

Cruse
Bereavement
Support

Coping with trauma and loss



Coping with trauma and loss

When someone dies in a traumatic situation, coping can be very difficult and painful. Circumstances are often very shocking and can be wide-ranging. The loss may have been caused by an accident, suicide, through drugs and alcohol, or as a result of violence, for example.

You or the person who died may have been involved in a major accident or terrorist incident. But trauma can also happen after any sudden or unexpected death, or where you have witnessed someone suffering in pain.

This leaflet explains a little about how you may feel, and gives information on how you can find support and help.

Bereavement and trauma affect people in different ways. Everyone will experience and respond differently. It is important to remember that there is no one right or normal way to grieve. While the reactions are normal, if you find that they are continuing and affecting your ability to cope with daily life and your relationships with others, you can contact your GP, Cruse or a support organisation for more help.

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Feelings after a traumatic death

There are some common reactions and feelings you may experience in the hours, days, weeks, months and years after a traumatic event. The feelings can be very strong and frightening. It can feel as if you are losing control or 'going mad', but for most people the feelings do become less intense over time.

Disbelief

Losses we are not prepared for can be difficult to make real, particularly if we can't be present or hold those who have died.

What can help

It takes a long time to take in what has happened. People often find it helpful to:

- visit the place where the person died
- talk with others involved
- place a wreath in a significant place
- attend memorial services or other rituals of remembrance.

In the end, there may be aspects of the loss that will never be explained. You may need to be prepared to live with the uncertainty of not knowing.

Feeling numb

Numbness is our mind's way of protecting itself from mental pain. Sometimes we may be unable to think clearly, or become confused and lose our bearings. At other times we may be unable to express feelings of any kind. In an emergency it is this type of detached thinking that enables us to keep going, searching for a lost person or engaging in the rescue of others. It is only if it continues afterwards that it becomes a problem.

What can help

At times of loss it is normal and appropriate to express grief in any way that feels natural. Some people need to cry, others will rage and others just talk endlessly about what has happened. Try to find someone you can trust who will be a good listener and don't worry if, for a while, you look or feel helpless, that will pass. Memories of the past are sometimes painful but it is best not to bury them for too long.

Haunting images

Many people are haunted by pictures in their minds after a traumatic event. Some also experience sounds, smells and tastes. This can happen if you witnessed a death or a traumatic incident, but even if you were not there, television or other pictures can also 'bring home' the awfulness of the way a person might have died. Such images may occur without warning and may also surface, in a distorted form, as recurrent nightmares. They may be triggered by any reminder of the loss such as loud noises, cries or shouts.

Some people go to great lengths to avoid such reminders because the images are so anxiety-provoking. In severe form these reactions become known as 'Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder' (PTSD).

What can help

Haunting images can sometimes be eased by talking to others, going over the events again and again until you get used to them. The images may not disappear but they usually become less disturbing and easier to live with. If the images are stopping you from grieving

or getting on with your life, then you should speak to your GP about being referred to specialist services.

Pain and crying

You may feel immense emotional and/or physical pain – some people can find this overwhelming and frightening. Some people will cry a lot but not everyone shows pain in the same way. You may feel overwhelmed and find it difficult to do even everyday tasks. It can be hard to concentrate.

What can help

Talking can be one of the most helpful things – to friends and family, or to Cruse or another supportive organisation. Some people find it helpful to throw themselves into work; others find they need to take some time out of day-to-day life and activities. Everyone needs to find their own way of coping. It's important to find your own balance between confronting grief and avoiding it, and take time to care for yourself as well.

Anger

Anger is a very natural reaction to loss, particularly if it was caused by violence, terrorism, error or negligence. It may be directed against those who caused the trauma, an authority figure or the people nearest to hand. Some people may find themselves hitting out at the people they love the most.

What can help

If you feel that you are becoming angrier, please do talk with someone before you get to a point of feeling you will lash out. Remember that anger can be a force for good if it is controlled and directed. Try to hold back from impulsive outbursts and, if you have said or done things that have hurt others, don't be too proud to apologise. Talking to someone will help them understand, and most people genuinely want to help.

Guilt

No one is perfect and it is easy to seize on something that we did or didn't do in our attempt to find someone to blame.

Often, people end up blaming themselves. At the back of our minds we may even cling to the idea that, if we punish ourselves we will make things right again and get back the person we have lost.

What can help

Sooner or later we have to accept that what has happened is irrevocable and that punishing ourselves won't change anything. Friends will often say 'You shouldn't blame yourself', but you do not choose the way you feel. Guilt and anger are not feelings that can be switched on and off at will. Rather we should try to find a creative outlet for our grief, to bring some good out of the destructive event that has occurred.



Fear

We all know that disasters happen, but most of the time we go through life with confidence that we are safe and protected from serious harm. Then disaster strikes, In a moment the world has become a dangerous place, we can take nothing for granted, and we are waiting for the next disaster. Fear causes physical symptoms including tense muscles, racing heart, sweating, breathlessness and sleeplessness.

What can help

The symptoms of fear are actually very normal, at such times a racing heart is a normal heart.

Headaches, back aches, indigestion, even feelings of panic, are natural reactions that will decline as time passes. Relaxation exercises, meditation techniques, aromatherapy or whatever helps to relax you will put you back in control. If physical symptoms do continue to worry you, speak to your GP.

Loss of meaning

After a traumatic loss, all of a sudden, we can take nothing for granted any more. Perhaps the person who died is the one we would have turned to at times of trouble. Sometimes it can be difficult to find a reason to go on.

What can help

Those who have a religious faith may find it helpful to seek support there.

Others may find spiritual help outside of formal religious frameworks. When faced with trauma it takes time and hard work to adjust.

People's core beliefs and assumptions are reshaped by the traumatic life events they have been subjected to. It is important to seek help if you find you are having feelings that life is not worth living, or thinking of ending your own life.



Types of traumatic loss

There are many types of traumatic loss. Some are listed here. Other deaths which may not appear naturally to fall into the category of a traumatic death can still be very traumatic for those who have witnessed them, and to those left behind.

Suicide

When someone dies by suicide it can be very difficult not to torture yourself with questions about why they chose to do what they did, or whether it could have been prevented in some way. Final conversations can play over and over in your mind. It can be difficult to come to terms with questions that could only be answered by the person who has died.

You may feel that the person who died rejected you or your help, or that your love and care was ignored by them. The nagging feeling that you didn't do enough can be very painful.

No one is perfect and it is easy to seize on something that we did or didn't do in our attempt to find someone to blame.

Other people sometimes find it very difficult to deal with others' bereavements.

In the case of a suicide people can feel even more worried about doing or saying the wrong thing, and therefore seeming to ignore you.

Those who are bereaved by suicide often say they feel judged and don't experience receiving the same level of compassion if the person had died by other means.

Everyone's grief is unique and if you are struggling to cope you can ask for help, no matter who died or how.

Drugs and alcohol

Death as a result of drugs or alcohol may be very traumatic. You may or may not have known about your friend or relative's drug or alcohol use or been unaware of the full extent of their use. Perhaps you had been living with their long-term drug or alcohol use. They may have been experimenting with drugs or alcohol.

Feelings of anger, guilt and disbelief may be common. It can feel isolating if you perceive that others are judging you or the person who died.

Violence and crime

Bereavement through murder or manslaughter may be particularly difficult to come to terms with.

You may feel numb as if this isn't happening to you, or that there has been a terrible mistake. People can repeatedly question why it happened and spend lots of time asking themselves if they could have prevented it. They also question why it wasn't them who died.

Feelings of unfairness, disbelief and despair may be heightened and you may encounter unwanted intrusion and interest from your community. You may feel that you have little control over the public interest shown towards the death of the person you were close to and this can lead to self-isolation and separation from your family, friends, community and wider society. Anger and feeling a need for revenge are also common reactions.

Major disasters and terrorism

Victims of a disaster or terrorist attack may have suffered a bereavement, been physically injured, or experienced emotional or psychological trauma.

There is no single pattern of response or recovery after an attack or disaster – every person will have a different experience. It's important that you have support from your family, friends and colleagues.

People who have been affected by a terrorist attack may display feelings and behaviors that others find hard to understand. These are natural in the aftermath of a major incident and can settle in time. Reactions can include:

- fear, shock, horror and helplessness
- anger that this has happened, and against others if a person or group was responsible or negligent
- helplessness if it was a natural disaster, and there was no-one to blame
- loss of control, or being unable to control your emotions
- worrying about not having done something to lessen the trauma or avoid the attack
- guilt for surviving when others did not

It is common to have some or all of these feelings and you may experience them immediately or sometime later. The feelings can be very strong and frightening, especially if a death was sudden or violent, or if a body was not recovered, or if many people died.

Pandemic

If someone died during the pandemic, a number of things may have been particularly hard for family and friends to deal with.

You may not have had an opportunity to spend time with that person or to say goodbye in person.

If you were not able to be present for the death and could not view the body, it may still be difficult to accept the reality of the death.

You may have read or seen difficult stories in the media or you may have witnessed distressing scenes directly.

If the health services were stretched at the time of death, you may also have concerns about the care the person received before they died. This in turn can lead to feelings of anger and guilt. You may have had to put your grief on hold during this time.

No matter how long it has been since the death, it is important you take time to grieve and get the support you need.

Practical issues

Some traumatic deaths take place in a way which means there will be extra procedures to follow and media interest to cope with.

Inquests

An inquest is a special investigation held if it's not clear how or why someone died, or if their death was 'unnatural'. There will often be an inquest after a traumatic death.

The Coroner has a legal duty to investigate all unexpected or 'unnatural' deaths and to decide whether an inquest is necessary to determine the cause of death.

The coroner is an official who makes inquiries into deaths reported to them, which may be unnatural or of an unexpected or unknown cause.

An inquest is a special court hearing which looks into how someone died. Inquests are held to find out facts – the 'how,' 'when' and 'where,' not the 'why' – and are not like criminal trials. The coroner and legal representatives should treat witnesses, especially bereaved people, with care and respect.

The coroner uses the inquest to answer the questions: who the person was; where they died; when they died and how they died. At the end of the inquest there will be a 'verdict' which includes the cause of death.

An inquest can be an emotional experience for relatives and friends. Waiting to get answers as to how someone died and whether their death could have been prevented can also be very difficult.

You can read more about inquests on our website at cruse.org.uk/inquests

Public enquiries

Public inquiries are investigations that can be given special powers when there is 'public concern' about a particular event or set of events. The purpose of a public inquiry is to find out what happened, why it happened, who is to blame and what can be done to prevent this happening again. All inquiries start by looking at what happened. They do this by collecting evidence,

analysing documents and examining witness testimonies. Inquiries can also often draw on experts to help them with recommendations.

These are intended to guide the Government and others to make the changes which will prevent it happening again.

Media interest

Particularly in the case of larger scale or violent deaths there may be media interest in those killed and their families and friends. Such interest may sometimes be difficult, even impossible, to avoid. You may feel that the death becomes a public event rather than a private sorrow.

What can help with the media

- Decide on who is going to be the family point of contact.
- Do not sign any agreement with the media without advice.
- A simple note on your front door may avoid unwelcome press intrusion.
- You might wish to prepare a short statement, which could be released to the media.
- Advise family members and friends of your wishes.
- Try not to allow journalists to flutter you, do not be pushed because of their deadlines.
- If you do give an interview make sure you have the questions first and allow time to prepare.
- Ask to see the story before it goes live. You can withdraw your story if you are not satisfied how it was reported.

Children

If a child or young person is bereaved or affected by a traumatic event, they will experience similar feelings as adults, but each in their own, unique way.

It is important to try and acknowledge their feelings and grief and try to answer their questions honestly in a way that is appropriate to their level of understanding. They may need some time to be quiet and alone, which is normal. They may also behave in ways that might not seem appropriate such as being boisterous or playing, again this is normal and part of their coping process.

Children sometimes want to talk about the bereavement, events leading up to it, and death in general. In the next minute they will become engaged in a completely unrelated activity. That is normal for a child – particularly a young one. Being present and available for a conversation whenever the child needs it is important.

At times you may feel too traumatised yourself to be able to offer support to your children. You can ask for help from trusted friends and relatives if you feel you need it. It is important to look after yourself too.

You can find some helpful information about supporting children and young people after a bereavement on our website – cruse.org.uk/children



How to look after yourself

It is important to think about self-care following a bereavement. Don't expect too much of yourself. Take time to grieve, to acknowledge what has happened and to heal. One of the most helpful things is to talk about the person who has died and your relationship with them. Who you talk to will depend on you. It may be your family, friends, a faith/spiritual adviser, your GP or a support organisation.

Finding the best ways to remember those who have died can also help many people. It is important to know that even if someone dies who we have been very close to, the memory of them does not die – they still live on in us. This might mean keeping a few special possessions, creating a memory box or special album of pictures, or organising a time for family and friends to come together and remember.

Do

- Talk to other people about the person who has died, about your memories and your feelings
- Look after yourself. Eat properly and try to get enough rest (even if you can't sleep)
- Give yourself time and permission to grieve
- Seek help and support if you feel you need it
- Tell people what you need
- Accept support with everyday tasks if you think it will help

Don't

- Isolate yourself (unless you have to, e.g. due to illness)
- Keep your emotions bottled up
- Think you are weak for needing help
- Feel guilty if you are struggling to cope
- Rely on drugs or alcohol – the relief will only be temporary.

Relationships after a traumatic death

Relationships with families, friends and colleagues will be affected in some way. Some people are able to support one another but others may struggle.

It can be difficult to understand what you have experienced and are going through. While a crisis can bring people together it can also cause tensions and strains. You might feel isolated, despite the presence of family

and friends. You may find it helpful to speak to support services or organisations, some of which run support groups with others who have similar experiences.

How to help someone else

If you are a friend or relative of someone who has been bereaved in a traumatic way, there is a lot you can do to help.

- Listen without giving advice or passing judgement – this is often the most helpful thing you can do
- Offer practical help – be specific about what you are able do
- Be understanding of their particular needs and circumstances and know that not everyone grieves in the same way
- Understand that grief eventually becomes more manageable and easier to cope with following adjustment to the loss, but does not ever go away
- As time goes on remember that some dates such as anniversaries and special days may be very difficult
- Find out if they need more support and pass on information about other organisations such as Cruse.

Getting help

If you need support after a traumatic bereavement you can seek help and support from family, friends and colleagues, faith organisations/groups or from support organisations such as Cruse Bereavement Support.

In particular it is important to seek help from your GP if you are finding it difficult to function at home work or school, especially if you have disturbing behaviours or emotions that have continued for more than six to eight weeks.

Cruse also offers a wide range of booklets, leaflets and resources on bereavement.

Find out more about our services on our website at cruse.org.uk or call our Helpline on **0808 808 1677**.

What Cruse offers

Cruse Bereavement Care has a network of local branches in England, Northern Ireland and Wales, and a national helpline.

We can provide:

- Telephone helpline and email support
- Individual support (including over the telephone and internet) for adults and children
- Online facilitated support groups
- Information and advice on our website
- A website for young people hopeagain.org.uk



There are a number of other organisations that may be able to provide support if you have experienced a traumatic event.

These organisations and links to their websites can be found on our website.

Cruse

Bereavement Support

We help people through one of the most painful times in life – with bereavement support, information and campaigning.

You're not alone

Cruse Bereavement Support,
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