

Coping with traumatic grief

here
for
you

When we're affected by crime, a frightening event, or a disaster, it's likely we will experience some *grief*. Grief is a normal reaction to any losses we experience, including loss of property, loss of security and safety, or even loss of life. It's a natural process that helps us to gradually adjust to what's happened, so we can begin to move forward again. Grief can be full on, intense and unpredictable for a while. It can feel as up and down as a roller coaster. Thoughts and emotions can be strong and hard to handle. The bigger the losses, the greater our grief reactions can be.

However, it's likely that after such terrible situations we will also experience some *trauma*. Trauma happens when we're extremely distressed by a frightening negative experience. We sensed that our own life, safety, or property, or someone else's, was being threatened in some way. There was a risk of serious harm. When a situation like this happens, our brain sees the threat and alerts us to it to try to keep us safe. It can be hard to cope with what's happening, and afterwards we can continue to experience some traumatic stress. Our reactions to our fear may be very strong, both immediately and in the days and weeks that follow. In other words, trauma can have some lasting effects. This is all a normal reaction to an abnormal event. Gradually, the brain stops being on full alert and calms down again.

So, a person impacted by crime, a frightening event, or a disaster can find they are experiencing both grief and trauma reactions at the same time. The focus of trauma is fear and threat, while the focus of grief is sadness and loss.

When the natural grieving process gets interrupted and intensified by experiencing trauma as well, it can be a lot to cope with. It's called *traumatic grief*.

Each person's experience will be different, because we're all different. It can be helpful to know about the common reactions to traumatic grief, and some ways to cope with them. For most people, the intensity of your grief and trauma responses will usually begin to

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I was starting to do okay and then got swamped by some big grief waves. It turns out my grief has its own agenda, but it's helping me get my head around what's happened. I'm thinking now it'll just take the time it needs to take.

Kara

lessen as you start to work through what's happened, get some good support, and have time to rest and recover.

Traumatic grief can be full on, intense and unpredictable for a while. It can feel as up and down as a roller coaster. Thoughts and emotions can be strong and hard to handle.

Our Victim Support workers understand traumatic grief and its effects. They can support you, your family, whānau, and friends as you come through this challenging time. We hope you will find this information helpful.

CONTACT

Victim Support

Get Help: 0800 VICTIM (0800 842 846)
victimsupport.org.nz

Manaaki Tāngata
Victim Support



Common traumatic grief reactions

Knowing the sorts of things to expect during traumatic grief can be helpful

You can be reassured you're not losing your mind or going crazy, although it can sometimes feel a bit like that for a while. And it can be difficult for others to understand what you're going through.

Your traumatic grief reactions will be like your fingerprint – unique to you.

Traumatic grief isn't just about emotions, as you have probably found out by now. It affects every part of us – physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and how we interact with others socially.

Do any of these reactions sound like what you're experiencing?

Physical

- a racing heart rate – palpitations, chest pains, increased blood pressure
- breathing fast – hard to take a deep breath, dizzy
- trembling and unsteady – need to sit or lie down
- hot and sweating or cold and shaky
- tired, exhausted, weak, lack of energy – or wired with high energy, restless, want to move
- tearful, crying, screaming, sobbing – or unable to cry at all
- tight chest, shallow breathing, deep sighs
- sleep problems – sleeping less or more, hard to get to sleep, waking often, nightmares
- decreased interest in sex and intimacy
- headaches, aching limbs, tense muscles
- appetite changes – nausea, digestion problems
- going to the toilet more often, diarrhoea, constipation
- falling ill more easily – existing health conditions may worsen
- clumsier, more accident-prone
- suddenly more sensitive to sound, sights, taste, smell, and touch

Mental

- things can seem a blur – can't remember details, brain fog
- hard to focus or concentrate, preoccupied, distracted, slow thinking, forgetful
- continually on alert – hypervigilant, concerned something else might happen
- preoccupied by what happened – thinking a lot about the loss
- avoiding thinking about it at all, not wanting any reminders of the loss
- wanting to make sense of it – wanting more information
- disturbing memories or thoughts might come into your mind – they may keep playing on loop, such as "What if I had done x, y or z, instead?"
- extremely sensitive to anything or any person that triggers bad memories
- distressing flashbacks – 'reliving' the experience, including having physical reactions to the vivid memories as if it's actually happening again
- difficulty planning or making decisions, even small ones



Emotional

- shocked, stunned, disbelieving, numb
- disoriented, confused
- helpless – feeling things are out of control, overwhelmed, vulnerable, powerless
- heightened strong emotions or avoiding emotions, as they seem too difficult to cope with
- sad, despairing – for the loss and harm done to you, others, property, or to how things were before
- worried, anxious, fearful – anxious about your safety and others’
- on edge and agitated, jumpy
- panic attacks – being overwhelmed by a sudden flood of extreme anxiety
- irritable and angry – more easily upset, short-tempered, sudden outbursts, anger or fury at who caused it or ‘allowed it to happen’, increased levels of aggression and possibly violence
- blaming – yourself, others, a system, or God
- resentful, bitter
- guilty or regretful – for not doing more to prevent it or not reacting well at the time, or for things said or done before it happened
- feeling different from others, embarrassed, ashamed, lowered self-esteem
- lonely, misunderstood
- negative thoughts, depression, possibly suicidal thoughts

Spiritual

- looking for meaning in what’s happened
- questioning *why*?
- strongly sensing the injustice of it
- seeing the world and life differently now – changed priorities
- drawing closer to beliefs and faith, or away from them if finding trust hard
- searching for, or sensing the presence of, someone who has died (tipuna/ancestors) and seeking their guidance and comfort
- getting close to nature for a spiritual uplift

Social

- wanting to be with others more – or withdrawing from/avoiding others
- able to talk about it – or not wanting to at all and avoiding remembering with others
- avoiding certain locations, people, or situations
- loss of trust in some people or things – suspicious, doubting
- becoming extra safety conscious and wanting to check where loved ones are
- unable to maintain regular social activities or fulfil responsibilities
- avoiding work or unable to work, or wanting to work more
- loss of interest in doing things you usually enjoyed
- distracting yourself by keeping very busy, or very social
- more irritable with others, short-tempered
- tense relationships, increased arguing and conflict with others, possibly aggressive
- more sensitive about what others think
- using humour more to decrease tension
- making poor choices, doing things impulsively
- using more alcohol, drugs or other risk-taking that can be harmful

“ Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it.

Helen Keller



How long does traumatic grief last?

It takes longer than most of us expect to sense we are healing, recovering, and moving forward. Remember, traumatic grief means both grief and trauma reactions are happening and being coped with. It's no easy task. The more extreme and frightening the situation was for us, the more complex our reactions can be. And the bigger the loss we've had, the greater our grief for it.

There is no set timetable and it's different for everyone.

*There are no right or wrong ways to react .
There are no rules to follow.*

Everyone does it differently, because we're all different.

What you experienced, and the impact it's had, will naturally have an impact on your life as you go forward. However, the intense, raw pain and fear will lessen, and you will sense that you're starting to move forward with life again. It's normal to experience some difficult memories or fresh reactions from time to time. All kinds of things can trigger them, even long afterwards. It could be music, a photo, a place, a calendar date, or someone sharing a memory. Gradually, recovering from such traumatic grief 'waves' becomes a little easier.

“ Time itself doesn't heal... it's what you do with the passing time that counts. You can let yourself grieve or try to avoid its pain. Avoiding it is understandable but trying to bury it isn't good for you and doesn't work. Grief is on your side, even though it doesn't feel like it at the start.

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What is PTSD?

Sometimes trauma reactions can become so severe that a person develops a serious condition called PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). They can experience very high levels of continuing fear and disturbing memories, such as in flashbacks. PTSD can affect how people live their ordinary daily lives. A person with such severe ongoing reactions needs a professional diagnosis and skilled help to get onto the road to recovery. PTSD is more likely when someone has also had a serious loss of some kind. Visiting a GP, counsellor, or psychologist and honestly telling them what it's been like is a wise first step. Perhaps also consider talking honestly to trusted close family, whānau, or friends, or to a trusted cultural or faith elder, who can give you some extra support and understanding at this difficult time. (You might find our 'Managing flashbacks' information sheet helpful.)

Complicated grief

Some people can find their grief and sense of loss continues to be very intense. For some, grief can become complicated and prolonged. This is more likely when someone has experienced trauma. Instead of gradually easing, the pain of the loss can remain constant, raw, and acute. The sense of loss can dominate and be overwhelming most days, affecting how you cope each day, and keeps you from moving forward at all. In extreme cases, people can feel suicidal. See your GP or find a counsellor or psychologist who has the skills to help you deal with such complex grief. Perhaps also consider talking honestly to trusted close family, whānau, or friends, or to a trusted cultural or faith elder, who can give you some extra support and understanding at this difficult time.



What can I do?

A traumatic loss can turn life upside down. There is no simple fix that can make things better right away, but there are some steps you can take to look after yourself well and feel more in control of things.

Tips for coping from others who have been through this

- Give yourself some time to adjust. This will be an up and down time for a while. Be patient with yourself, and others. Don't expect too much. Your recovery will take the time it needs to take.
- Do what's worked for you before in hard and stressful times. Put those positive things into action again. Avoid doing things that didn't work.
- Keep up a daily routine as much as possible. Even simple routines help us feel more in control of things. Do something you enjoy every day.
- Keep connected with others. Regularly talk with, text or message those you know to keep in touch with them. Spend time with those who care about you.
- Make looking after yourself a top priority. Eat healthily and drink plenty of water. Keep active because exercise lifts mood and keeps you well. Get plenty of rest and sleep. See your GP if sleep becomes an ongoing problem.
- Accept support from trusted people who care and can give emotional support and help in practical ways.
- If possible, talk with others who've been through the same or a similar situation. It often helps to talk with those who 'get it', when you feel ready to.
- Several times each day, take slow, deep belly breaths in and out. This is an easy but powerful way to calm down and feel more in control.
- Avoid regularly using alcohol or drugs. This could negatively affect your health and wellbeing and delay recovery. It could make things even harder for you and others around you.
- If what happened to you is in the media, limit the time you listen, watch or read about it.

- If you are also supporting others who have been affected, such as children, young people, relatives, friends, neighbours, or workmates, remember they will each react in their own ways. Contact Victim Support for links and resources that could help you with this.
- Don't hesitate to reach out for extra help and support if you realise you need it. Traumatic grief can often be overwhelming and feel too much to handle alone. Use your support circle of relatives, friends, neighbours, workmates, and other trusted caring people around you. Talk to your GP or a counsellor or psychologist about any strong reactions you are concerned about.

Seek professional help and support if...

- Any of the traumatic grief reactions listed earlier are particularly intense or overwhelming for you, such as flashbacks, high levels of ongoing anxiety, or panic attacks
- After a few weeks or months, your reactions are not easing up, or they are intensifying, or they are dominating your daily life and causing you and/or others concern
- You realise you are struggling to cope most days
- You think you may be depressed, or your mental health is not good
- You're feeling hopeless and are having thoughts of self-harm or suicide
- You have serious concerns about how your family, whānau, friends, or others are coping or about their current mental health
- You have no one to talk to about your experience but would like to talk to someone
- You are becoming dependent on regularly using alcohol or drugs to cope.





How can Victim Support help?

- Call us on 0800 842 846 to be connected with a support worker who can provide practical help and information, emotional support, and referral to other services at this difficult time. We're available 24/7.
- Ask your support worker about how Victim Support can connect you with a professional counsellor in your community, and any financial support to help you with this.

Other places you can call to get help:

- Call or text the 24/7 Need to Talk helpline on 1737 to speak with a counsellor.
- Call a local helpline, e.g. Youthline (0800 376 633 or free text 234) or Lifeline (0800 543 354).
- Call Healthline about health concerns on 0800 611 116 (24/7).

**“ Naku te rourou nau te rourou ka ora ai te iwi
With your basket and my basket the people will thrive**



Our service is free, personal, and confidential



