

After Disaster:

Understanding Traumatic Grief

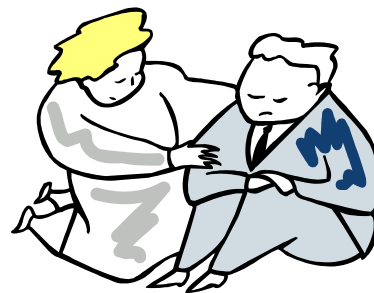
Any disaster, whether natural or man-made, leaves us to grieve over our losses and adjust to a world in which our sense of security and control has been stolen.

Most adults have experienced feelings of grief, perhaps at the death of a family member, a significant decline in health, or a failed marriage. Children, too, at some point learn about the inevitability of loss. But when losses occur suddenly and traumatically, feelings of grief may be more intense, long-lasting, and emotionally disabling.

Traumatic grief is especially severe among those who are directly exposed to disaster. People close by when an event occurred often find that mourning is made more difficult by their memories of painful sights, sounds, and odors at the scene. Often, those who are grieving behave as if they are numb; this is a way of “putting up one’s guard” to avoid being emotionally overwhelmed.

Waiting to learn what has happened to a loved one involved in a disaster adds to the anguish. So do the ongoing media coverage and intense public interest; they make it hard for mourners to “get some distance” from the tragedy and begin to work

through their painful feelings. When a traumatic event is caused by the deliberate act of another human being, the grief of those affected is often mixed with feelings of rage at the cruelty and injustice of the attack. People who have been victimized want to find out who is responsible, understand the motive, and see that the guilty are punished. Thoughts of revenge are normal, but too much of this kind of thinking can delay the healing process.



Sometimes, individuals experiencing traumatic grief are bothered by memories of their last contact with their loved one – regretting, for example, that they parted in an angry or indifferent manner. It’s common, too, to be haunted by the “empty spot” left in the family or work group and to focus on the fact that the person who died will no longer be present at special occasions or will never again occupy a

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certain chair or perform a particular job. Feeling the “empty spots” is painful, but a necessary part of the adjustment process.

Both children and adults have strong responses to traumatic loss, although they may express them differently. For example, an adult may openly show signs of depression for many months. A child may seem sad only briefly, then return to usual play activity, and may even appear to be ignoring the family’s loss. It’s important to remember that children do grieve; they simply have different ways of showing it – often with disruptive behavior, physical ailments, or impossible fantasies about the return of the lost family member or friend.

There are things you can do to help yourself and those around you through a period of traumatic grief. The first is to recognize that each person is unique. Children of varying ages have varied reactions. Each family member, co-worker, or friend now must learn to cope with different roles and routines, and each will be challenged with his or her own special “empty spots.”

Young children need to be told the facts honestly, but gently. Tailor information to the child’s level of understanding, but don’t mislead or allow the child to harbor misinformation. Give youngsters extra attention and reassurance during a period of grief.

Ask for help and advice with practical decisions related to finances, your job, and other concerns. Decide which things must be done right away and defer the rest until a less stressful time. Keep your focus on

positive memories, rather than reliving the tragedy or thinking of future sorrows.

Limit exposure to new stories about the disaster if you feel they are delaying your recovery keeping you “stuck” in a cycle of anger and grief. Think about the coping skills you have depended on in other difficult times, and use them now. Join a support group. There is comfort in sharing experiences, and strength in knowing you have helped others and allowed them to help you.

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For additional information, please contact:

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| Connecticut Helps, Office of Family Support | (860) 418-6262 |
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| Connecticut Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services | (800) 446-7348 |
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