Coping After a Tragedy

- Dealing with loss
- Common reactions following trauma
- Dealing with emotions – Resolving grief
- Helping children grieve
- Helping children deal with suicide
- Dealing with suicide

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- Common Reactions Following a Traumatic Event
- Dealing with Your Emotions - Resolving Grief
- Helping Children Grieve
- Helping Children Deal with Suicide
- Suggestions for Families Dealing with Suicide

Dealing with Loss

Loss from a tragedy or traumatic event can take many forms. It might involve the loss of a loved one, a home, or a pet. It could involve a life-changing injury or illness. It might involve the loss of a sense of safety and security when a crime has been committed. Although our information generally reflects the death of a loved one, your emotional responses and the recommendations regarding your health and well-being can apply to all categories of traumatic loss.

- **The first response to your loss may be shock.** You may feel numb and like the situation is unreal. You may have moments of disbelief that your loved one is really gone. Others may want you to quickly "accept reality and get on with your life." Do not be hurried. There is no timetable. Accepting the reality of your loss may be a slow and gradual process.
- **Be involved in burial and funeral planning.** Take the time to explore the many options available to you. Plan a service that is meaningful and special to you and your family. There are no hard and fast rules. Take charge and make whatever you decide a plan which reflects you and your family's unique wishes.
- **Delay major decisions until you have recovered from the initial turmoil following a death.**
- **How to deal with children (more information)**
  - Tell the truth about what happened
  - Answer questions in a straightforward manner
  - Let the child participate in the family sorrow and in grieving rituals
  - Protect the child from imagined guilt ("I was bad – it was my fault")
  - Provide lots of love and reassurance
- **Accept your feelings.** You may find yourself experiencing a "roller coaster" of feelings for weeks and months after the loss. Do not try to escape these feelings. They are normal. You must go through them.
  - *Anger*: you may blame yourself, a family member, the deceased, or God for the loss ("Why me?")
  - *Guilt*: "If only I had done . . ."
  - *Depression*: You may feel unable to perform even basic daily tasks. You may feel "Why bother?"
- **Keep a journal.** It may help to write down how you are feeling. Re-reading it can help you see the healing that is taking place.
- **Seek help from others.**
  - *Friends and family*: Talking to those outside of the immediate family may help you express your feelings without blaming those closest to you.
  - *Professional help*: Seek professional help if despair and worthlessness persist; if your family relationships are deteriorating; or if you continue to blame yourself for what

happened.
- *Support groups*: There are support groups where you can receive support from others who have lost a loved one.
- *Nurture yourself*: Do something good for yourself on a daily basis.
- *Hope and healing*: It may take time and work, but you can survive a terrible loss. You may never completely get over the loss of a loved one, but you can live your life in the future with joy and perhaps with a new understanding and purpose.

Common Reactions Following a Traumatic Event

Emergency service providers as well as citizens can experience the following symptoms following a crisis event. In a crisis situation, one may experience emotional detachment in order to cope and function. The following reactions may occur hours, days, weeks, or months after an event.

Physical:

- Stomach problems / indigestion
- Headache
- Chest pains
- Difficulty breathing
- Elevated blood pressure
- Hyper alertness / easily startled

Emotional:

- Irritability / anger
- Preoccupation with the event and one’s role in it
- Depression
- Guilt
- Anxiety
- Emotional numbness

Behavioral:

- Impulsiveness
- Excessive risk taking
- Silence
- Withdrawal

Cognitive:

- Sleep disturbances / nightmares
- Poor Concentration
- Difficulty in decision making
- Change in personal or work habits
- Memory problems
- Difficulty with details

Dealing with Your Emotions - Resolving Grief

- Accept all of the feelings you are having as normal reactions to an extraordinary event. You are not “crazy.” You are reacting normally to a “crazy” event. Be patient with yourself. It takes time to recover emotionally from a traumatic event.
- Accept the fact that you have been a victim and accept the feelings that result. Remember: others may not validate your feelings. In fact, they may minimize your experience: “You were only a witness,” or “You were really lucky,” or “It’s been two weeks, why are you still bothered?”
- Don’t revert to alcohol, drugs, or overeating to cope. They will only make matters worse.
- Maintain normalcy. Go about your daily routines and take care of business.
- Attempt to understand what happened by getting the facts.
- Talk about the event and write about it.
- Combat any guilt you might have by:
  - Accepting it as normal.
  - Talking to others about your role and their role during the event. You are probably not alone in your reaction to this event.
  - Realizing you were a victim yourself and not a trained rescuer.
  - Recognizing what you “did right.”
  - Recognizing the extenuating circumstances related to the event: the suddenness, the danger, etc.
  - Help others in your family or group.
  - Reach out to support those who are particularly traumatized.
  - Respect each other’s way of coping. Don’t victimize them by judging their individual coping style. Let the “grievers” grieve and allow the “doers” to do.
  - Bereavement groups provide an opportunity to share grief with others who have experienced a similar loss.
  - If the healing process becomes too overwhelming, seek professional help.

Helping Children Grieve

- Tell children the truth about what happened, in language they can understand for their age. Answer their questions in a straightforward manner. They often sense when you are not telling them important information. Let children participate in the family sorrow and in grieving rituals. It is an important learning process. Protect the child from imagined guilt, such as, “I was bad – it was my fault.” Provide much love and reassurance, especially that you and others will still protect and love them.
- Reassure the child that he/she will be taken care of, loved, and cherished as before. The greatest fear of the bereaved child is that of being abandoned and deserted.
- Touch, hold and hug the child. Non-verbal communication is the most powerful and direct way of telling the child that you care.
- Explain to the child that the parent did not intend to die nor did the parent want to die. The child needs to be assured that his or her parent did not intentionally desert the child.
- Explain it was not the child’s fault that the parent died. Young children often believe they possess magic power, and through the power of such thought the child actually brought about his parent’s death. The child may need help to relieve this burden of guilt.
- Encourage the child to ask questions about anything that is on his or her mind. Do this on many occasions.
- Answer the child’s questions simply, directly, and honestly. Children are quick to sense deceptions and may come to distrust adults.
- Allow the child the option of participating in the funeral. Describe the proceedings in detail beforehand. The funeral has an important cultural, religious, and therapeutic function for the family and the child is a member of that family.
- Be tolerant. It is normal for a child confronting a major crisis to regress to levels below his present level of maturity.
- Encourage the child to express his or her feelings and thoughts.

Helping Children Deal with Suicide

- It is important to be honest with your children. Give the correct information in a loving, compassionate way.
- The explanation should be clear and direct. Be careful not to over explain.
- Listen carefully. Answer their questions truthfully and be consistent in telling the truth.
- Talk about the deceased family member.
- Discuss better ways than suicide to handle problems.
- Tell all your children – even the younger ones.
- Encourage children to share their grief with those at home and with trusted persons outside the family.
- Teach your children to be selective about who they tell the story of suicide.
- You can help your children grieve by letting them see your tears, by crying with them, and by letting them know that it’s okay to be upset.
- Have a positive attitude toward your children.
- Be aware of your children’s possible feelings of guilt. Assure them that it wasn’t their fault.
- Children need to know that suicide is an individual matter. Even if family members do it, they can still choose not to commit suicide.
- Children may experience all of the many emotions and phases of grief.

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Suggestions for Families Dealing with Suicide

It is important to sit down together to experience your honest feelings. Communication is the key to survival in the aftermath of suicide. At the same time, there should be respect for each person's individual way of handling grief. Some family members will grieve privately, others openly, and others a combination of these two styles. Here are some suggestions to help with family grief:

- Pay attention to your family members when you are with them.
- Be sensitive to how other family members feel.
- Listen to what is meant as well as what is being said.
- Accept the other person and what they say.
- Do not give each other the silent treatment. This has many negative effects.
- Sit back and listen. Let other family members have an opportunity to talk.
- Be sure to hug and touch each other at every opportunity.
- If depression, grief, or problems in your family are getting out of control, seek the advice of a counselor.
- Recognize that anniversaries, birthdays, and special holidays will be difficult for the family and each member of the family.
- Remember you can't help anyone if you are falling apart. Do what you can do and get help for what you can't do.
- Studies show that a bereaved person's self-esteem can be extremely low. Survivors should help each other to think and feel good about themselves.
- If there is a suicide note, discuss as a family what to do with it: Possible options are keeping, copying or destroying the note.