



Coping with trauma and loss

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Someone close to you may have died in sudden and/or traumatic circumstances. You may have witnessed the death, or the deaths and injury of others. This leaflet explains some common reactions and sources of help.

What you may experience

Bereavement and trauma affect people in different ways. Everyone's experience and responses will be individual to them. There is no right or 'normal' response.

The following are some of the reactions and feelings that you may experience in the hours, days, weeks and months after a traumatic event. It is common to experience some or all of these feelings and reactions. You may experience them immediately or some time later.

The feelings can be very strong and frightening. It can feel as if you are losing control or 'going mad'. These are normal reactions but if you find that they are continuing and affecting your ability to cope with daily life and your relationships with others, contact your GP or a support organisation.

Feelings

Fear

You may feel frightened:

- of being left alone
- of 'breaking down' or 'losing control'
- of a similar event happening again
- of going to particular places that recall the event
- for your own safety
- for the safety of those close to you.

A sound or smell may remind you of the event, and this can be very frightening.

You may experience panic attacks.

Sadness

You may feel sadness:

- about this death
- about other deaths, injuries and losses.

Longing

You may feel a sense of longing:

- for things that have gone
- for things that can never happen now.

Guilt

You may feel guilty:

- for being better off than others who you think have suffered more
- for being alive, or not injured
- for not having done more to protect or save other people
- for things you have said and done or not said and done in relation to the dead person.

Shame

You may feel a strong sense of shame:

- for being seen to be helpless, 'emotional' and needing others
- for not having reacted/behaved as you would have wished.

Anger

You may feel angry:

- about what has happened
- with whoever caused it or allowed it to happen
- about the injustice and senselessness of it
- about other people's lack of understanding
- about other people's perceived mistakes or failures.

Numbness

You may feel numb. The event may seem unreal, like a dream. You may feel that it has not really happened, or that it is happening to someone else.

Emptiness/hopelessness about the future

You may feel empty and hopeless about the future. You may feel that life is not worth living. You may even feel that you want to end your own life, or to harm yourself.

Thoughts

Traumatic loss and grief can also affect your thinking and the way your brain works.

Memories

You may experience repeated and intrusive thoughts and memories of those who have died or been injured or the event itself. You may find yourself constantly recalling other bereavements and losses.

Inability to concentrate

The stress and your preoccupation with the experience may affect your ability to focus on the here-and-now. You may have poor concentration, which can make you more accident prone. You may feel jumpy, restless and anxious.

Reconstructing/questioning the event

You may find yourself going over the event, reconstructing it so that it comes out differently. You may be constantly asking yourself 'why?' – why me? why them? why did it happen?

Dreams and Flashbacks

You may experience recurring dreams and nightmares.

You may find yourself repeatedly re-experiencing the trauma through unwanted images or flashbacks.

Behaviours

You may find yourself crying more frequently than before, or crying in situations that wouldn't normally be seen as an occasion for tears.

You may find yourself doing things you haven't done before, such as:

- drinking alcohol excessively or taking drugs – alcohol or drugs may dull the pain, but only temporarily
- avoiding situations, objects or people who remind you of the event or the person who has died.

Physical reactions

You may experience physical reactions to the trauma, such as loss of appetite, difficulty sleeping, increased heart rate, stomach upsets and exhaustion. These symptoms usually pass but consult your doctor if they persist.

People who have experienced bereavement are often more vulnerable to physical illnesses following their loss.

Impact on relationships

Relationships with family, friends and colleagues will be affected. Some people are able to support one another, but others may struggle. It can be difficult for people to understand what you have experienced and are going through. A crisis can bring people together, but it can also create tensions and strains. You may feel isolated, despite the presence of family and friends. You may find that you want to be left on your own or to be with a few select people who know what has happened.

Children and young people

Children and young people will experience similar feelings as adults, but each in their own, unique way.

- Try to acknowledge their feelings/grief.
- Answer their questions honestly and fully to try to help them understand what has happened.
- Give them extra reassurance and affection.
- Recognise that they may need time to be quiet and alone.
- Accept that they may also sometimes behave in ways that might be considered inappropriate in an adult, such as being very boisterous, and playing.
- Allow them to choose whether they want to take part in the funeral or other commemorative event.
- Inform their school about what has happened, and make sure school staff are able to offer support.

At times you may feel too traumatised yourself to be able to offer support to your children. Ask for help from trusted friends and relatives if you feel you need it.

What can you do?

It is important to try to take each day at a time and to do what you know is right for you. Everyone has their own way of grieving and coping with loss. These are some general suggestions about what can help.

Look after yourself

Don't expect too much of yourself. Give yourself time to grieve, to acknowledge what has happened and to heal. Try to be kind to yourself. Do things and be with people that you find helpful and avoid those you find unhelpful. Get enough sleep and try to eat well.

Accept support with everyday tasks if you think it will help – although some people find it a relief to have ordinary, daily tasks to distract them. Set yourself small, realistic goals. Try to keep to familiar routines that give a sense of order and control. This also applies to children: try to keep their usual day and bedtime routines.

Don't be afraid of sharing emotions. Don't be ashamed or embarrassed about crying.

Do things that help you relax – a massage, a walk in the park, listen to music. Try not to cut yourself off from friends, family, work colleagues and neighbours.

Talk about it

Many people find it helpful to talk about what has happened and how they feel, over and over again. This can be an important part of the healing process. Find someone you can talk to – a friend, someone who has had similar experiences, your GP, a counsellor or bereavement support organisation.

Accepting the reality

Attending the funeral, returning to the scene of the incident and talking to people who were also there or who know what happened can all help the reality of what has happened to sink in, which can aid the grieving and recovery process.

Seek help and support

Seek help and support from family, friends and colleagues, faith organisations/groups or from support organisations such as Cruse Bereavement Care.

It is particularly important to seek help from your GP if disturbing behaviours or emotions have continued for more than six to eight weeks or if they are making it difficult for you to function at home, work or school.

Cruse can help

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

We provide:

- telephone helpline and email support
- one-to-one, face-to-face bereavement support and counselling for adults, young people and children
- facilitated support groups and social groups
- information and advice on our website
- a freephone helpline and special website for young people.

Cruse also stocks a wide range of books, leaflets and resources on bereavement. For further information, please visit our website or telephone or email us (see contact details overleaf).

Contact details

Central Office

Cruse Bereavement Care
PO Box 800
Richmond, Surrey TW9 1RG
Tel: 020 8939 9530
Fax: 020 8940 1671

National Helpline

0844 477 9400

Email

helpline@cruse.org.uk

Website

www.cruse.org.uk

Young people's freephone helpline

0808 808 1677

Young people's website

www.RD4U.org.uk

Young people's email

info@RD4U.org.uk



Working towards equality and diversity

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