



Duke University Health System Bereavement

Coping After a Traumatic Death



Few events in life are as painful as the traumatic death of a loved one, friend, coworker, or neighbor.

A traumatic death is:

- sudden, unexpected, and/or violent.
- caused by the actions of another person, an accident, suicide, natural disaster, or other catastrophe.

The following describes grief reactions common to all types of losses, and reactions specific to traumatic death survivors.

Common Grief Reactions

Feelings, thoughts and emotions that may feel overwhelming at times:

<i>Denial</i>	<i>Restlessness</i>	<i>Isolation</i>	<i>Resentment</i>	<i>Sense of failure</i>
<i>Anger</i>	<i>Irritability</i>	<i>Deep sadness</i>	<i>Loneliness</i>	<i>Hopelessness</i>
<i>Guilt</i>	<i>Depression</i>	<i>Disbelief</i>	<i>Confusion</i>	<i>Forgetfulness</i>
<i>Crying</i>	<i>Mood swings</i>	<i>Short attention span</i>	<i>Inability to make decisions</i>	

Physical reactions:

<i>Lack of energy</i>	<i>Heart palpitations</i>	<i>Blurred vision</i>	<i>Shortness of breath</i>
<i>Dry mouth</i>	<i>Changes in appetite</i>	<i>Body aches</i>	<i>Fatigue</i>
<i>Weakness</i>	<i>Sleep problems</i>	<i>Muscle weakness</i>	

Behavioral changes:

<i>New or increased use of alcohol or substances</i>	<i>Absenteeism at work</i>
<i>Keeping busy to avoid feelings</i>	<i>Conflict</i>

Reactions Experienced After a Traumatic Death

Shock – Physical and emotional shock may be prolonged, persistent memories or dreams about the event may occur for months. It might be difficult to believe the person is really gone.

Fear and Anxiety – Simple activities like answering the phone, being in the dark, or opening a closed door may cause fear or anxiety. You may no longer feel safe, worry that something bad will happen, or be startled easily.

Anger – Anger and rage come from feelings of helplessness after a traumatic death and can be overwhelming for survivors.

Guilt – Guilt includes regrets about the past, over things done or not done, guilt for surviving. Much guilt that people feel is emotional and not rational, but even this realization does not make the feelings go away.



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Coping with Traumatic Death

- Many experts recommend that survivors confide in someone about their loss, and find a support system. This can be a friend, clergy, or another person who has experienced similar loss.
- Keep in mind that each person grieves in his or her own unique way.
- Each person grieves at his or her own pace, there is no timeline for grief.
- Anniversaries, birthdays and holidays may be especially difficult, so you might want to think about whether to continue old traditions or create some new ones.
- Create a ritual or other way to say “good-bye” to the person who has died.
- Write down your thoughts and feelings; keep a journal, write a letter or a poem.
- Take care of your physical well-being, maintain adequate nutrition, sleep and exercise.
- Be kind to yourself. When you feel ready, begin to go on with your life. Eventually starting to enjoy life again is not a betrayal of your loved one, but rather a sign that you’ve begun to heal.

What Can You Do if You Need Help?

Some people find it helpful to explore feelings and thoughts with someone outside the family who is not directly involved and who will listen (a minister, counselor, or support group). **Know that you are not alone. There are people available to you who understand and care.**

Support group – A safe place where survivors can share their experiences and support each other.

Religious/Spiritual community - People who can help identify spiritual resources that may be comforting for you.

Bereavement counselors - Specialists, who help people adjust to the death of a loved one, try to find a therapist who has experience working with victims of homicide.

Duke Hospital Bereavement Services – Bereavement Services provides a clearinghouse for information, resources and support about grief, loss, dying and death, 877-460-7969.

Local mental health associations - To get more information and referrals.

North Carolina Victims Assistance Network (NC VAN) – To get legal assistance, 800-348-5068.

North Carolina Crime Victims Compensation Commission - 800-826-6200 or 919-733-7974.

Call Your Doctor if You

- Continue to experience intense yearning for the deceased that does not diminish over time.
- Are unable to take care of yourself or your family.
- Have thoughts about harming yourself.
- Become very depressed.
- Start to use, or increase the use of, alcohol or other drugs.

