

Traumatic Grief Reactions & Coping Tips

More than 45,000 people are victims of homicide annually in the United States. More than 130,000 survivors are left each year to cope with the deep and bitter grief of a loved one's violent death. These statistics, as do all statistics, have names. They are someone's parent, grandparent, spouse, sibling, child, neighbor, coworker and friend.

When a loved one dies violently, you are almost certain to feel shock, disbelief and confusion. A kind of numbness may envelop you. That's nature's insulation, cushioning the blow. A sense of intense turmoil may alternate with the feeling of numbness. If you are a survivor of violent death, the days and months to come might bring:

Immediate physical and mental reactions to the crisis.

These may include inability to sleep, lack of appetite, anxiety, numbness, nausea, fatigue, feeling alienated from the world, a sense of isolation, anger, fear, intense sadness, or an inability to concentrate. Survivors commonly feel hopeless and helpless. In addition to the loss of a loved one, they may experience a sense of loss of control over their lives, loss of security, or loss of trust in God or people around them. With adults and especially for children, reactions may include loss of well-being, a lost sense of fairness, and a feeling of vulnerability.

Longer-term physical and mental reactions.

These may include intrusive thoughts, nightmares, terror attacks, a continued sense of isolation, difficulty in communicating, sleep disturbances, depression, and inability to feel emotion, disruption of sexual activity, startled reactions, irritability, and poor concentration.

Memory-triggered crisis reactions.

Everyday events might trigger crisis reactions in survivors similar to those they suffered because of the death. Anger and rage are normal. You might become angry at police for not preventing the crime, at physicians and nurses for not saving your loved one, or at the person who caused the death, even if it was an accident. You might be angry at the one who died for being careless. The anniversary of the death is a painful reminder. Holidays, birthdays and other once-happy occasions are marred.

You're going to make it!

You are in a major crisis. But you will get through it. With time, and with help from family and friends, and with a combination of struggle and surrender, you will see daylight again. You will learn and heal and grow. In your heart there will always be an ache for your lost loved one, but your incredible pain will gradually ease. You will get better.

Reach out to friends and relatives.

Let people know what has happened. Reach out for support. If you have to go to the police station or funeral home, take others with you. The supportive presence of those who live on and care about you will give you the strength to face the trauma and keep going. This will be true throughout your painfully slow journey through grief to healing. Allow friends to help out. Accept both emotional support and assistance with daily tasks. Ask for what you need.

Accept and express your feelings.

Whatever your emotions and thoughts, they are part of the healing process of grief work. Stay open to your feelings as they arise. You are grieving not only the death of your loved one, but also how he or she died. Accept the intensity of your feelings. Be very compassionate and kind to yourself. Realize that your anguish, rage and confusion are the beginnings of a natural healing process—a process you cannot rush, a process that will have a variety of ups and downs. You might feel guilty for having allowed your loved one to go out that evening, for having moved to a city with more crime, for having not spent more time with the victim. Guilt, regret and rage are normal. Fear and panic are also common after the trauma of violent death. Remember that the only feelings that don't heal are the ones we push away or hide. Express yourself. Let it out. Talk. Cry. Scream. Pound with your fist on a pillow or sofa. Run laps. Just don't bottle up your anger; it causes stress and can affect job performance and relationships. You have to deal with your sorrow and anger. The only way out of your pain is through it.

Be patient with yourself.

No matter what form it takes, a violent death makes the grieving process more difficult.

As bad as it is in the beginning, your sorrow and sense of loss will probably intensify as the weeks roll by. You will eventually feel better, but it will be a gradual process marked by unexpected flare-ups of grief. Don't defeat yourself by having unrealistic expectations. Be patient with yourself, and the healing process will move along much more smoothly.

When to seek professional help.

If you find yourself feeling consistently hostile, depressed or fearful; if your thoughts keep dwelling on the details of the violent death; if you're having regular nightmares; if your health has suffered markedly; or if you simply want an objective person to talk with—reach out for assistance. Bereavement counselors, the clergy, mental health professionals, and family therapists are among the trained professionals who can assist you. At times we all need a helping hand. Reaching out for professional guidance is a mark of courage and intelligence.

Suggestions for your journey of healing

As you move into and through your grief, these guidelines may ease your way:

- **Breathe!** In the stress of grieving, we often tighten our muscles, particularly in the lower stomach area. Thus we fail to breathe properly, de-energizing and stressing ourselves. Occasionally take in a slow, deep breath: Allow your belly to expand as if it were a balloon filling with air. Then relax as your breath gently, naturally flows out. As you go through the day, notice your breathing. Avoid tensing the muscles of your belly. Breathe with a soft belly.
- **Be kind to yourself.** You have been brutally wounded. You need to give yourself special care. Tune into and respond to the needs of your body. Get some exercise, such as a walk in the fresh air, and take plenty of time for rest and sleep. Do your best to eat food that comforts you and properly fuels your body. Remember to drink enough water and other fluids. And be very accepting, understanding and gentle with yourself—just as you would to a dear friend if he or she were suffering.
- **Share your grief.** Though you will need time to yourself, it's also essential that you talk about your grief. Find at least one person whom you like and trust, and pour out your heart and soul. Do this regularly, as long as you feel the need. The violent death of a loved one is a devastating experience; you will probably need to periodically talk about it even well into the future.

• **Consider joining a support group.** Like many before you, you may derive invaluable assistance from a bereavement support group. It helps so much to share with and support those who, like yourself, are grieving the death of someone close.

• **Write your grief.** Daily, or perhaps several times a week, record your thoughts and feelings in a journal, diary or notebook. Let your pen do the talking as you express yourself to your deceased loved one, to the person who caused the death, or perhaps to God if you are a person of faith. Or you can write “Dear Diary” letters, “talking” to your diary as if it were a trusted and wise friend; and then letting your diary respond back to you through your own pen. It’s a creative way of dialoguing with your inner self. Putting your genuine thoughts and feelings on paper is a therapeutic, healing experience.

• **Say no to persistent negative thoughts.** You are probably struggling with a variety of repetitive negative thoughts, perhaps mental flashes of the death scene or thoughts of revenge. Acknowledge and face these thoughts. However, once you have felt them, and learned from them, it’s time to release these troublesome thoughts. When unhealthy picture or word thoughts start to crowd in, mentally say “Stop!” while visualizing a large stop sign. Then immediately put your mind on more positive, constructive thoughts. Doing something physical, like taking a walk or talking to another person, can also help you to break loose from self-defeating thoughts.

• **Forgive and let go.** In the aftermath of a violent death, it is common to harbor feelings like blame, guilt, and a desire for revenge. At some point you need to let go and do your best to forgive. **Forgiveness does not condone wrong or hurtful behavior**, but *it can free you* from self-defeating blame, resentment and guilt. Forgiveness also brings peace of mind, freedom of spirit, and an opportunity to make fresh starts. For your own well-being and for the benefit of those around you, try to extend forgiveness to others and to yourself.

• **If you are spiritually inclined, draw on this resource.** Your relationship to God or a guiding power can bring immense comfort in the wake of violent death. Nourish yourself spiritually in whatever way works best for you—prayer, being with nature, meditation, or the drinking in of sacred scripture. Pour out your heart; express your heartache, rage and frustration; ask questions. Then trustfully, patiently open to the inner guidance you receive. Listen to the whispers of your heart and soul.

• **Look for bright spots.** To complete your healing you must continue to stay open to your pain as it arises. But gradually balance that pain by embracing the small, simple gifts of delight that come your way—a beautiful sunset, the laughter of children at play, the caress of a gentle breeze, a co-worker who makes you chuckle, or a warm hug from a dear friend. The more you look for bright spots, the more they will find you and bless you.

PTSD Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

What Are Grounding Skills?

Grounding Skills are interventions that assist in keeping a person in the present. They help to reorient a person to reality and the immediate here-and-now. Grounding skills are useful in many ways. They are particularly helpful with symptoms of dissociation. They can help a person prevent dissociating. However, they can be used to help re-orient oneself when experiencing intense and overwhelming feelings and intense anxiety. They help to regain one's mental focus. These skills usually occur within two specific modalities:

1. Sensory Awareness
2. Cognitive Awareness

Sensory Awareness Grounding Skills

Keep your eyes open, look around the room, notice your surroundings, notice details.

Hold a pillow, stuffed animal or a bell.

Place a cool cloth on your face, or hold something cool such as a can of soda.

Listen to soothing music.

Put your feet firmly on the ground.

FOCUS on someone's voice or a neutral conversation.

Cognitive Grounding Skills

Reorient yourself in place and time by asking yourself some or all of these questions:

1. Where am I?
2. What is today?
3. What is the date?
4. What is the month?
5. What is the year?
6. How old am I?
7. What season is it?
8. Who is the President?

List as many Grounding skills as you can.

Practice several grounding skills every day.

Construct a list of those which are most helpful and effective.

TRAUMATIC EVENTS INFORMATION SHEET

You have experienced a traumatic event. Even though the event may be over, you may now be experiencing or may experience later some strong emotional or physical reactions. It is very common, in fact normal, for people to experience emotional after shocks when they have passed through a horrible event. Sometimes the emotional aftershocks (or stress reactions) appear immediately after the traumatic event. Sometimes they may appear a few hours or days or weeks later. In some cases, months may pass before the symptoms appear. Occasionally, no symptoms or problems occur.

The signs and symptoms of a stress reaction may last a few days, a few weeks, or longer depending on the severity of the traumatic event. With understanding and the support of loved ones the stress reactions usually pass more quickly. This does not imply craziness or weakness. It simply indicates that the particular traumatic event was just too powerful for the person to manage by themselves.

Here are some very common signs and symptoms of a stress reaction after a traumatic event:

PHYSICAL	THINKING	EMOTIONAL
Nausea	Slowed thinking	Anxiety
Upset stomach	Hard to make decisions	Fear
Tremors	Hard to problem solve	Guilt
Chills	Confusion	Grief
Diarrhea	Disorientation	Depression
Rapid heart beat	Concentration problems	Feeling lost
Headaches	Memory problems	Feeling numb
Sleep disturbance	Intrusive images	Irritability
Headaches	Intrusive thoughts	Anger
Fatigue	Frustrated	Feeling isolated

If you or someone you know is experiencing any of the above, it is important to remember that these are **NORMAL** reactions, of a **NORMAL** person, who is trying to cope with an **ABNORMAL** event.

There are some things you can do to help speed up the recovery process. Sometimes just knowing that what we are going through is a normal reaction can help, but usually it is important to talk to others, especially those who have gone through this experience or similar ones. Talking about it helps the most.

HELPFUL HINTS FOR RECOVERY

Trying some of the following hints may help to alleviate the emotional pain associated with a traumatic event. For the next few days anyway you should consider eating/drinking less caffeine, salt, sugar, alcohol and eating/drinking more wholesome foods, vitamins B and C. Give your body a chance to recover too.

For Yourself

- try to get more rest
- talk to friends
- do not be alone for a while
- intrusive thoughts/images are normal- don't try to fight them, they'll decrease over time and become less painful
- maintain as normal a schedule
- eat well-balanced and regular meals (even if you don't feel like it)
- try to keep a reasonable level of activity
- fight against boredom
- physical activity is helpful
- reestablish a normal schedule as soon as possible but don't push too hard
- express your feelings as they arise
- talk to people who love you

For Family Members and Friends

- listen carefully
- spend time with your loved one
- offer your assistance and a listening ear especially if they don't ask
- reassure them that they are safe
- help them with every day tasks as possible but take breaks like cleaning, cooking, children
- give them some private time
- don't take their anger or other feelings personally
- don't tell them that they are "lucky it wasn't worse" they are not consoled by this statement. Instead tell them you are sorry this happened to them and you want to help.
- don't be surprised if your loved one only wants to talk about the incident with their colleagues as long as they are talking.

Taking Care of Yourself After A Traumatic Event

Everyone who is in **any way** involved with a traumatic event may experience trauma reactions. You might experience these reactions if you:

- Were a witness or were involved in the event.
- Arrived upon the scene of the event.
- Had a "near miss" or were almost involved in the event.
- Knew or know others who were killed, harmed, or involved in some way.
- Have a relationship with family or friends of victims.
- Have heard a lot about the event through media or friends.
- Are reminded of other traumatic incidents in your life by this event.

Trauma reactions are normal reactions to extremely **abnormal** circumstances. It is difficult to predict what type of trauma reactions you will experience following a disastrous event. It is important to allow yourself permission to have your reactions, and take care of them both by yourself and by asking for help from others, as best you can. Many people find it helpful to have information about what constitutes a typical reaction to trauma.

Typical Reactions to Trauma

Not everyone experiences the same set of responses to trauma, but people typically experience reactions that fall into four basic categories. Here are some reactions that you may be experiencing:

Psychological and Emotional

- Heightened anxiety or fear
- Irritability, restlessness, or over excitability
- Feelings of sadness, moodiness, more crying than usual
- Feelings of helplessness or hopelessness
- Feelings of numbness or detachment
- "Survivor guilt", or feelings of self-blame that you escaped the tragedy
- Re-experiencing of the traumatic event, possibly including:
 - intrusive thoughts or images of the event
 - distressing dreams or nightmares
 - flashbacks about the event
 - distress when exposed to events that remind you of the trauma
- Feelings of estrangement or isolation from others
- Hypervigilance (feelings especially attuned to events around you, scanning environment for possible danger)

Cognitive

- Difficulty concentrating
- Feelings confused or distracted, slower thought than normal

Physical

- Headaches
- Nausea or upset stomach
- Exaggerated startle response (tendency to startle easily at loud noises)
- Fatigue or feelings slowed down

Behavioral

- Hyperactivity, or less activity
- Heightened tendency to behave irritably
- Withdrawal, social isolation
- Avoidance of activities or places that remind you of traumatic event
- Insomnia
- Strong need to talk about the event, read accounts about the event

You may recognize yourself as experiencing some of the above reactions. Remember that your response is normal. Immediately following a traumatic event you will probably feel disrupted, dazed, and somewhat confused. You will notice that you are not behaving as you typically would. It is important to take care of yourself as best you can. Here are some self-care suggestions for you.

Self Care

Keep reminding yourself that your responses are **normal** responses to a stressful situation. Give yourself permission to do whatever you need to do to take care of yourself. Your body and mind will tell you what you need to do--your job is to listen to them.

Get plenty of rest when you're tired, and use the energy you have if you experience hyperactivity at times. Don't force yourself to be active if you don't have the energy, or rest when you feel tired.

Talk to people as much as you need to. Reach out. You may experience a need to talk repetitively about the trauma. If you can find someone who is willing to listen, use her/him to talk to about how you are feeling. If you do not have anyone in your support network to use, consider calling a crisis line, going to a crisis center, or using other community resources--they are there to help you.

Spend time with others, even if you don't feel like talking. It can be very comforting to know you're not alone. Try to find someone or someplace that feels safe and comforting to you, and spend time there.

Don't make any major life decisions or big life changes if at all possible. This is not a time to put pressure on yourself to do anything out of the ordinary. Concentrate on taking care of yourself.

Do things that feel good to you--take baths, read, exercise, watch television, spend time with friends and family, fix yourself a special treat, or whatever else feels nurturing and self-caring.

Allow yourself to cry, rage, and express your feelings when you need to. Try not to numb your feelings with alcohol or drugs. This will only complicate your situation.

The Process of Recovery

It is important to know that recovering from a trauma is a process that may take a long time. The initial response of disruption (perhaps alternating with numbness) may last days, weeks, or longer. Don't be surprised if you continue to experience these reactions for longer than you expected. It is impossible to predict how long you will experience effects of the trauma, but usually trauma reactions gradually decrease over time. If you experience another stressful event while recovering from this trauma, you may find that your trauma reactions reappear for awhile. This re-activation, or delayed trauma response, is perfectly normal.

At **any** time during this process, you may find it useful to ask for professional help from a counselor or mental health professional. There are some circumstances under which you should **definitely** get professional help:

- if you find yourself feeling suicidal or contemplating suicide
- if you find that your daily functioning continues to be impaired so that you cannot carry out your life tasks
- if post-trauma fears interfere with your ability to return to certain places or situations that remind you of the trauma

Make some fresh starts. After you've given yourself plenty of space to grieve and heal—and only you can know how long that will take—it's time to begin making fresh starts. What would you love to do? Let yourself dream; then follow your heart and step out in some new directions. Travel, take an enjoyable class, make some new friends, or launch into a hobby that fascinates you. Bring your visions to life.