Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
SAMHSA
www.samhsa.gov • 1-877-SAMHSA-7 (1-877-726-4727)

Tips for Survivors:

COPING WITH GRIEF AFTER COMMUNITY VIOLENCE

It is not uncommon for individuals and communities as a whole to experience grief reactions and anger after an incident of community violence. Grief is the normal response of sorrow, emotion, and confusion that comes from losing someone or something important to you. Most people will experience a natural occurrence of grief after the death of a loved one, but grief and anger can be the result of other types of losses. In situations of community violence, people may experience the loss of their sense of safety, their trust in those who live in their neighborhood, or their trust in local government. The trauma and grief of community violence can be experienced by all involved.

This tip sheet contains information about some of the signs of grief and anger and provides useful information about how to cope with grief. In addition, the **Helpful Resources** section provides hotline numbers and treatment locators for those who may want further help.

Grief Reactions to Violence

Often after a death or loss of some kind, many people express feeling empty and numb, or unable to feel. Some people complain that they become angry at others or at situations, or they just feel angry in general, even without a reason.

Some of the physical reactions to grief and anger may include the following:

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

People experiencing grief may have nightmares, withdraw socially, and may have no desire to participate in their usual activities, work, or school.

How Long Do Grief Reactions Last?

Grief lasts as long as it takes you to accept and learn to live with the changes that have occurred in your community due to the violence and its aftermath. For some people, grief lasts a few months; for others, it may take more than a year. It's different for each person depending on his or her health, coping styles, culture, family supports, and other life experiences. How long people grieve may also depend on the resilience of the community and the ability of its members to take on roles and responsibilities that will help restore the basic needs of the community, such as getting children back to school and businesses back to working again.

Reactions to Community Violence in Children

Witnessing community violence and death can be traumatic experiences that cause negative mental health outcomes, particularly for children. Close relationships are important to children's development, and the loss of family or a community member can represent the loss of social capital—the emotional support that enhances their well-being. Children may experience depression, posttraumatic stress, anxiety, aggression, poor academic achievement, hopelessness, and risky behavior. These losses can even affect their capacity for relationships and diminish future expectations.

Tips for Helping Children Cope With Grief

- Allow children to talk about their feelings and to express their grief (e.g., crying, being sad).
- Try to follow the same routines as usual.
- Encourage them to play and laugh.
- Limit exposure to violence on TV news.
- Encourage them to get adequate rest and to eat healthy meals.

What Can Communities Do To Cope With Their Grief?

Often the community needs to come together to honor those who died and find meaning in their deaths in a way that will help everyone in the community recover. People may create a memorial and decide together that this will remind them never to allow such violence in their community again. It may help them be determined to work out their differences in other ways in the future—for example, by forming a community advisory group or identifying a local leader to be their liaison with law enforcement and other government entities.

Helpful Resources

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Disaster Technical Assistance Center (SAMHSA DTAC)
Toll-Free: 1-800-308-3515
Website: http://www.samhsa.gov/dtac

SAMHSA Behavioral Health Disaster Response Mobile App
Website: http://store.samhsa.gov/product/PEP13-DKAPP-1

Administration for Children and Families*
Website: http://www.acf.hhs.gov

Treatment Locators

Mental Health Treatment Facility Locator
Toll-Free: 1-800-789-2647 (English and español)
TDD: 1-866-889-2647
Website: http://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/MHTreatmentLocator

MentalHealth.gov
Website: http://www.mentalhealth.gov
MentalHealth.gov provides U.S. government information and resources on mental health.

Substance Abuse Treatment Facility Locator
Toll-Free: 1-800-662-HELP (1-800-662-4357)
(24/7 English and español); TDD: 1-800-487-4889
Website: http://www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov

Hotlines

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
Toll-Free: 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255)
TTY: 1-800-799-4TTY (1-800-799-4889)
Website: http://www.samhsa.gov
This resource can be found by accessing the Suicide Prevention Lifeline box once on the SAMHSA website.

National Domestic Violence Hotline*
Toll-Free: 1-800-799-7233
TTY: 1-800-787-3224
Website: http://www.thehotline.org

**Note: Inclusion of a resource in this fact sheet does not imply endorsement by the Center for Mental Health Services, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.*

What Can Individuals Do To Cope With Their Grief?

Talking to others who understand and respect how you feel—family members, faith leaders, people you trust—is a helpful way to ease your grief. Recognize that although you might still have these feelings over a long period, they will likely be less and less intense over time. Make sure to exercise and eat healthy meals. Do the things that you used to enjoy doing, even if you don't always feel like it. This will help you get back into your routines. Allow yourself to feel joy at times and to cry when you need to.

Even though they may be experiencing grief, some individuals also exhibit positive changes from their experience of loss, such as the following:

- Becoming more understanding and tolerant
- Having increased appreciation for relationships and loved ones
- Being grateful for what they have and for those in their community who are loving and caring
- Experiencing enhanced spiritual connection
- Becoming more socially active

If you have experienced the death of a friend or loved one—or if you have been exposed to community violence—feelings of grief and anger are a normal reaction. But, if these feelings persist, access the resources on this page for more information on getting help.

If you or someone you know is struggling after a disaster, you are not alone.

Disaster Distress Helpline
PHONE: 1-800-985-5990
TEXT: "TalkWithUs" to 66746
WEB: http://disasterdistress.samhsa.gov

Call 1-800-985-5990 or text "TalkWithUs" to 66746 to get help and support 24/7.

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