

After the Storm: Handling Grief and Loss



After the winds calm, the rains stop, and the waters recede, the human loss from a natural disaster is obvious. The set of emotions we feel when a loved one dies is called grieving. Disaster survivors have the added burden of the emotions that come from trauma.

It is very normal to feel angry when a loved one dies. A survivor can feel sad, anxious, and guilty all at the same time. It also is normal to feel lonely. A survivor also can be angry with the person who died because he or she feels deserted.

Under any circumstances, the greater the loss, the more grief we feel. The same thing is true about disaster. Normally, the greater the scope of the disaster and the closer the person is to the tragedy, the stronger the emotional reactions will be. Thankfully, an individual can work through the grief process and rebuild his or her life. Rebuilding, however, is a slow process.

Some of the stages of traumatic grief are shock/denial, anger, guilt, depression, and, finally, acceptance.

Shock/Denial - The first part of the grief process is shock. It's hard to accept that a loved one has died. You can be so numb that it is almost like you cannot feel anything. It is your mind's way of helping you deal with what is almost unbearable.

Complicating matters is that while your world is in disarray because of the disaster, your mind also is in disarray because of your loss. Disorganization and confusion reign. Confusion is common once you begin to come out of a state of shock. It is very difficult to do the simplest things when you are in such an emotional upheaval.

Following a disaster, however, there are some things that have to be done. For example, you must find shelter, locate food

and water, and get your children back in school. Families have to deal with rebuilding lives when they are in a state of grief.

Anger - Both the loss of a loved one and traumatic events can trigger volatile emotions. Common emotions include anger, hostility, irritability, resentment, and extreme nervousness. Your emotions may bounce back and forth, creating confusion. These emotions are normal, and there is no cause for shame. You have to accept your feelings. You also have to start putting your life back together. As you work through the grief process, you can find peace and acceptance, but it takes hard work.

Feelings of Guilt - Survivor guilt is normal in a disaster. You feel guilty because you survived and others did not. Your guilt might stem from decisions that were made concerning the disaster. It is easy to say, "If only I had gotten my family farther inland," or, "If only I had taken this or that safety precaution, everyone would be OK." You can "what if" or "if only" forever, but the fact is no human is perfect and the past cannot be changed. Unfortunately, while hindsight is perfect, no human has foresight.

Depression - Losing a loved one causes loneliness. Because of the emotions triggered by the tragedy, it is easy to become depressed by any disaster. A person can feel lonely and empty, and think that his or her life has little purpose. It is common to feel sorry for oneself while, at the same time, feeling very grateful for the assistance of others. This stage of grief can last for months. One way to help yourself get over this stage is to think of what others need and do what you can to help them.

Acceptance - As time goes by, survivors can, in some way, come to terms with death's finality. They have to accept their feelings and start putting their lives back together. As people work through the grief process, they can find peace and acceptance.

How can you find this peace and acceptance? It helps to express your grief to friends. Some survivors find prayer, meditation, or inspirational reading helps them recover. You may need to talk to a professional counselor. You might find help in a support group. It does not matter to whom you talk, as long as you talk out this loneliness of loss. Lean on your support network of family, friends, co-workers, church members, and others. If you are far away from your support network, build a new network. It is important to be in contact with your relatives, even if it is only by phone. Recovery is slow, but if you talk openly about your feelings, you can pull through your loss.

Be sure to make plans for the future. Recovery means accepting the past and present realities, redefining goals, and creating a new normal. The important thing to remember is to be patient. This is a long process, and there will be setbacks. Wedding anniversaries, disaster anniversaries, birthdays, and holidays will be painful.

Don't try to hide your emotions; express them. How can you express your emotions? You could write a poem, paint, or work on memorial projects. Working

on photo albums or scrapbooks can help you express your feelings. Crying can help - tears often play a part in the healing process.

As you work through the grief process, you can find peace and acceptance. No, your life will never be the same as it was before the disaster, but your new life can be just as satisfying.

Additional Reading:

Chicken Soup for the Surviving Soul by Jack Canfield, et al.; *Is There Anything I Can Do? Helping a Friend When Times Are Rough* by Sol Gordon

Adapted from the following publications: *GriefWork: Guides for Survival and Growth and Expressing Kindness in Times of Illness and Death* by Sam Quick, Ph.D., and Betsy Spalding, R.N., B.S.N., The University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service; *Triumph Over Tragedy: A Community Response to Managing Trauma in Times of Disaster and Terrorism* (Second Edition), edited by Garret D. Evans and Brenda A. Wiens and prepared by the University of Florida National Rural Behavioral Health Center; *How Families and Neighbors Can Help One Another Cope* by North Carolina State University Cooperative Extension Service; *Establishment and operation of shelters serving socially vulnerable populations: A socio-spatial analysis* by Lynn Pike, Ph.D., Mississippi State University

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Information Sheet 1796

Extension Service of Mississippi State University, cooperating with U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Published in furtherance of Acts of Congress, May 8 and June 30, 1914. VANCE H. WATSON, Interim Director

(POD-05-06)