

# Dealing with Tragedy

We know that it is typical for people to experience a variety of emotions following a traumatic event.

You may experience some of the symptoms below - this is normal.

- **Shock:** often the initial reaction to events like this. Shock is the person's emotional protection from being too overwhelmed by the event. You may be stunned, numb, or in disbelief.
- **Suffering:** this is the period of grief during which the person gradually comes to terms with the reality of the event/loss. Feelings that life is overwhelming and disorganized are common.
- **Sadness:** The most common feeling found following traumatic events like this. It may become quite intense and be experienced as emptiness or despair.
- **Anger:** Can be one of the most confusing feelings for the grieving person. Anger is a response to feeling powerless, frustrated, or even abandoned.
- **Anxiety:** Ranges from mild insecurity to panic attacks. Grievers may become anxious about their ability to take care of themselves, or fear a similar event will happen to them or a loved one.

These emotions are universal and should pass after a while. Over time, the caring support of family and friends can help to lessen the emotional impact and ultimately make the changes brought about by the tragedy more manageable. It will take some time to recover your sense of equilibrium. Meanwhile, you may wonder how to go on living your daily life. You can strengthen your resilience—the ability to adapt well in the face of adversity—in the days and weeks ahead.

Here are some tips:

1. **Talk about it** — Ask for support from people who care about you and who will listen to your concerns. Receiving support and care can be comforting and reassuring. It often helps to speak with others who have shared your experience, so you do not feel so different or alone.
2. **Strive for balance** — When a tragedy occurs, it's easy to become overwhelmed and have a negative or pessimistic outlook. Balance that viewpoint by reminding yourself of people and events which are meaningful and comforting, even encouraging. Striving for balance empowers you and allows for a healthier perspective on yourself and the world around you.
3. **Turn it off and take a break** — You may want to keep informed, but try to limit the amount of news you take in whether it's from the internet, television, newspapers or magazines. While getting the news informs you, being overexposed to it can increase your stress. The images can be compelling in reawakening your feeling of distress. Also, schedule some breaks to distract yourself from thinking about the incident and focus instead on something you enjoy.

4. **Honor your feelings** — Remember that it is common to have a range of emotions after a traumatic incident. You may experience intense stress similar *to* the *effects* of a physical injury. For example, you may feel exhausted, sore, or off balance.
5. **Take care of yourself**— Engage *in* healthy behaviors *to* enhance your ability to cope with excessive stress. Eat well-balanced meals, get plenty of rest, and build physical activity into your day. Avoid alcohol and drugs because they can suppress your feelings rather than *help* you *to* manage and lessen your distress. Also, alcohol and drugs may intensify your emotional or physical pain. Establish or reestablish routines such as eating meals at regular times and following an exercise program. If you are having trouble sleeping, try some relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing, meditation, or yoga.
6. **Help others or do something productive** — Locate resources in your community on ways that you can help people who have been affected by this incident, or have other needs. Helping someone else often has the benefit of making you feel better, too.
7. **If you have recently lost friends or family *in* this or other tragedies** — Remember that grief is a long process. Give yourself time to experience your feelings and to recover. For some, this might involve staying at home; for others, it may mean getting back to your daily routine. Dealing with the shock and trauma of such an event will take time. It is typical to expect many ups and downs, including "survivor guilt"—feeling bad that you escaped the tragedy while others did not.

### **WHEN TO GET HELP:**

For many people, using the tips and strategies mentioned above may be sufficient to get through the current crisis. At times, however, an individual can get stuck or have difficulty managing intense reactions. A licensed mental health professional such as a psychologist or counselor can assist you in developing an appropriate strategy for moving forward.

### **It is essential to get professional help if:**

- You feel like you have tried your usual self-care activities but are not feeling better
- Are unable to function or perform necessary activities of daily living
- Are drinking or using drugs to cope
- Acting out aggressively towards others
- Isolating yourself and becoming depressed