



## Tips for Survivors: COPING WITH GRIEF AFTER A DISASTER OR TRAUMATIC EVENT

Grief is the normal response of sorrow, heartache, and confusion that comes from losing someone or something important to you. Grief can also be a common human response after a disaster or other traumatic event.

This tip sheet contains information about grief, the grieving process, and what happens when the process is interrupted and complicated or traumatic grief occurs. It also offers tips and resources for coping with both types of grief.

Grief is a part of life. It is a strong, sometimes overwhelming reaction to death, divorce, job loss, a move, or loss of health due to illness. It can also occur after disasters or other traumatic events.



## What Is Grief?

Grief is a part of life. It is a strong, sometimes overwhelming reaction to death, divorce, job loss, a move, or loss of health due to illness. It can also occur after disasters or other traumatic events. If you are experiencing grief, you may feel empty and numb, or unable to feel joy or sadness. You may also feel angry. You may experience physical reactions, including the following:

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

While grieving, you may have nightmares, withdraw socially, and not want to participate in your usual activities.

Eventually, you may also notice positive changes in yourself from your experience of loss, such as the following:

- Becoming more understanding and tolerant
- Having increased appreciation for relationships and loved ones
- Feeling grateful for the presence of those in your community who are loving and caring
- Experiencing enhanced spiritual connection
- Becoming more socially active
- Getting involved in advocacy to help people who have experienced similar losses

## How Long Does Grief Usually Last?

Grief is different for every person and every loss. The manner of the death or loss and your personal circumstances can affect how long you experience grief.

If you are experiencing grief now, it may be difficult to imagine an end to the pain you are feeling. Even though your life may not be the same as it was before, the grief will eventually ease, and the grieving process will allow you to accept the loss and move forward with your life.

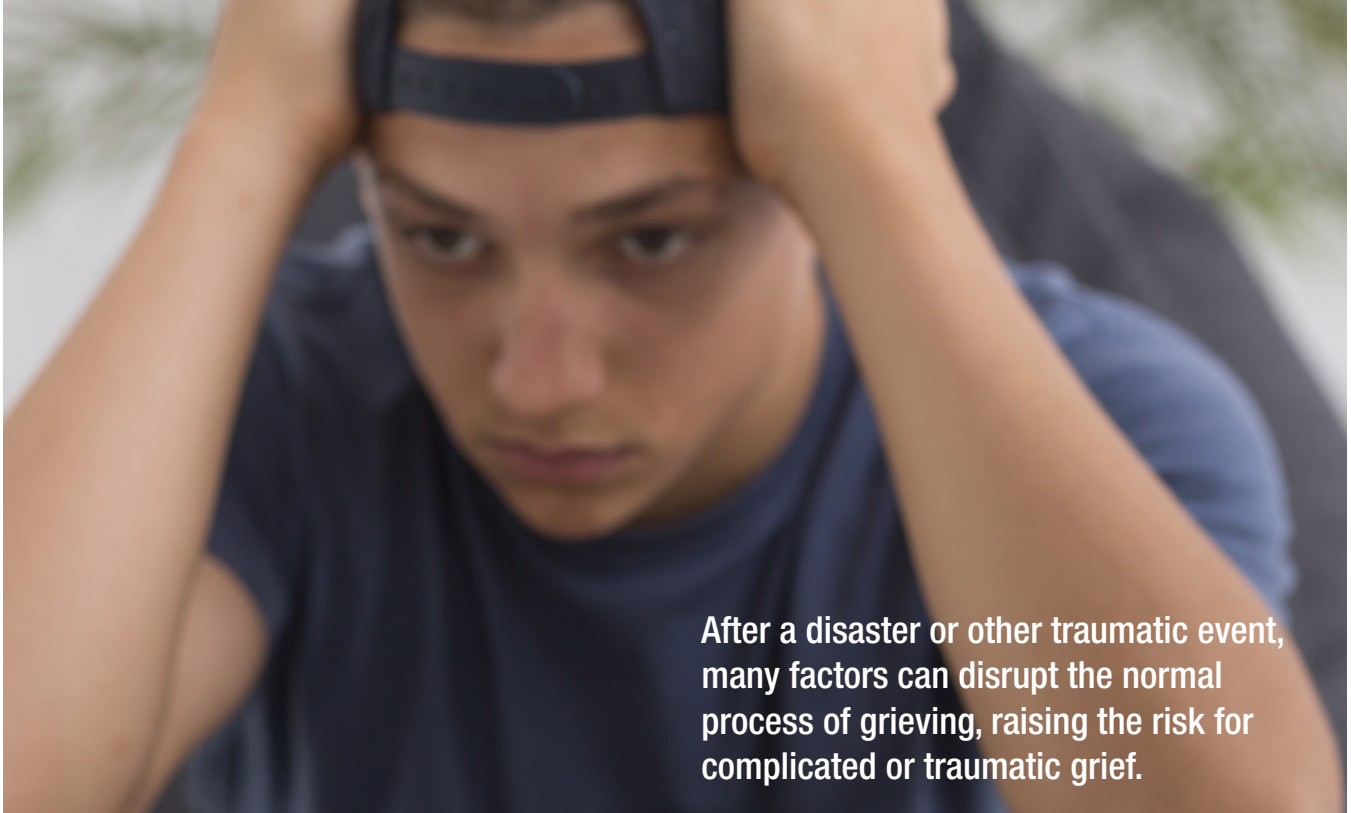


## Coping With Grief

You can take steps to help yourself cope with grief. Talking to others who understand and respect how you feel—family members, faith leaders, people you trust—is a helpful way to cope with your grief. Recognize that although you might still have these feelings over a long period, they will likely be less intense over time. Try to take care of yourself physically by exercising, eating healthy meals, and getting enough sleep. Allow yourself to feel joy and sadness, and to cry when you need to.

Going through the grieving process and healing from loss does not mean forgetting about loved ones who have died. You may still feel deeply connected to the person you have lost, but you will also be able to imagine a life without him or her. You will start to be reengaged in daily life and reconnected to others. When moving out of grief, you may start to experience the following:

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



After a disaster or other traumatic event, many factors can disrupt the normal process of grieving, raising the risk for complicated or traumatic grief.

If you are not experiencing these changes and adjustments after many months, and you feel “stuck” in your deep and overwhelming feelings of loss, then you may be experiencing what is known as complicated or traumatic grief.

## 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 you make progress toward getting back to your 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 if you’re experiencing complicated or traumatic grief, you may not feel any reduction of grief over many months or even years. Your feelings of sadness, anger, and loneliness may even become more intense over time.



These are some of the symptoms of complicated or traumatic grief:

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

If you are experiencing any of these symptoms, you may need to seek help in order to move forward and begin the healing process. You can find help by using the resources listed on this page, talking to your doctor, or seeing another health care professional.



## 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).

