

Coping with Grief and Loss After a Traumatic Event: Dealing with shock and disbelief

Grief and loss are natural parts of life, but it can be incredibly hard to cope with them when they result from a sudden death, an accident, or a traumatic event such as an earthquake or other disaster. A traumatic event that affects many people calls into question many of our commonly held beliefs about safety and security. Survivors may experience intense emotional reactions, such as feelings of sadness, helplessness, fear, vulnerability, and confusion.

This is the first in a four-part series of articles on coping after a traumatic event.

Dealing with shock and disbelief

Grief is highly individual, and no two people work through a loss in the same way or in the same time frame. However, some feelings are common among people who have experienced a loss. Reactions of shock and disbelief—or denial—often happen initially as a way to protect the person from the full emotional impact of a traumatic event.

Denial may play an especially strong role for people who have lost a loved one in an accident or a traumatic event where the body has not been recovered. It is normal for survivors to struggle with feelings of denial following an unexpected or sudden death if there is no way to formally say goodbye. These feelings may continue for days, weeks, or even years.

Thoughts such as "this can't be happening" or "there must be some kind of mistake" are common signs of disbelief. They offer you emotional breathing room and protect you from the full effects of devastating news before you are ready to believe it. At first, survivors of a traumatic event may cling to the hope that their loved one will be saved, even after rescue efforts have ended. Or they may believe their loved one is unconscious and unable to make contact. This can lead to wishful thinking and unrealistic expectations of a positive outcome. Here are helpful steps to take:

Ask for help from family and friends. Ask friends and relatives to help you make phone calls, make travel arrangements, or complete other tasks while you're in the process of searching for information about loved ones.

Talk with people you trust about your fears and anguish. Talking with friends, family, or a professional counselor may help you work through what you are feeling. You may also want to join a support group.

Allow yourself time. Denial is a protective mechanism. It will pass when you are ready to begin to address deeper emotional issues.

Seek help from rescue and relief agencies. Crisis counseling may be available through a variety of federal or local organizations. Contact relief agencies such as the [American Red Cross](#) or local hospitals for more information.

If you are employed, look into helpful benefits provided by your workplace. If you don't know what's available, ask your manager or human resources (HR) representative to tell you about any programs that could be helpful after traumatic loss, such as an assistance program.

If, as time goes on, you are not able to acknowledge the loss of a loved one, consider talking with a mental health professional. Your health care provider or assistance program can provide you a referral.

Take care of yourself. You will need all of your strength to cope with a sudden or traumatic loss. Eating healthy meals and getting enough sleep can help you maintain your strength.

This is the first in a four-part series of articles on coping after a traumatic event. Read the next in the series, “[Managing your anger about the event.](#)”

© TELUS Health 2024



Patrick Williams, LMFT, CEAP
Clinical Director