



Coping with **TRAUMATIC** Death

Mothers Against Drunk Driving

24-Hour Victim Help Line
877.MADD.HELP

madd.org/help



Helping Survivors Survive.®

I had experienced the death of a loved one before, but never experienced the emotional impact this crash brought. The emotions are indescribable; the crash and tragic death of my sister Krystle broke my heart.

Not a day goes by that I don't think about my sister and that I don't miss her like crazy. My life will never be the same because of this crash, and neither will the lives of our family and friends.

During this time depend on your friends and family as much as you can and need to. Allow yourself time to grieve, really grieve, then remember that life for you still goes on. Live life in a way that would make them proud.

It will take time to find new meaning in life, but it will happen. You will find a new sense of hope and a new sense of joy.

Melissa

In 2006, Melissa was only 17 when her sister Krystle was killed in a substance impaired driving crash.



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What Makes Traumatic/Sudden Death Different?

It is difficult to imagine the magnitude of pain associated with the traumatic death of a loved one. When someone is killed suddenly and violently, grief reactions of family and friends can be intense, complicated, and long lasting. If your loved one was killed in a substance impaired driving crash you may feel angrier than you have ever felt and sadder than you ever thought possible. Included in this resource you will find some suggestions that may help. However, keep in mind that even though your situation may share similarities with someone else, every person's grieving process is different.

Every person's grieving process is different.

Feeling Out of Control

After a crash your world is changed. Your thoughts and feelings may be changing from minute to minute or hour by hour, and you could feel very out of control. You may even feel like you are "going crazy." Grieving the death of your loved one can feel so overwhelming that you may question your own sanity. Because there is no way to prepare for this type of loss, many people find traumatic grief to be uncharted territory, which can be very unsettling.

Worry About the Violent Nature of the Crash

You may be worried about what happened to your loved one during and

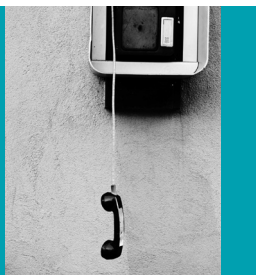
after the crash. Your loved one's death was violent. His or her body may have been seriously injured. You may be concerned your loved one suffered extreme pain or felt alone as they died. This is a common fear loved ones have and can be harder on the loved one than the person killed. It may bring you some solace to know that many people who have recovered from a traumatic event don't remember the point of impact. In fact, most say that it was some time before they felt pain, even if they drifted in and out of consciousness. Researchers call this response stress-induced analgesia. The body releases hormones which block pain pathways to prevent people from feeling pain.

No Opportunity to Say Goodbye

After a crash, surviving family members and friends are emotionally assaulted. There is no time to gradually prepare for the loss. You could have never prepared for the devastating blow caused by your loved one's traumatic death. When someone dies due to an expected death they may have the opportunity to see or talk with their loved one. You may not have had time to say goodbye, tell them you love them or to spend time with them before their death. You may be sad that you weren't with them when the crash happened or that they were alone.

**No time
to say
goodbye.**

Your concern that your loved one was alone at the time of their death is a valid one. However, you should know that it's also very common that a witness to the crash



or a first responder may have spent time comforting your loved one. It's possible that at some point you may come in contact with that person as facts of the crash are learned. But it's also possible that you may never know all of the details of who witnessed the crash or what your loved one's last moments were like; some of those details are lost in the chaos surrounding an emergency. Even if you didn't have the chance to say goodbye, it's very likely that your loved one knew how much you cared about them.

Physical Responses to Traumatic Grief

Illnesses Related to Grief

During the first six months to a year after a fatal crash, people who are grieving are vulnerable to physical illness. Physical complaints, aches, and illness are all common in people dealing with grief. Your body's immune system is working overtime, and you may feel worn out. This is your body's reaction to the trauma you have experienced.

You may have difficulty sleeping, or you may want to sleep all the time. You may feel nauseous and quit eating, or feel extremely hungry and eat more than you normally would.

Maintain regular contact with your physician for a year or two to be sure that you do not have a stress-related physical condition. During this early period of grief, eat well, get plenty of rest, and see your doctor if the problems persist.

Substance Use

Some people find the pain too difficult and turn to alcohol or drugs to ease the pain. Unfortunately, there is no easy fix to make the loss easier to bear. Alcohol and drugs both are likely to make the situation more difficult to cope with, because both will contribute to irrational thoughts and depressed moods.

You may need short-term medication prescribed by your doctor to help you eat or sleep while grieving. If so, do not consider it a weakness. You have suffered severe trauma and deserve professional help to begin feeling better. You will probably need the help of prescribed medication only for a short time. Even if you don't want to feel better yet, you owe it to yourself and your family to stay in good health.

A substance impaired driving crash can cause many physical, psychological and social responses due to grief. Although everyone's grief response is different it's important for you to take note of those grief reactions that are particularly common so that if you experience them, you will know what's happening to you.

**Don't
consider
seeking
help a
weakness.**

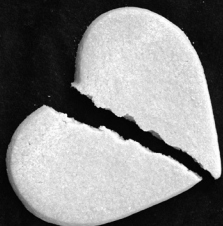
Psychological and Emotional Responses to Traumatic Grief

Denial

Denial can be a wonderful thing. It is the mind's way of buffering the full impact of a trauma until it can be absorbed. Upon learning that a loved one has been killed, most people are too weak to undertake the overwhelming task of grieving.

When you heard of your loved one's death, you may have gone into shock. Going into shock is something like feeling the effects of a general anesthetic. With the help of a quick spurt of adrenaline and other chemicals in your brain, your initial response may have been "fight" or "flight" or "freeze." Fighters sometimes scream so they won't hear the message or physically attack the person who has delivered the bad news. Those whose reaction is "flight" may faint or run to try to escape the pain. People who freeze may not be able to move or speak due to their reaction to the news.

Regardless of the initial impact, if you are like most people, you soon found yourself in a state of numbness. Looking back now, you may wonder how you remained calm. You may have completed some tasks that now seem impossible. You probably have a hard time remembering exactly what you did during those first few days.



During this time, people may have assumed that you were strong when you were actually in shock. You may have appeared strong but felt more like a robot, going through the motions. Denial following a violent and unanticipated death is considered normal and functional. It allows a person to travel through grief at their own pace and serves them well until they are stronger and better able to cope. It is impossible to push through any part of grieving in order to get over it. If you cannot think clearly or if you seem forgetful and detached, be patient with yourself. Most importantly, if you need help, ask for it.

**Be patient
with
yourself.**

Fear/Vulnerability

You may feel that life is out of balance and that the world no longer makes sense. Many victims/survivors are surprised to find that they feel anxious, fearful, and powerless after the violent death of a loved one. Before the crash, you may have assumed you were safe from crime. Now, you may feel that life is out of balance and that the world no longer makes sense. The part of you that was previously confident and carefree has been damaged. You see the world differently and fear comes with that.

We tend to believe that good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. For you, this belief no longer makes sense. Instead you may feel that you and your remaining loved ones

**Little
by little
you can
overcome
your fears.**

are more vulnerable than other people. It is important to work up the courage to go out in public, even when it frightens you. Little by little you can overcome your fears.

Anger

Anger is a common grief reaction. You may be surprised by the intensity of the anger you feel for the person who killed your loved one. You may find that your anger is directed toward members of the legal system or hospital staff. Even if it doesn't make sense, many people direct feelings of anger at a family member or friend, or even at themselves for not having prevented the unpreventable violent crime. You may even be angry at everything and everyone.

You may wish desperately that the person who killed your loved one would show some remorse and say "I'm sorry." That probably won't happen. Many offenders do not feel remorse although some are indeed sorry. However, their attorneys warn them not to make contact with the victim's family because such contact can be considered an admission of guilt.

The injustice of your loved one's death, the deep hurt you feel, and the loss of future dreams may all add up to rage. Most of the things you think about doing must remain undone, like harming the offender. It is important not to act in a destructive manner when responding to your anger.

Many people find it beneficial to talk with someone about feelings of anger or rage. Expressing these feelings can free the

mind, enabling you to be more open and realistic in your thinking and planning for the future. Physical activity often helps. Some people write in journals or write letters to the offender, which are better left unsent. Some cry and yell and scream. What you do with your anger really does not matter as long as you acknowledge it, and you do not hurt yourself or anyone else in expressing it.

**Expressing
your
feelings can
help free
the mind.**

Guilt

Anger frequently becomes guilt over time. Guilt is feeling somehow responsible for what happened or thinking that you didn't do enough in the relationship while your loved one was alive. You may say to yourself, "If only I had known," or "If only I told them I loved them." Guilt involves a lot of "should haves" or "should not haves."

**Regrets are
normal, but
you cannot
change
the past.**

Regrets are normal, but you cannot change the past. Some people find it helpful to write letters to their loved ones to help them say their goodbyes.

As difficult as it is, it is important to look rationally at how your beliefs make you feel guilty. You may, indeed, be responsible for some component of your loved one's death. If so, acknowledge it and see if you can find a way to forgive yourself. If you made a bad judgment, you probably made the best one you knew how to make at the time. Try not to exaggerate your role in your loved one's death.

In most cases, other factors were largely responsible for your loved one's death. It's important to acknowledge that the person who killed your loved one was/is to blame.

Talking with others who have some understanding of your experience can help you look at your guilt realistically. It will be hard work for them and for you. Feeling less guilty will not take away your sadness or your anger, but it can be a big load off your shoulders. It will be worth the effort to rid yourself of it.

Faith/Philosophy of Life

People who have not focused on God or a belief in an afterlife before may do so in the wake of trauma. Likewise, people whose faith plays a significant part in their lives may change some of their basic thoughts and beliefs connected to their faith. You may have been told that your loved one's death

Working through issues may take time.

was God's will; you may have been told you should forgive. Working through issues of faith may take time and can be another difficult component of grief.

Complicated Grief

While grief reactions such as sadness, anxiety, anger, and fear are normal, a more serious psychological complication can develop over time. You may find that feelings of numbness, sadness, anxiety, anger, confusion, helplessness, and hopelessness are long lasting and that they are interfering with your abilities to function both physically and emotionally. All of the feelings you are experiencing are normal;

however, it's important to recognize when they become more serious.

When people are exposed to a traumatic event, they frequently suffer psychological consequences such as depression or anxiety. Additionally, some people experience recurrent and ongoing recollections of the trauma, which can obviously lead to distress. Clinical depression and anxiety can be harmful but are very treatable.

**Serious
issues
are
treatable.**

Sometimes these feelings may lead to thoughts of suicide or death. **If they do, it is time to ask for help immediately.**

You may be driving in your car and suddenly have thoughts of the crash or perceive sensations (images, smells) that “bring you back” to the crash. You may wake-up in the middle of the night in a panic due to a nightmare.

Moments like these typically come about without warning and over time can cause you to avoid situations that you connect with the crash or these recurrences. You may feel on edge, anxious or always ready to react. Recollections can be so painful and scary that they disrupt your normal activities and relationships.

Trauma victims/survivors who consistently experience all of these symptoms for at least one month or longer may be suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD is an anxiety disorder that is diagnosed by a mental health professional. If you believe you may be suffering from PTSD it is important to seek professional help as PTSD is treatable with a combination of therapies.

Professional counselors can help diffuse the impact of these memories by providing emotional support as the experience is relived, using techniques to help recall the memory with less horror. With help, positive memories of the loved one will replace the distressing memories.

Social Changes in Response to Traumatic Grief

Life After Loss

While the initial response to the death is defined by the term grief, mourning refers to the internal processes associated with adapting to life without your loved one. Some have described mourning as a “misty fog on life.” You are not always aware, yet you realize that life is not quite as bright as it was before. Your values may have changed, and you may be impatient with things you deem unimportant or trivial.

Special Dates

Anniversaries, holidays, and birthdays often trigger reminders of the death or absence of your loved one. Perhaps the most significant and most difficult anniversary is that of the crash. The annual date of the crash may cause anticipatory anxiety and can contribute to renewed grief for victims/survivors. Special dates can be triggers that bring about painful thoughts and emotions.

The first anniversary will most likely be the most painful. Other annual celebrations, such as Christmas, Thanksgiving, and Mother’s/Father’s Day will continue to take place year after year. In the past these times

of joy brought your family together. Now and forever they will trigger memories of your loved one.

Today these special dates will be difficult, but later will provide you with reasons to reminisce and begin new rituals. Planning ahead for holidays and birthdays not only allows you to prepare for those events, but also provides ongoing and open communication between family members.

**Openly
communicate
what
you need.**

Future Losses

Mourning the loss of all of the possibilities that could have been if your loved one was alive is something that most people experience. You may miss out on the possibility of having grandchildren or having your loved one with you as you experience life events. Thinking about these losses and acknowledging them is a part of the grieving process. You may want to talk with someone or journal about the things you will miss due to your loss. It may help you cope with those losses.

**Journal
what's on
your mind.**



Healing Journey

Your life will not be the same as it was before your loved one was killed. Learning to manage grief requires that you recognize and acknowledge all that is involved in the grief journey. Many people describe the grief process as a roller coaster ride with ups and downs along the way. However painful and difficult, grieving is necessary to heal and to find new meaning in life.

**Find things
that work
for you.**

Coping is an attempt to adapt your new circumstances into your existing life and you may try a variety of means to achieve this; some may work for you;

others may not. Try several to see what may work. Through this grieving process you will learn to live in your new normal.

Coping Tips:

- Tell your story, over and over again.
- Get support from a professional counselor or support group in your area.
- Talk to someone who has experienced the traumatic death of a loved one.
- Write about your experience in a journal.
- Seek information about your loved one's crash to answer those unanswered questions.
- Understand that everyone grieves differently and be especially sensitive to family members who may be grieving differently than you.

- Reinvest in life by reaching out to others.
- Stay connected with people who are supportive and understanding.
- Take care of your physical body, try to rest and eat well.

If you are afraid to get better because you think you might forget your loved one, know that you will never forget. You will always cherish the memory of your loved one. In time you will remember the happy memories more often than the painful ones that fill your mind now.

**Cherish the
memory
of your
loved one.**

Eventually, you will be able to do those things you were able to do before the crash, including:

- Solving problems and completing tasks in your daily work routine again;
- Sleeping well and having energy again;
- Feeling good enough about yourself to be hopeful about the rest of your life;
- Being able to enjoy the pleasurable and beautiful things in life again.

It won't happen right away. For most people it takes years of hard work. But you will probably be able to achieve these in time.

For your own sake and for the sake of those who need you and love you, you have a responsibility to try to heal. You could not prevent the outcome of the substance impaired driving crash that killed your loved one. You can, however, control how

**You have
control over
how to live
the rest of
your life.**

you choose to cope with their death, and how you choose to live the rest of your life.

Resources

For some, enduring trauma ignites a spark of activity to right some of the wrongs involved in a sudden violent death. Most victims/survivors want to prevent it for others. Thousands of men, women and teenagers have joined Mothers Against Drunk Driving, MADD to make a difference in their communities. Whether helping those impacted by a crash cope emotionally, educating others about the dangers of substance impaired driving, or working to prevent substance impaired driving crashes by strengthening laws in your state, you can make an impact.

Some people find it helps them enormously to work to end substance impaired driving and victimization. It can feel as though it is the one activity that might bring something constructive out of their loss.

**Bring
something
good from
tragedy.**

To reach out to talk with someone about what you are going through, to find resources or to get involved, you can call the MADD Victim Services Help Line at 1-877-MADD-HELP or 1-877-623-3435 to be connected to a MADD Victim Specialist who will be ready and willing to listen and help. You are not alone.





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