

Coping with Grief and Loss Following a Traumatic Event

Overview

Many people will be coping with grief and loss over the next days, weeks and months as a result of the September 11 terrorist attacks.

- Coping with grief and loss in the days after a traumatic event
- Coping with grief and loss in the weeks and months after a traumatic event
- Helping children cope with traumatic grief and loss
- Helping teenagers cope with traumatic grief and loss
- Dealing with traumatic grief and loss in the workplace
- When to seek help

The days, weeks, and even years to come will be marked by immense pain as the nation struggles to accept the recent horrific acts of terrorism on the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and the hijacked plane in Pennsylvania. Many people have lost friends, family, and co-workers to these tragedies.

Loss and grief are natural parts of life, but can be incredibly hard to cope with when they are a result of a traumatic event such as the September 11 attacks. When death and destruction occurs so violently, unexpectedly, and publicly, grief may be prolonged. A trauma of this magnitude shatters many of our commonly held beliefs about safety and security and leaves survivors with intense emotional reactions, such as feelings of sadness, helplessness, fear, vulnerability, and confusion.

For many people life will never be the same. Though there is the need to make sense of this tragedy and give meaning to so many deaths, there may not be concrete information about the attacks for some time, leaving survivors trying to cope with so many painful unknowns.

Coping with grief and loss in the days after a traumatic event

Grief is highly individual and no two people work through a loss in the same way. The tragic and violent nature of the attacks that have claimed so many lives may extend the grieving process for many people. Other people may take comfort or find the tragedy easier to bear because so many others are struggling to deal with the death of loved ones.

Many people coming to terms with the loss of loved ones in the September 11 attacks may experience common emotions as they struggle to understand this traumatic event.

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 the recent attacks because victims may not be identified for days or weeks and bodies may never be 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 or weeks, and may even be accompanied by a sense of hope.

Thoughts like “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 love about your fears and anguish.* Talking to friends, family, or a professional counselor may help you work through what you are feeling. Allow yourself time. Denial is a protective mechanism. It will pass when you are ready to accept your loss.
- *Seek relief from rescue and relief agencies.* Crisis counseling may be available through a variety of federal or local organizations. Contact relief agencies such as the Red Cross or local hospitals for more information.
- *Seek support from your employee assistance program (EAP) or employee resource program.* Your EAP can help you find professional help in your area. If you are not sure how to contact your EAP, ask your manager or human resources (HR) representative.
- *If, as time goes on, you are not able to acknowledge the loss of a loved one, consider talking with a counselor or therapist.* Contact your EAP or employee resource program for more information.
- *Take care of yourself.* You will need all of your strength to cope with the days ahead. Push yourself to eat nutritious meals and try to keep to a regular sleep routine.

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 taking that flight not leaving the office

quickly. 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 help you manage your feelings of anger:

- *Remember that feelings of anger are normal following a terrible loss.* Talking about them with family and friends is sometimes all that is needed to 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 uneasiness.
- *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 about the traumatic event can help you better understand the event and begin to come to terms with the loss of a loved one.
- *Model positive behavior for children.* If you are a parent, remember that your child is learning a powerful lesson about dealing with crisis and tragedy. Acting on your anger is not a lesson you want your child to learn. Instead, let your child know that it's normal to feel angry, but acting in anger is not an effective way to deal with grief.

Coping with grief and loss in the weeks and months after a traumatic event

Survivors may struggle with feelings of guilt, sadness, and depression in the 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 I had called and told her to leave the office?

A person deep in grief may not be able to think clearly, and may truly believe there is something they could have done to prevent the death of a loved one. If you are asking these kinds of questions or trying to make “bargains,” remember that this is a natural part of the grieving process. Also try to remember that there is nothing you can do to change the circumstances of this tragic event.

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 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 ease guilt.

Depression

It takes time to come to terms with the loss of a loved one, especially if the loss is a result of a traumatic event that no one fully understands. As reality begins to sink in, you may begin feeling very depressed. You may wonder how you will go on with life without your loved one. You may also experience other signs of depression including

- a significant change appetite
- the inability to sleep or sleeping all the time
- a lack of energy/fatigue
- the desire to be left alone
- feeling distracted and unable to concentrate
- 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 following a traumatic loss. But if these symptoms persist, seek help from your health care provider or contact your employee assistance program. Seek help immediately if you or someone you know has feelings of hopelessness or suicide.

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

Helping children cope with traumatic grief and loss

Helping a child cope with the sudden and violent death of a loved one may be one of the hardest things any adult will ever do. If your child is suffering from grief as a result of a traumatic event, it may be even more difficult because young children may not understand why or how a tragic accident took the life of a loved one. Children may be struggling to understand all of the events of September 11, and the death of a loved one as a result of the violent attacks may be very difficult to accept.

Even before you fully understand your own feelings you may need to help your child face a complicated range of emotions -- fear, sadness, anger, confusion, and guilt. Here are some ways to ease the pain for both of you:

- *Talk truthfully about the loss.* Even if you don't have all the details, tell your child as much as you know, using simple and direct words. Tailor your explanations to your child's maturity level, helping younger children put words to their emotions like "angry" and "sad."
- *Talk about your own feelings.* Let yourself cry and admit that you are sad. This gives your child permission to express his own feelings.
- *Show your love.* Remember that the news of a death may make your child very afraid of losing you. You may want to consider giving your child family pictures or other objects that will give comfort during particularly tough moments.
- *Be patient.* Your child may ask the same questions over and over. This is a natural way of trying to understand something that is very confusing.
- *Explain death in a way that fits with your beliefs.* It can be comforting to a child to fit the death of a loved one into his religious belief system. If you have spiritual beliefs, talk about them with your child.
- *Limit exposure to television or newspaper coverage.* Your child may be unable to handle repeated images of the destruction that took the life of a loved one. If your child wants to watch news coverage, make sure you do it together so you can answer questions and offer comfort.

Helping teenagers cope with traumatic grief and loss

Teenagers may have especially complicated reactions to the death of a loved one, including anger that may be expressed in aggressive behavior at home or school. Teenagers may also become withdrawn or very quiet when coping with the death of a loved one as a result of a traumatic event.

- *Give clear and accurate information about what happened.* Tell your teenager what you know about the death and then ask if she has any questions. When a loved one dies in a traumatic event, teenagers will have as many questions about the circumstances as adults do. Try to answer these as best as you can.
- *Realize that your teenager may not react to a loss in the same way you do.* Your teenager may feel suddenly afraid, extremely angry, or very sad. Help her understand that all of these emotions are normal responses to a loss.
- *Be as honest as possible when talking to your teenager.* Don't diminish the nature of the loss. Instead let your teenager know that you will be there to help her with any difficult or confusing feelings she may have.
- *Don't assume that if your teenager isn't talking about his loss he's OK.* Some teenagers may deal with their grief by burying it. Talk about your loss with your teenager, and ask if he has any questions.
- *Help your teenager find support.* Encourage her to talk about the death with important people in her life -- teachers, coaches, religious advisers, and close friends. If your teenager spends time on the Internet, encourage her to look into online support groups and informational Web sites such as www.GriefNet.org. Make sure your teenager understands that while it's fine to talk about grief online, it's not OK to express anger in Internet chat rooms or on bulletin boards.
- *Temporarily lower expectations of school and home performance.* Your teenager may be so overwhelmed with grief that her attention and emotional energy will be focused entirely on coping.

Dealing with traumatic grief and loss in the workplace

Many workers across the nation may realize that a colleague or someone they know worked in one of the areas that was devastated by the attacks on September 11. If your workplace has been affected by these tragic events, it may take a long time for co-workers, and the organization as a whole, to recover.

Keep an open line of communication with co-workers and managers. Talk about your losses, and the shock you may be feeling as a result. You can also

- organize activities or ceremonies in remembrance of a deceased co-worker
- make a contribution in memory of a person who died
- plant a tree or install a commemorative plaque

Returning to work after the traumatic loss of a co-worker may be difficult. If you are worried about returning to work, your human resources department or employee assistance program can provide you with resources and support.

When to seek help

Some people may need professional counseling to cope with a loss. Seek help from your health care provider or EAP if you are experiencing any of the following:

- prolonged feelings of 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