

Traumatic grief generally occurs when a death is:

- Sudden, unexpected, and/or violent.
- Caused by the actions of another person, an accident, suicide, homicide, or other catastrophe.
- From natural causes but there is no history of illness.

A traumatic death shatters the world of the survivor. It's a loss that doesn't make sense as the survivor tries to make sense and create meaning from a terrible event. The family searches for answers, confronting the fact that life is NOT fair. Bad things DO happen to good people and the world doesn't feel safe.

This shattering of belief about the world and how it functions compounds the tasks of grieving. Many times, one's spiritual belief system may no longer work, which is yet another loss for the bereaved.

In the initial days, weeks, and months, the individual may go from periods of numbness to intense emotions in brief time periods. In general, it takes two years or more for people go through the grieving process and adapt to a major loss. With a traumatic death, the time period may be longer. Over time, the intensity and frequency of painful periods diminish.

People may feel worse a year or more after the death. The numbness that helped to protect them in the early months is gone and the full pain of the loss is very real. Family and friends may have gone back to their own lives, and not be as supportive.

Over the years, holidays and special family events increase the feelings of grief. When a similar traumatic event occurs, people may feel re-traumatized or that they are reliving their own loss. Involvement with lawsuits or the justice system can cause upsurges of grief during the entire course of that involvement. As these things occur and if the coping gets more difficult, it may be time to seek some counseling.

Common Physical Reactions

- Numbness
- Tightness in the throat or chest
- Shortness of breath
- Sensitivity to loud noises
- Forgetfulness and difficulty concentrating
- Agitation and restlessness may also be experienced which will decrease in time

Because an event has occurred that is beyond one's control, people feel out of control. Regular exercise may help to control these experiences. Putting more structure into a daily routine will help one to feel more in control. It's often helpful to keep lists, write notes, or keep a schedule.

Grief is a normal, natural process following a loss. With a traumatic loss, the process is more complicated. People often describe it as feeling like "they are going crazy without a road map of how to do it." Like all grief, the experience and process of traumatic grief is different for everyone.

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Grief & Loss

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Common Emotional Reactions

- Shock: The physical and emotional shock may be prolonged. Persistent memories or dreams about the event may occur for months. Talking or writing about it can help to break the cycle of obsessive thoughts.
- Fear and Anxiety: Simple activities, like taking a shower, being in the dark, or opening a closed door, may cause fear or anxiety. This is a normal response, but if the anxiety prevents normal routine for a prolonged period, it's important to see a physician or therapist.
- Guilt: Guilt over things done, or not done, regrets about the past, and guilt for surviving. Much of the guilt that people feel is emotional and not rational but knowing this does not help to alleviate those feelings. When guilt persists, people are often helped to deal with it in support groups or with a therapist.
- Anger: Anger and rage come from the feelings of helplessness and powerlessness one feels after a traumatic death and can be overwhelming for family members.

How to Help

- In the early days and weeks, offer help aggressively and concretely. Many times, the family may not know what you can do to help. Offer to prepare meals, help with childcare, answer the phone, or help to make calls or arrangements. If the media is involved, it may be helpful to run interference for the family. They can feel besieged by the intrusion.
- After a few months, support is most needed. Allow them time to talk about their grief if they want to, but be prepared to listen. It is not usually helpful for those who are grieving to hear about your losses unless the circumstances are very similar. Ask how you can help. You might offer to go with them to a support group if it's appropriate.
- As time passes, be mindful of anniversaries, holidays, or the birthday of the person who died. On these difficult days, people want to know that their loved ones are remembered.
- Families may be involved for years in legal proceedings. Offer help and support during critical times in the process. Help them find resources for victim and family support and advocacy.
- Most importantly, accept their grieving for what it is: a process following a loss. Allow them to grieve in their own style.