

## **After a disaster . . .**

**Make connections.** It's easy to feel alone in your worries and other reactions. Connecting with close family members, friends and neighbors can be a source of strength and support. By discussing some of the challenges you are experiencing, you may discover you are not alone. You may learn how others are managing similar experiences and incorporate some of those strategies. Sometimes after disasters, local support groups are offered by appropriately trained and experienced professionals. People can feel a sense of relief and comfort by connecting with other flood survivors who have had similar reactions and emotions. Another way to make connections is to reach out and help others who are also managing flood-related challenges. Helping others can give you a sense of accomplishment and self-worth.

**Avoid seeing crises as insurmountable problems.** You can't stop the flood waters, but you can change how you interpret and respond to them. Try to see beyond the current crisis to how future circumstances may be a little better. Note any subtle ways in which you might already feel better as you make progress containing water damage or cleaning up following the flood.

**Take a news break.** Watching replays of flood footage can increase your distress. Often, the media tries to interest viewers by presenting worst-case scenarios. These may or may not be representative of what's happening to your home or community.

**Accept that change is a part of living.** Certain goals may no longer be attainable because of your home and community being flooded. Accepting circumstances that cannot be changed can help you focus on circumstances that you can change.

**Move toward your goals.** Develop some realistic goals. Do something regularly — even if it seems like a small accomplishment — that enables you to move toward your goals. Instead of focusing on tasks that seem unachievable, ask yourself, "What's one thing I know I can accomplish today that helps me move in the direction I want to go?"

**Take decisive actions.** Act on adverse situations as much as you can. Take decisive actions, rather than detaching completely from problems and stresses and wishing they would just go away. Although floods can uproot people from their normal routines, establish new routines as soon as you can, even if they may have to change again once the flood and clean-up are over.

**Look for opportunities for self-discovery.** People often learn something about themselves and may find that they have grown in some respect as a result of their struggle with loss. Many people who have experienced tragedies and hardship have reported better relationships, greater sense of strength, increased sense of self-worth, a more developed spirituality, and heightened appreciation for life.

**Nurture a positive view of yourself.** You are persevering through difficult circumstances. That's an accomplishment. Developing confidence in your ability to solve problems and trusting your instincts helps build resilience.

**Maintain a hopeful outlook.** An optimistic outlook enables you to expect that good things will happen in your life. Try visualizing what you want, rather than worrying about what you fear. Even when facing significant water damage and a long flood clean-up, try to consider these stressful circumstances in a broader context and keep a long-term perspective. You've tackled past hardships that may have felt overwhelming at the time. Tap into those successful skills to get through current challenges.

**Take care of yourself.** Engage in healthy behaviors that will enhance your ability to cope with excessive stress. Be patient in the midst of the chaos. You may not feel like it, but eat well-balanced meals and get plenty of rest. If you experience difficulties sleeping, you may be able to find some relief through relaxation techniques. Avoid alcohol

and drugs since these can increase feelings of sadness or distress and hamper your progress in successfully managing current circumstances.

For many people, using the resilience-building strategies described 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 can help you develop an appropriate strategy for moving forward. It is important to get professional help if you are having trouble functioning or performing basic activities of daily living. You can find therapists near you by contacting Interface-Samaritan Counseling Centers at 713.626.7990.

For children, disasters can create intense anxiety and fear. This is particularly true if family members or friends were injured or died or if a child is separated from his or her family during the storm. A child's distress may manifest itself in a variety of ways, including experiencing nightmares or fear of going to sleep, unusual outbursts or tantrums, or withdrawing and becoming more solitary.

Caring adults can help alleviate the emotional consequences of trauma by doing the following . . .

**Spend more time** with children and let them be more dependent on you during the months following the trauma — for example, allowing your child to cling to you more often than usual. Physical affection is very comforting to children who have experienced trauma.

**Provide play experiences** to help relieve tension. Younger children in particular may find it easier to share their ideas and feelings about the event through nonverbal activities such as drawing.

**Be available** and encourage older children to ask questions they may have, as well as sharing their thoughts and feelings with you and with one another. This helps reduce their confusion and anxiety related to the trauma. Respond to questions in terms they can comprehend. Reassure them repeatedly that you care about them and that you understand their fears and concerns.

**Keep regular schedules** for activities such as eating, playing and going to bed to help restore a sense of security and normalcy, even if your family has been relocated to a shelter or other temporary housing.

**Provide safe opportunities for children to help others** — helping others offers a sense of control and can help children feel better about themselves.

**Reduce the number of times children see the trauma on the news.** Repeatedly watching broadcasts of the disaster can re-traumatize children.

### **When should parents seek professional help for their children?**

Many children are able to cope effectively with the emotional and physical demands brought about by a natural disaster by using their own support systems. It is not unusual, however, to find that serious problems persist and continue to interfere with daily living. With children, continual and aggressive emotional outbursts, serious problems at school, preoccupation with the traumatic event, continued and extreme withdrawal, and other signs of intense anxiety or emotional difficulties all point to the need for professional assistance. A qualified mental health professional such as a psychologist can help such children and their parents understand and deal with thoughts, feelings and behaviors that result from trauma.



# Crisis and trauma reactions

Have you been the victim of a crime or trauma (this includes being a witness or family member of a victim)? Traumatic events like this can affect people in different ways. Here's a summary of some common reactions to trauma, and some helpful ways to cope

## Common reactions to crime and trauma.

In the weeks and months after a crime or trauma it's common to experience a number of reactions. These can affect you physically, mentally and/or emotionally. You may also notice changes in behavior.

This is a painful time and these reactions are a part of the healing process, so acknowledging them is important.

## Examples of common reactions:

### Physical:

- fatigue – feeling exhausted or generally tired and unwell.
- sleep problems – such as insomnia, disturbed sleep or nightmares
- under-activity or lethargy – feeling like you just can't be bothered
- hyperactivity or feeling unable to stop and relax
- frequent colds, headaches, general aches and pains, or digestive problems
- lost appetite, or conversely comfort eating
- feeling constantly on edge, such as sensitivity to sudden noises or movements.

### Mental:

- difficulty with concentration
- flashbacks
- difficulty problem-solving
- absent-mindedness or forgetfulness
- difficulty making decisions.

### Emotional:

- feeling as though nothing matters
- anxiety, fear and worry about the future
- guilt or self-blame for some aspect of the trauma; thoughts of 'if only'
- emotional numbing – inability to feel clear-cut emotions
- over-sensitivity – becoming upset or angry more easily than usual
- anger: with the offender, police, another family member or self
- irritability, 'snappiness' or short-temperedness

- feeling overwhelmed by practicalities
- thoughts of revenge
- anxiety or worries about the future
- depression, extreme sadness and the feeling of loss
- feelings of helplessness – the feeling of loss of control over your life.

### Behavioural:

- turning to alcohol, drugs, gambling or other behaviours likely to cause harm
- avoiding people or places
- turning to work or other activities to avoid thoughts
- making erratic decisions.

### Coping mechanisms

Accepting what you're feeling and giving yourself permission to feel sad, angry, hurt or whatever is a good start.

- Talking to a trusted friend, counsellor or minister may be helpful. There are also 24 hour phone lines available such as LifeLine (0800 543 354).
- Let other people help out in practical or supportive ways.
- Try to get enough sleep and exercise; physical activity is a good stress reliever.
- Eating well helps too. If you can't face eating much, keep up fluids (non-alcoholic). If your loss of appetite continues, consult your GP.
- Try taking multi-vitamin/mineral supplements. Vitamin B group is helpful in times of stress. Take as directed.
- If you can, try not to take excessive quantities of cigarettes, coffee and sugar, as these may only add to emotional arousal.
- Try to keep alcohol use down, or if you have a problem doing this seek help from your GP.
- If you have to use anti-depressants or medications to help with sleep or anxiety, make sure your GP monitors these and explains to you which of these medications can be habit forming. There are herbal alternatives from natural health shops should you prefer these preparations to pharmaceuticals.
- Try to take one day at a time, or one hour at a time.
- Try to avoid making major decisions in times of turmoil.

# What is Trauma?



**Trauma:** A powerful emotional response to a distressing event, such as war, an accident, the unexpected loss of a loved one, or abuse. Trauma can continue to cause both emotional and physical symptoms for many years after the event has concluded.

## Trauma Risk Factors

- ✓ The traumatic experience was unexpected.
- ✓ The victim has experienced past traumas.
- ✓ The experience happened repeatedly, or over a prolonged period of time.
- ✓ The trauma occurred during childhood.
- ✓ Feeling of helplessness during the experience.
- ✓ The victim is dealing with other major stressors, unrelated to the trauma.



## Symptoms of Trauma

Everyone's experience with trauma is unique. Some people will develop every symptom, while others develop very few. The following list of symptoms is not comprehensive, and should not be used to form a diagnosis.

avoidance of trauma reminders, including memories	exaggerated startle response	irritability, anger, and other negative emotions
flashbacks to the traumatic event	distressing dreams and other sleep problems	self-blame regarding the traumatic event

## Treating Trauma



### Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a common and well-supported treatment for trauma disorders. CBT works by identifying and challenging unhealthy thinking patterns that contribute to the symptoms of trauma. The benefits of CBT can be long-lasting.



### Exposure Therapy

During exposure therapy, the patient is exposed to reminders of their trauma in a gradual and safe way. With enough exposure, the trauma begins to lose its emotional power, and the symptoms diminish. Exposure therapies have extensive research support.



### Medication

Medication may be used to manage the symptoms of trauma, such as anxiety, depression, and insomnia. Medication can be especially valuable when a person's symptoms are so intense that they are unable to participate in psychotherapy.



### Other Treatments

Many other treatments, such as Narrative Exposure Therapy, Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), and group therapy have all been found to be helpful for survivors of trauma. It's always ok to ask your therapist what treatments they use.

# The Grieving Process



**Grief:** The natural emotional response resulting from a significant loss—especially the death of a loved one.

Everyone deals with grief differently. People cry, laugh, busy themselves with work, throw up, or even feel numb. Some recover quickly, while others take their time. Grief is a natural healing process, and there's no "right" way to do it.

For some people, grief can become *too* painful. It can grow into something totally different, like depression or anxiety. Other times, grief might last far too long, and take over a person's life for years on end. This is called **complicated grief**.



"Normal" grief varies greatly between cultures, people, and situations.



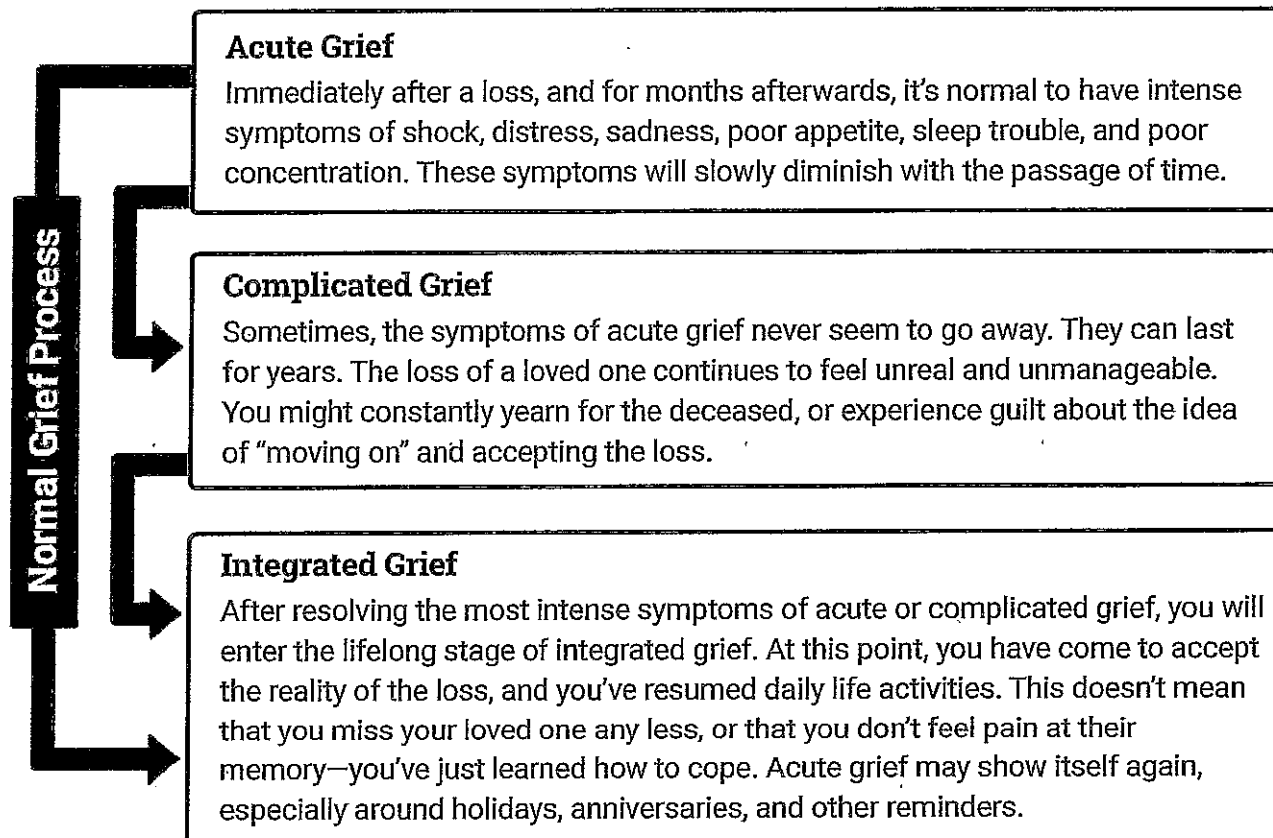
Grief is a natural process, and does not always require treatment.



About 10% of people develop complicated grief after a loss.



Complicated grief can be treated with psychotherapy.



# The Stages of Grief

The Kübler-Ross model of grief (the five stages of grief) describes five primary responses to loss. These stages are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Someone who is grieving may go through these stages in any order, and they may return to previous stages.

**Denial:** "This can't be happening."

Individuals may refuse to accept the fact that a loss has occurred. They may minimize or outright deny the situation. It is suggested that loved ones and professionals be forward and honest about losses to not prolong the denial stage.

**Anger:** "Why is this happening to me?"

When an individual realizes that a loss has occurred, they may become angry at themselves or others. They may argue that the situation is unfair and try to place blame.

**Bargaining:** "I will do anything to change this."

In bargaining, the individual may try to change or delay their loss. For example, they may try to convince a partner to return after a breakup, or search for unlikely cures in the case of a terminal illness.

**Depression:** "What's the point of going on after this loss?"

At the stage of depression the individual has come to recognize that a loss has occurred or will occur. The individual may isolate themselves and spend time crying and grieving. Depression is a precursor to acceptance because the individual has come to recognize their loss.

**Acceptance:** "It's going to be okay."

Finally, the individual will come to accept their loss. They understand the situation logically, and they have come to terms emotionally with the situation.