



Loss | *Tip sheet*

# Trauma and Loss: Support for Those Experiencing Grief

## What is trauma and what is loss?

Everyone experiences trauma and loss. If you have recently gone through a traumatic event or lost someone close to you, you may have reactions that seem confusing. You may have expected to feel one way, but feel another. You may have conflicting feelings. You may wonder how long it will take to get back to feeling “normal.” Knowing the different ways that people respond when facing a trauma or loss can give you an idea of what to expect.

## Reactions to trauma and loss are different for everyone

Every person has a slightly different reaction to trauma and loss. You may even respond differently depending on whether you have witnessed a terrible scene or lost a loved one. These differences are due to a variety of psychological factors and experiences. It's important to know that there is no one “right” way to be after a loss or trauma.

It is not uncommon for a variety of reactions to occur following a trauma or a loss. Possible reactions include:

Unexplained physical problems, such as headaches or exhaustion

Changes in eating and sleeping patterns

Inability to concentrate or make decisions

Loss of interest in friends, work and other regular activities

Withdrawal from loved ones

Withdrawal from religious or spiritual activities

Unexplained restlessness

Behaviors like excessive TV watching, shopping, or substance use

Explosive anger

## The Grieving Cycle

People use the phrase “time heals all things,” and it’s true that the painful reactions to loss and trauma tend to resolve in time. The question is – how much time? The answer is – it depends. While research has uncovered more about these processes, the amount of time it takes to move from initial denial to acceptance depends on a person’s resiliency, cultural expectations, and other life stressors.

Dr. Elizabeth Kübler Ross (On Life after Death, 2008) described five stages of grief: **Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance**

Experts now talk about “cycles” rather than stages of grief. People don’t move from stage to stage, instead they tend to cycle back and forth among the different stages. People also find that it’s possible to experience two stages at the same time, such as anger and depression.

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## Recovery from Trauma and Loss

While the grieving process can feel overwhelming, there are strategies which you may find helpful.

**Reach out for help:** When you're in the depths of crisis, it's hard to imagine that anyone else could care or understand your suffering. Yet reaching out to others is healing. Talk to your friends, pastor, counselor or family. Use the EAP or other resources offered by your employer. Consider online resources as a mechanism for support or additional information.

**Take charge:** Following a trauma or loss it is natural to have little things bother you more than usual or to feel helpless. Overcoming these feelings is vital to healing. In the midst of your sorrow, make a plan to take charge of your life. It may begin with something as simple as resolving to get out of bed each day and eat a meal or pledging to check in with a friend daily. The goal is to take responsibility for putting yourself on the road to healing.

**Find a purpose:** When healing from a trauma or loss it is often helpful to identify a purpose and reason for moving forward. Caring for other family members, volunteer work, or supporting a cause to which you are passionate about can help focus your energy in a healthy direction.

**Move beyond self blame:** Following a trauma or loss it is not uncommon for people to blame themselves. "If only..." thoughts enter the mind and individuals can get stuck in grief. None of us get through life without making mistakes. You may share some of the responsibility for the crisis or, more likely, it would have happened no matter what you did. Either way, the important thing is what you do from this point forward. Being stuck in self-blame hurts all involved.

## Providing Support to Someone Else

Working closely with people for many hours a week can make them feel like family. When a coworker experiences a loss or trauma, you may share that person's grief. If something happens to a co-worker, you may feel grief yourself.

Grieving in the workplace does bring up some unique difficulties. The following may be helpful as you move through a colleague's loss or trauma or workplace event.

1. Offer your expression of sorrow to a grieving co-worker, then follow his or her lead. Some people want to share their experiences; others do not. Respect the co-worker's boundaries.
2. The same is true when a workplace loss or trauma occurs. Not everyone is comfortable talking about it.
3. Give your co-worker or your team time to deal with the situation. Remember that grief doesn't proceed in a straight line. One day it may look like the person is "over it" while the next they shows signs of sorrow or inability to work.

Co-workers may appreciate some means of remembrance or memorial. Ask if contributions to a special charity, flowers, or some other recognition are wanted.

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