Coping with Grief and Loss After a Traumatic Event

Loss and grief are natural parts of life, but it can be incredibly hard to cope with them when they are a result of a sudden death, an accident, or a traumatic event such as an earthquake or another disaster. When death occurs violently and unexpectedly, grief may be prolonged. A traumatic event that affects many people shatters our commonly held beliefs about safety and security. Survivors may experience intense emotional reactions, such as feelings of sadness, helplessness, fear, vulnerability, and confusion. This article provides information on ways to cope with feelings of grief and loss following a traumatic event.

In the days after a traumatic event
Grief is highly individual, and no two people work through a loss in the same way. However, most people go through normal and predictable stages of grief, though the stages are not necessarily experienced in the same succession for everyone. The stages are described below.

Denial
The early stages of grief often include intense feelings of denial, shock, and anger. Denial may play an especially strong role for people who have lost a loved one in an accident or a traumatic event where the body is missing or not recovered. It is normal for survivors to struggle with feelings of denial following a sudden death if there is no sense of closure. These feelings may continue for days, weeks, or even years, and may even be accompanied by a sense of hope.

Thoughts such as “This can’t be happening” or “There must be some kind of mistake” are common expressions of disbelief. They give you emotional breathing room and protect you from the full effects of devastating news before you are ready to accept it.

In the earliest stages of grief, survivors may cling to the belief that their loved one will be saved even after rescue efforts have ended. Or they may believe he is unconscious somewhere and unable to make contact.

It is important to seek support from others during all the stages of grief, and especially at the beginning.
• **Ask for help from family and friends.** Call friends and relatives and ask them to help you make phone calls, take trips, or complete other tasks in the process of searching for information about loved ones.

• **Talk with people you trust about your fears and anguish.** Talking with friends, family, or a professional counselor may help you work through what you are feeling. You may also want to join a support group. Allow yourself time. Denial is a protective mechanism. It will pass when you are ready to accept your loss.

• **Seek help from rescue and relief agencies.** Crisis counseling may be available through a variety of federal or local organizations. Contact relief agencies such as the American Red Cross (www.redcross.org) or local hospitals for more information.

• **If you are employed, look into helpful benefits at work.** If you don’t know what’s available, ask your manager or human resources (HR) representative to tell you about any programs that could be helpful after a traumatic loss.

• **If, as time goes on, you are not able to acknowledge the loss of a loved one, consider talking with a counselor or therapist.** Your health care provider can give you a referral.

• **Take care of yourself.** You will need all of your strength to cope with a sudden or traumatic loss. Try to eat nutritious meals and try to get enough sleep.

**Anger**
People who are coping with loss as a result of a traumatic event may have very strong feelings of anger. People may blame the government, authorities, or other organizations or individuals for not protecting their loved ones. Sometimes people may even blame the victim for being in the wrong place or for not getting out of danger quickly enough. These are perfectly normal responses. Feelings of anger may be accompanied by irritability or difficulty dealing with authorities during efforts to determine what happened to victims. Here are some ways to cope with feelings of anger:

• **Remember that feelings of anger are normal following a terrible loss.** Talking about them with family and friends may help you calm down.

• **Use exercise as a way to calm yourself.** Go for a walk or find other ways to calm your racing mind or physical symptoms.

• **Avoid directing anger at others.** Expressing anger is part of the grieving process, but physical or verbal attacks against others are never OK.

• **Write in a journal.** Writing down your feelings can help you better understand the event and begin to come to terms with the loss of a loved one.

**In the weeks and months after a traumatic event**
Survivors may struggle with feelings of guilt, sadness, and depression for weeks and months following a traumatic loss.
Bargaining and guilt
People in this stage of the grieving process may want to “cut a deal” with someone or something in the future in exchange for changing what has happened. For example, “I will never snap at my wife again if I find her alive at the hospital today.” They may also become obsessed with all the “what ifs”: What if I hadn’t let her go to work that day? What if he had taken a later plane? What if she hadn’t gone out that night?

A person deep in grief may not think clearly, and may truly believe he or she could have prevented the death of a loved one. Asking these kinds of questions or trying to make “bargains” is a natural part of the grieving process.

Guilt is another common reaction following a traumatic event in which many people lost their lives. Survivors may wonder why they escaped when friends or co-workers were killed. If you are experiencing survivor guilt you can:

- **Acknowledge that you had no control over the situation and are not at fault.** Your actions did not result in the deaths of other people.
- **Talk with others about your feelings.** Your friends or co-workers may be experiencing survivor guilt, too. Sharing these thoughts may be helpful.
- **Turn your guilt into positive action.** Volunteer your time or money, write letters to families of victims, or organize relief efforts at your workplace or in your community. The helplessness and lack of control you feel in the face of a trauma may cause feelings of guilt. Finding things in your life that you can control, like your ability to help others, may help ease feelings of guilt.

Depression
It takes time to come to terms with a major loss, especially if it results from a traumatic event. As reality begins to sink in, it’s normal to feel depressed. You may experience other signs of depression, including:

- a change in appetite (eating too much or not enough)
- the inability to sleep or sleeping all the time
- fatigue or lack of energy
- withdrawing from others and wanting to be left alone
- feeling distracted and unable to concentrate
- mood swings
- feeling that you will never recover
- chronic aches and pains
• weight loss or gain
• uncontrollable crying

It is normal to experience some of these symptoms after a traumatic loss. But if they persist, talk with a professional who can suggest ways to feel better. Seek help right away if you or someone you know has feelings of hopelessness or suicidal thoughts. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-TALK (800-273-8255) will connect you right away to a crisis center in your area that can refer you to health services.

In the weeks and months following a traumatic death:

• *Give yourself permission to grieve.* The healing process begins when you give yourself permission to grieve in your own way and on your own timetable.

• *Expect a wide range of emotions throughout the process.* You may go from feeling extremely angry to sad to numb and back to feeling guilty, all within the day or even the hour.

• *Respect your beliefs.* If spiritual beliefs are a part of your life they can be a great comfort after a loss, particularly after a traumatic event. Religious and cultural customs can provide solace, ritual, and the comfort of others.

**When to seek help**

The final stage of the grief process is coming to acceptance of your loss, honoring the deceased person’s memory, and going on with life though with new perspectives. However, some people may need counseling to cope with a loss. Ask your health care provider to give you a referral if you are experiencing any of the following:

• prolonged depressed feelings, guilt, or rage
• intense yearning for the deceased that doesn’t diminish over time
• thoughts of suicide
• alcohol or drug abuse
• an inability to accomplish the tasks required for daily living
If you are coping with grief after a traumatic event, remember that the program that provided this publication offers many helpful resources.

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