspapers and magazines and talk with knowledgeable people.
- *Try to see people as individuals and not just as members of a cultural, racial, or other group.* Avoid stereotypes, which are grossly exaggerated assumptions about a group that are often false. Stereotypes can cause mistrust and misunderstandings.

Think about your own racial or ethnic background and about some of the negative and incorrect stereotypes others may have of your “group.” Consider the many ways you are different from others who share the same racial, religious, or cultural group identity.

- *Examine your own attitudes and feelings about people from other cultures, races, and religions.*
 - Do you react to people of different religions, cultures, and backgrounds with openness, respect, and an interest in learning about them?
 - Do you teach tolerance and acceptance of difference to your children?

Understanding and coping with feelings of anger

Most people respond to acts of violence or terrorism with shock. But once the shock begins to wear off, many people find themselves feeling angry. They feel angry at the individual or group they believe to be responsible for the violence. Feelings of anger are normal. What’s important is to cope with your anger in a healthy way.

Remember that

- *It is never OK to behave with anger or resentment against an individual or group.* You may need to talk about your feelings with a trusted friend, family member, or counselor. Expressing your anger toward others verbally or physically is never OK.
- *It is never OK to vent your anger toward an individual or a group by mail, over the telephone, or on the Internet.* Hate crimes, including those committed in Internet chat rooms or on Web sites, are illegal.
- *If you are having trouble managing your anger, it’s important to seek help.* Your human resources (HR) department, employee assistance program (EAP), or employee resource program can provide you with resources and support. If you are not sure how to contact the EAP or employee resource program, find out how to do so from your HR department.
- *You can channel your anger into efforts to help others.* Write letters, make donations, or otherwise become involved with relief efforts. Anger may be caused by feelings of helplessness and frustration that there’s nothing you can do in the face of trauma. Finding things in your life that you do have control over can be very helpful. One way to take control is to help others.
- *If you are a parent, remember that your child is learning powerful lessons from you about how to react to a crisis or tragedy.* A lesson you want to teach your children is the distinction between feeling angry and acting on your anger. Acting on your anger is not a lesson you want to teach. Instead, help your child understand that

it's normal to feel angry and to want to find someone to blame, but focusing efforts on helping others is more important.

What to do if you experience discrimination

If you, a family member, or someone you know experiences discrimination or harassment, seek support. Harassment can include verbal comments, written comments, or behavior that is meant to annoy, disturb, or frighten another person.

- *If you receive hate mail, hate phone calls, or threats, file a report with the police immediately.* Ask that the incident be treated as a hate crime. A hate crime is a violent act against a person, persons, property, or organization because of the group the person identifies with or belongs to. Hate mail and threats can be very frightening and may cause you to want to avoid going to work or other public places. Seek support from family, friends, and your EAP. If you receive threatening or offensive phone calls, messages, or e-mail at work, report the harassment to your manager or your HR department. If you are not sure how to approach your manager or HR department, the EAP can help you find support from your company.
- *Document the incident.* Write down exactly what was said and/or done by the offender. Save evidence. For example, by taking photographs.
- *Follow up with investigators.*
- *If you are ever worried about your safety or your family's safety, contact the police.*
- *Inform trusted neighbors, family members, and friends about the crime.* Neighbors may be willing to keep an eye out for strangers in the area, or unusual events. Friends may be able to provide support in other ways.
- *Seek support from community organizations.* Contact local support groups, organizations, or your faith community for support.
- *If you are concerned that your child may be the victim of discrimination, talk with school authorities about your concerns.* Ask for support from your child's teacher, administrators, and the school psychologist. It is important to make teachers and school officials aware of your concerns. Offer to speak with teachers or children to help them learn more about your culture. Urge school officials to look for opportunities to deepen understanding among faculty and students of diverse cultural attitudes and behaviors, and racial and gender stereotyping.
- *Talk with your child and allow him to express any fears or concerns he might have.* Let your child know that discrimination is wrong. Consider talking with a therapist or counselor if your child is having behavioral problems or trouble coping.

Staying strong during difficult times

- *Consider talking with a professional if your feelings about the traumatic event are affecting your personal or work life.* For example, if you notice that you are very irritable or have a short fuse, your EAP or employee resource program can help.
- *Try to go about your usual life as much as possible and to stick with normal routines.* Getting enough rest, eating nutritious food, seeking support from family and friends, and exercising are all important to help you cope during a difficult time.