

Understanding Traumatic Grief

For individuals experiencing the traumatic death of a loved one

Someone you loved may have been suddenly killed or injured and you feel like you have been mentally and emotionally assaulted. Traumatic grief is considered a more complicated grief than a grief that is a result of a natural life experience. Traumatic grief is the result of some violent assault, a homicide, suicide, or a traumatic and unnatural occurrence. It is sudden and intense and personal.

Your feelings and reactions may include preoccupation of thoughts about the type of death, re-experiencing events such as the death notification and having traumatic dreams following your loss. Or you may be experiencing self-blame, avoiding reminders, excessive anger, isolation and withdrawal, having a shattered view of the world, and other intense feelings.

Perhaps you have been given books or been told about grief and have been encouraged to remember all the wonderful times you have had with your loved one. But whenever you think of him or her, all you can think about is the terror of what happened — and you can't think about it very much without getting even more upset. You may be preoccupied with thoughts about the type of death your loved one experienced. You may experience extreme anger or rage. You may experience intrusive images or become preoccupied about the manner of death. If you have these reactions, you may be experiencing traumatic grief. Here are a few things you need to know.

Forget about the “Stages of Grief”. There have been many studies identifying “stages” of grief describing feelings and reactions such as: shock and denial, panic and anxiety, disorganization and despair, yearning and searching, depression and sadness, hope and fulfillment, and readjustment.

Some people find it helpful to talk about stages of grief – that you will first experience certain feelings or reactions as you deal with the trauma. There is no timetable for grief. You may feel many of the emotions described (deep sadness, anger or rage, feeling like you are not quite present, the blackness of depression, trying to accept what happened) all within a few hours or months or years. Do not expect to experience all of these feelings, or have them in a certain order. Everyone grieves differently. An individual experiencing grief goes through their own process in their own time and their own way.

What can you do? When people tell you how you should be feeling and you don't feel that way, or give you advice that makes no sense, gently thank them but don't believe it or accept it *unless it fits for you*. Later on you may want to read or learn more about traumatic grief.

- Consider journaling to vent your strong feelings.
- Get involved with victim/survivor support groups or link with others who have suffered.
- It is healthy and reasonable for co-victims to maintain some sense of contact with your loved one. Talking to them, writing them a letter, creating a memory space, lighting candles, carrying a linking object, etc. These will give you some peace and comfort for as long as you need it.
- Be assertive with those around you and tell them exactly what you do and do not need. Expect that people may often do things out of their own sense of discomfort rather than what is best for you.
- Invite someone to be “on call” for you, perhaps a trusted advocate, or close friend—someone who is willing and able to be there for you when you need someone to talk to.

Expect some fear, anxiety and challenges to your beliefs. You may wonder why you feel so unsafe when the tragedy happened to someone else — not you. Most of us live day to day with a sense that the rules will be fair, that good things happen to good people. The rules don't fit any more. “*Why me?*” “*Why us?*” “*Where was God?*” Shattered assumptions can make you feel generally unsettled, wondering what to expect next.

Get involved. If your case is crime related, the Victim’s Bill of Rights in most states gives you opportunities to become involved in the system as a victim, family member of a victim or as a witness. Find out what your state has mandated by contacting the local county or city victim witness assistance office, crime victims’ compensation fund, the prosecutor’s office or state Attorney General’s office.

Recognize that it is impossible to figure it all out now. Concrete information does help. If your loved one is injured, insist that physicians explain his or her condition to you in words you understand. Keep a list of questions. If your loved one was killed as a result of a criminal event, obtain the autopsy report when you want questions answered and have the medical examiner explain it to you. Stay in touch with the investigators and, later on, the prosecutor to learn more about what happened. When charges are filed, ask that they be explained to you along with what evidence is needed to prove the case. Ask for copies of relevant state laws. On the other hand, if you feel you can’t face this information, you do not have to.

Seek help. Get help from trauma specialists, traumatic grief counselors, support groups and other survivors and organizations that can provide you with information and education about your feelings and reactions. Find support from pastoral or spiritual leaders, or other individuals available who are trained to assist you in the healing process.

Don’t compromise your health. You may go to bed feeling exhausted but then awaken shortly, overwhelmed with what has happened, perhaps going over and over the circumstances, playing out dozens of “what if” scenarios. You may not feel like eating — or you may want to eat all the time because eating, in some way, seems to be about all you can do to comfort yourself. Not eating or sleeping can weaken your immunity system and make everything else worse.

Drink plenty of liquids (avoid caffeine and alcohol) even when you don’t want to eat. In a few days, make yourself eat small amounts of healthy foods even if you’re not hungry. Ask your primary care physician for something to help you sleep. This does not need to be a tranquilizer or anything with side effects. It will simply help your body rest enough that your own health is not compromised.

Grief can become clinical depression, especially if you have been depressed before. If you begin to feel helpless and worthless, excessively guilty about what happened, or begin to think there’s no way out of your emotional pain, you may benefit from a mild antidepressant for a while. You owe it to yourself to begin to get help and feel better.

Develop resiliency for the long haul. For many individuals there is no “closure” for traumatic events. However, there are opportunities to gain a level of healing over time.

- What internal and external resources and resiliencies do you have?
- How have you confronted challenges and disappointments in the past?
- What did you learn from your prior experiences?
- What can you do to develop physical, emotional and spiritual strengths to help?

Draw on your spiritual resources also. If the God of your understanding has been with you through other life experiences, it is likely that that same spiritual support is available for you now. Sorting out your beliefs to accommodate what has happened will take time.

Get help for yourself, join a support group and get involved in helping others. Find a way to make this event meaningful to you in helping others.

Understanding Traumatic Grief was written by Janice Harris Lord,
with contributions by Deborah Spungen, Jayne Crisp, Carol Hacker, CIGNA and greatergreenvillemhc.com
For additional information on trauma and grief, visit the Association of Traumatic Stress website at:

<https://www.atss.info/>