

Helping Others Cope with Tragedy



Crisis and Disaster

People cope with tragic experiences in a variety of ways. Although there is no “right” way to handle these events, there are general responses that have been found helpful to many people. Reach out both physically and emotionally. When speaking, use a soft voice and position yourself at the victim’s level. Ask how he or she is feeling, and reassure him or her that you’ll do what you can to help.

Coping with Tragedy

Grief and stress are normal reactions to terrible and tragic events. Some symptoms that may arise include:

- Fear, panic, shock, denial, confusion and anxiety
- Survivor’s guilt: happiness about being alive, guilt about feeling that way
- Hyperactivity, anger and irritability
- Sadness and sensitivity
- Difficulty sleeping and/or eating
- Nightmares and recurrent dreams
- Physical reactions: shaking, chest pains, sweating, nausea, increased heart rate
- Phobias (fear of large crowds, fear of being alone)
- Alcohol and/or drug use.

What Should You Say?

When helping others in the aftermath of a tragedy, it’s important to be aware of your own emotional reactions. It’s also important to pay close attention to the words you use.

Things that ARE okay to say:

- This is a normal reaction to what has happened.
- It is reasonable and understandable for you to feel this way.
- You are not crazy.
- This wasn’t your fault.
- You did the best you could.
- Things might never be the same, but they will get better and you will feel better.

Things that ARE NOT okay to say:

- It could have been worse.
- You can always replace the things you’ve lost.
- Try to keep yourself busy.
- I know exactly how you feel.
- You need to get on with your life.

When to Seek Professional Help

It’s important to recognize that sometimes professional help may be needed. If you or your loved one are experiencing any of the following behaviors, it might be time to seek the help of a professional.

Disorientation: Memory loss, inability to recite date, time, or place, difficulty understanding what is happening.

Inability to Recover: Feelings of despair continue for a prolonged amount of time, possibly interfering with daily functioning.

Extreme Withdrawal: Refusal to go to work or school, see people or leave home.

Mental Illness: Hearing voices, seeing visions, delusional thinking, or excessive preoccupation with an idea or thought.

Inability to Care for Self: Not eating, bathing or changing clothes.

Suicidal or Homicidal Thoughts: Thinking about or making plans to bring lethal harm to others or one’s own self.

Alcohol or Drug Abuse: Misuse of drugs and alcohol in an attempt to mask the pain.

Abusive or Violent Behavior: Malicious patterns of behavior used to intimidate and gain control over others, including domestic violence and child abuse.

Additional Information

Learn more about how to help yourself and others cope with the aftermath of a tragic experience by visiting the links listed below:

- <http://www.nmha.org>
- <http://www.ptsdinfo.org>
- <http://www.ptsd.va.gov>

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