

**Traumatic grief**

**Large print version**

**Cruse**  
Bereavement  
Support

## **Traumatic grief**

When someone dies in a traumatic way, it can be difficult to cope.

### **What is traumatic bereavement?**

Traumatic bereavement may include dying in an accident, by suicide, through drugs and alcohol, or as a result of violence. You or the person who died may have been involved in a major accident, conflict or terrorist incident. Or your relative or friend may have had coronavirus and you might not have been able to be with them.

Trauma can also happen after any sudden or unexpected death, or where you have witnessed someone suffering or in pain.

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## Feelings after a traumatic loss

Some reactions and feelings are very common in the hours, days, weeks, months and years after a traumatic event. These feelings can be very strong and frightening. People tell us they feel they are losing control or 'going mad'. But for most people the feelings do become less intense over time.

## Disbelief

When you're not prepared for a death it can be difficult to believe or accept what has happened. This often a problem if you couldn't be with or hold the person who died.

### *What can help*

It takes a long time to take in what has happened. There are some things you can do to help.

- Visit the place where the person died or look at pictures.
- Talk with others involved.
- Place a wreath in a significant place.
- Attend memorial services or other rituals of remembrance.

There may be aspects of the loss that will never be explained. You may need to live with the uncertainty of not knowing.

## Feeling numb

Numbness is our mind's way of protecting itself from mental pain. Sometimes you may be unable to think clearly, or become confused. At other times you might not be able to express feelings of any kind. In an emergency putting your feelings to one side can help you to keep going. If it continues afterwards it can become a problem.

### *What can help*

- Although the memories are painful, try not to bury them.
- Show your grief in any way that feels natural. You might need to cry, or even rage.
- Talk about what happened. Find someone you can trust who will be a good listener and don't worry if, for a while, you look or feel helpless.

## Haunting images or flashbacks

Many people are haunted by pictures in their minds after a traumatic event. Some also experience sounds, smells

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and tastes. Even if you were not there, television or other pictures can also 'bring home' the awfulness of the way a person might have died.

You may see things without warning and they may also come up in dreams or as recurrent nightmares. They may be triggered by reminders such as loud noises, cries or shouts. In severe form these reactions become known as 'Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder' (PTSD).

### ***What can help***

Talk to someone. Haunting images can sometimes be eased by talking to others, going over the events 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 emotional and/or physical pain which can be overwhelming and frightening. Some people will cry a lot but not everyone shows pain in the same way. You may find it difficult to do 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.

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, particularly if a death was caused by violence, terrorism 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 can, 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.

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.

Exercise is a really helpful way to use some of the energy you feel when you're angry.

## Guilt

It is easy to seize on something that someone did or didn't do in an attempt to find someone to blame. Often we can blame ourselves. At the back of our minds we may even feel that, if we punish ourselves we will make things right again and get back the person we have lost.

### *What can help*

You do not choose the way you feel. You can accept it but it's important to remember that punishing yourself won't change anything.

It can help to find an outlet for grief, for example writing about how you feel or writing a letter to the person who died.

## Fear

We all know that disasters happen, but most of the time we go through life feeling that we are safe and protected from serious harm. When a traumatic event happens, 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 very normal. Understanding what you are feeling can make it less frightening. Headaches, backaches, indigestion, even feelings of panic, are natural reactions that will decline as time passes.
- Relaxation exercises, meditation techniques, or whatever helps to relax you will put you back in control.
- Consider talking to your GP if you are struggling to cope with anxiety or fear.

## **Loss of meaning**

After a traumatic loss it can be hard to return to normal life. Sometimes it can be difficult to find a reason to go on.

### ***What can help***

It takes time and work to adjust after a trauma. You can't expect to be the same person afterwards.

It is really important to seek help if you find you are having feelings that life is not worth living, or thinking of ending your own life

Places to look for help:

- The NHS has a list of urgent mental health helplines.
- You can contact your GP about getting a referral to local mental health services.

**For more support call our helpline**

**0808 808 1677**