



Tips for Health Care Practitioners and Responders: HELPING SURVIVORS COPE WITH GRIEF AFTER A DISASTER OR TRAUMATIC EVENT

Introduction

Grief is the normal response of sorrow, heartache, and confusion that comes from losing someone or something important. Grief can also be a common human response after a disaster or other traumatic event. As a health care practitioner or responder, you will need to help others cope with and manage their grief after a disaster or other traumatic event—even if you are experiencing grief yourself.

This tip sheet offers health care practitioners and responders guidelines for communicating with survivors experiencing grief. Background information about the grieving process and what happens when the grief process is interrupted and complicated or traumatic grief occurs is included as well as helpful resources for additional assistance.



Health care practitioners and responders have an opportunity to greatly reduce survivors' fear and anxiety through compassionate communication.

Tips for Communicating With Survivors

Health care practitioners and responders have an opportunity to greatly reduce survivors' fear and anxiety through compassionate communication. Positive or negative intervention at this stage can affect the long-term grief process. Whether talking with a survivor or family member who is coping with a loss, or addressing a group of survivors or other professionals, be sure that you communicate in these ways:

- Clearly identify yourself and your role.
- Communicate calmly. Make eye contact and use an open posture (avoid crossing your arms or legs, lean forward, and stand or sit directly facing the person or group).
- Communicate warmth. Express empathy, use a soft tone and welcoming gestures, and listen carefully.
- Speak slowly. Repeat yourself, if necessary.
- Do not use euphemisms. For example, state very clearly that their loved one has died or is missing.
- Be factual and gentle and do not engage in speculation or make broad statements like "everything will be ok."
- Acknowledge the emotions of those who are suffering. Speak to the person with respect.
- Use concrete questions to help the person focus. Use closed-ended questions—questions the person can answer with a yes or a no, or by providing specific information—and explain why you are asking the question.
- Listen and allow for emotional expressions or crying without interruption.
- Do not answer questions outside of your expertise. Refer people to appropriate experts.
- Avoid using examples from your own life, and keep the focus on those currently suffering.
- Look for cues in body language, and ask if they would like to be left alone.
- Suggest the survivor contact support resources, such as family members, medical professionals, or religious leaders.



What Is Complicated or Traumatic Grief?

After a disaster or other traumatic event, many factors can disrupt the normal process of grieving, raising the risk for complicated or traumatic grief. Whether a disaster is natural or human-caused, grief at the loss of loved ones may be compounded by sorrow and anger at the loss of home and possessions, as well as fear or anxiety about the loss of a sense of safety and security in the community. In some cases, meeting immediate physical needs after a disaster may take priority over grieving the loss of life, which can delay, prolong, or complicate the normal grieving process.

Complicated or traumatic grief is grief that does not end and does not help individuals to make progress toward getting back to their usual activities and routine. For most people, intense feelings of grief will lessen gradually over time, beginning to ease within 6 months of the loss. But those with complicated or traumatic grief may not feel any reduction of grief over many months or even years. Their feelings of sadness, anger, and loneliness may even become more intense over time.

Survivors may experience some of the following symptoms of complicated or traumatic grief:

- Feeling deeply angry about the death or loss
- Being unable to think about anything but their loved one
- Not wanting any reminders of the loved one at all
- Having nightmares or intrusive thoughts
- Feeling deep loneliness and longing for the person they lost
- Feeling distrustful of others
- Feeling unable to maintain regular activities or responsibilities
- Feeling bitterness about life and envying others not affected by grief
- Being unable to enjoy life or remember happy times with their loved one

How Do Disasters Raise the Risk for Complicated or Traumatic Grief?

The circumstances of a natural or human-caused disaster or other traumatic event can affect the way that survivors experience grief. These factors may increase their risk for complicated or traumatic grief:

- Sudden, traumatic, or violent death
- Death of a child
- Multiple deaths and widespread grief
- Lack of tangible evidence of a loved one's death
- The unavailability of support from others, often because they are coping with their own losses
- Devastating loss—including loss of loved ones, property, community, and employment—that overwhelms an individual's coping capacity



What Does Grief Look Like?

Grief is a part of life. It is a reaction to death, divorce, job loss, a move, or loss of health due to illness. It can also occur after natural and human-caused disasters or other traumatic events. Often after a death or loss, people report feeling empty and numb, or unable to feel joy or sadness. Anger is also a common reaction. You'll want to pay attention to survivors' physical reactions to grief and anger, which include the following:

- Trembling or shakiness
- Muscle weakness
- Nausea and trouble eating
- Trouble sleeping and difficulty breathing
- Dry mouth

People experiencing grief may have nightmares, withdraw socially, and have no desire to participate in their usual activities.



How Long Does Grief Usually Last?

When assisting survivors, keep in mind that grief is different for every person and every loss. The manner of the death or loss can affect how long a survivor experiences grief. How long he or she grieves will also depend on personal circumstances.

Survivors who have recently experienced a death of someone close to them, or who have experienced a disaster or other traumatic event, may have difficulty imagining an end to the pain they are feeling. They may also go through and make positive changes in their lives. Survivors may experience the following:

- Feeling the pain of loss without resisting or avoiding it
- Adjusting to a new reality in which a loved one is no longer present
- Forming new relationships

As you work with survivors following a disaster or other traumatic event, keep in mind that there are many resources available at the state and federal level, including 24/7 SAMHSA helplines. You can refer survivors to the appropriate agency listed on this page and encourage them to access additional tips and resources in the SAMHSA tip sheet *Tips for Survivors: Coping With Grief After a Disaster or Traumatic Event*.

Helpful Resources

SAMHSA Disaster Technical Assistance Center

Toll-free: 1-800-308-3515

Website: <https://www.samhsa.gov/dtac>

SAMHSA Behavioral Health Disaster Response Mobile App

Website: <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/PEP13-DKAPP-1>

Administration for Children and Families

Website: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov>

Mental Health America*

Website: <http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net>

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)*

Toll-free helpline: 1-800-950-NAMI (1-800-950-6264)

Website: <https://www.nami.org>

Treatment Locators

Behavioral Health Treatment Facility Locator

Toll-free: 1-800-662-HELP (1-800-662-4357) (24/7 English and español)

TDD: 1-800-487-4889

Website: <https://www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov>

MentalHealth.gov

Website: <https://www.mentalhealth.gov>

MentalHealth.gov provides U.S. government information and resources on mental health.

Helplines

SAMHSA Disaster Distress Helpline

Website: <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline>

Call 1-800-985-5990 or text "TalkWithUs" to 66746 to get help and support 24/7.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

Toll-free: 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255)

TTY: 1-800-799-4TTY (1-800-799-4889)

Website: <https://www.samhsa.gov>

This resource can be found by accessing the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline box on the SAMHSA website.

*Note: The views, opinions, and content expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views, opinions, or policies of the Center for Mental Health Services (CMHS), the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

