

From the Desk of
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Traumatic Loss: What it is and How to Recover



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a very strong sense of irreversible loss. The lives of survivors may be disrupted for many years. There, too, may be a lingering sense of dread, danger or a threat to one's life.

Traumatic Events

Traumatic events are sudden, unexpected, life-threatening events that leave survivors with complicated emotions and feelings. There is no time to prepare for a traumatic event, which can make the survivor feel helpless and highly vulnerable. Most people have no experience dealing with such trauma. The most common traumatic events that occur in the United States include the following:

- **Death of a child**
- **Drug overdose**
- **Accidental and sudden death**
- **Violent, mutilating or random death**
- **Manslaughter**
- **Suicide**
- **Rape**
- **War-related death**
- **Terrorism**
- **Natural Disaster**
- **Serious car accident**
- **Death during a medical procedure**

Emotional Experiences after a Trauma

The way people experience a traumatic event varies in types of emotional responses, severity and length of time. One common emotional response is numbness, being in a dream-like trance, or feeling that the event never happened. People will ask "Why me?" and struggle to make sense out of the senseless. They may feel like a mistake has occurred and their loved one isn't dead. Worse, some individuals will blame themselves for the accident and believe that they could have prevented it. Some will want revenge, begin to self-medicate, and be tormented by guilt. Thankfully, for most people, these feelings and emotions become less intense over time. Hopefully, time will heal.

Some common emotional reactions include the following:

- **Fear of being left alone**
- **Losing control**

- **Sadness**
- **Guilt**
- **Shame**
- **Unfairness**
- **Despair**
- **Anger**
- **Helplessness**
- **Powerlessness**
- **Injustice**
- **Isolation**

Managing Life after a Traumatic Loss

One of the most important tasks in recovering after a trauma is to gain back one's sense of control and emotional stability. It is important to talk about the feelings and thoughts one is experiencing with loved ones and close friends. It is also important to give one's self time to heal and accept that everything in life cannot be controlled. Getting back to one's life can also include healthy eating, exercise, going back to work, returning to hobbies and meaningful activities, and getting some rest.

Seeking support from professionals can be very helpful. If one still feels overwhelmed by intruding and painful thoughts, intense guilt or self-blame, or deep sadness, it may be time to seek professional help. Some people may develop post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety or depression after a traumatic event. In such cases, it is very important to schedule a consult with a clinical therapist, psychologist or psychiatrist if psychotropic medications are involved in treatment.

Final Words

We all see traumatic events unfold daily on cable news. The difference between experiencing a real traumatic event and watching them on television is distance. It is easier to watch trauma from afar. No one is fully ready for a mass school shooting, unless they are a well-trained law enforcement officer. No one is prepared for a fatal car crash, unless they are an experienced paramedic. Regardless, traumatic events are going to happen. We are truly fortunate when they do not happen to us or our loved ones. But, for those who do experience trauma, healthcare professionals are uniquely prepared to help whenever and wherever they can.

Introduction

A fatal accident. Another teen takes his or her life. A heroin overdose. The victim of a drive-by shooting. Another high school massacre. No one anticipates these and no one is ever quite prepared to experience them. Yet, these types of traumatic events and losses occur daily in our society. As healthcare professionals, we need to learn as much as we can about traumatic loss and how to help the individuals affected by loss.

Trauma & Loss

The intense grief resulting from a traumatic loss can be the most difficult thing to handle in one's life. Trauma-related stress can be more severe and prolonged. The emotional impact can be so intense and emotionally overwhelming that it leads to significant physical and psychological problems. Trauma involves experiencing a deeply disturbing event, accident or experience that leaves the individual in a state of extreme emotional or physical distress. What is lost after a trauma is varied and deeply personal. How does one recover after the loss of a child? What will be experienced after witnessing a violent accident that takes the lives of those involved? How does one justify a loved one dying during a routine operation? These questions and many, many more are common after a traumatic loss.

Much of what is experienced after a traumatic event is unpredictable. The amount of time a person remains in crisis after an event is unknown. Some people will become withdrawn and self-isolated, while others will be compelled to be with family and friends more than they normally would. Still others may feel a lack of control in their lives, a sense of helplessness and