

Coping after a traumatic event

After a traumatic event it is normal to feel distressed and to experience symptoms of stress

After a traumatic event, for people directly involved, who have family and friends involved, who work in services that are part of the response to the event, and for the wider community, it is normal to feel distressed, and to experience symptoms of stress. You may have trouble sleeping, feel tense or irritable, or find yourself having repeated thoughts of the event, or images of what you saw. You may also have physical stress symptoms such as being jumpy and easily startled, having headaches or pain from tense muscles, and feeling your heart pounding.

These kinds of feelings and symptoms are part of our normal reaction to a traumatic event, and for most people they pass over several days or weeks. You may find yourself fearing you are “going crazy” – this is also common, but remember these feelings pass with time

The following *dos* and *don'ts* reflect our understanding of what *helps* recovery, and what *doesn't*:

Dos:

1. **Spend time in places that feel safe and comfortable** as much as possible.
2. **Tell yourself that how you are feeling is a normal reaction and will pass** – it is nothing to be afraid of.
3. **Reach out to your usual supports** – family and whānau, friends, workmates – sharing how we feel, and offering support to others, is important for recovery.
4. **Keep to usual routines** – mealtimes, bedtime, exercise, and so on.
5. **Keep active** – going to work, doing usual leisure activities, seeing friends, and so on, can distract us from any distressing feelings, and is also helpful.
6. **HOWEVER, if over the following days and weeks, distress or stress symptoms are escalating, or you feel you are not coping, early access to help and professional support is important. Your GP is a good starting point, or for support with grief, anxiety, distress or mental wellbeing, you can call or text 1737 – free, anytime, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week - to talk it through with a trained counsellor.**

Don'ts:

1. **Talking about details of the traumatic event repeatedly has been shown to increase distress** and delay recovery. Talking about feelings is helpful, but avoid repeatedly talking about what happened, of the detail of the event, what you saw, and so on.
2. **Being constantly reminded of the event is not helpful** and can increase distress. While the media, Facebook etc are full of the recent traumatic event, spending too much time reading and hearing about what happened is not helpful. Turn off Facebook, and watch the news only to the degree you normally would. If watching even normal news is distressing, turn the news off and do something relaxing or enjoyable instead!
3. **Major life decisions are best not made at a time of distress** – avoid making big decisions until you have recovered.



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Grief after the loss of a loved one – a family member or friend

For people who have had a family member or friend injured or killed in this tragedy, the thoughts and good wishes of all Kiwis are with you at this time.

You will likely be experiencing a mix of trauma yourself, plus grief. Trauma and grief are different, but together can mean a mix of complex thoughts and feelings. It is common to find yourself having persistent thoughts such as “why did this terrible thing happen?”, “why was this not prevented?”, “what did my loved one suffer?”, and “what is the meaning or purpose of this tragedy?”. You may find yourself questioning your faith.

It is also common to feel a range of changing emotions

It is also common to feel a range of changing emotions from numbness and a feeling of unreality, to anger, to grief and sadness, to hopelessness. You may feel guilt that you survived and your loved one did not, or blame yourself for having not been able to protect your loved one. You may find yourself struggling to sleep, withdrawing from others, and you are likely to also experience a range of physical symptoms. Feeling a weight in your chest – literally a “breaking heart” – is a very common symptom of grief.

Coping after a traumatic death is difficult for everyone

Coping after a traumatic death is difficult for everyone. The general advice above will be helpful. We know that support from others is critical, so take time out when you need it, but make sure reach out especially to those family and friends who have not lost a loved one, and accept offers of help and support.

Grieving is a process that unfolds over a number of months and sometimes years, but with time it does get easier. It is important to remember it is a very individual process – we all go through it at some times of our lives, but how grief affects us is very individual.

Staying active in your faith, whatever that may be, and prayer, are helpful and protective – even if you do find yourself questioning your faith – “Why did this happen?”

For support with grief, anxiety, distress or mental wellbeing, you can call or text 1737 – free, anytime, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week - to talk it through with a trained counsellor.



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Advice on supporting your kids after a traumatic event

How children react to trauma is different from adults

How children react to trauma is different from adults – they may withdraw or behave in a more “babyish” way, seem anxious or clingy, be preoccupied with the event in their play or drawing, have problems sleeping or nightmares, or may get physical symptoms such as stomach aches or headaches.

As with adults, most children will recover with support and love from those around them.

As parents or caregivers you will know your kids best, and what works for them. Some simple *dos* and *don'ts* to guide you support a distressed child are:

Do:

1. **Reassure** them that the event is over and they are safe.
2. **Encourage** them to talk about how they feel about what happened.
3. **Tell them they can ask questions**, and answer these in plain language appropriate to their age – be honest but avoid details of the trauma.
4. **Tell them that feeling upset or afraid is normal**, and that telling you how they are feeling will help, that with time they will feel better.
5. **Be understanding** – they may have problems sleeping, tantrums, wet the bed – be patient and reassuring if this happens – again, with support and care it will pass.
6. **Give your children extra love and attention.**
7. **Remember that children look to their parents to both feel safe and to know how to respond** – reassure them, share that you are upset too but that you know you will all be fine together.
8. **Try to keep to normal routines** – mealtimes, bedtimes etc. – allow them to get out and play, to go to the park etc.
9. **HOWEVER if a child's distress is escalating, or they are displaying any worrying behaviours – extreme withdrawal, terror that you cannot comfort them from etc – seek help early. Your GP is a good start, OR For support with grief, anxiety, distress or mental wellbeing, you can call or text 1737 – free, anytime, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week - to talk it through with a trained counsellor.**

Don't:

1. **Talking about the details of a traumatic event** repeatedly can be harmful. Children may be fascinated/horrified and may want to ask about details, talk about what they saw/experienced.
2. **If this is repeated try to refocus them on how they are feeling** e.g. what happened is awful, it's normal to feel upset or afraid, how are you feeling?.
3. **Don't tell them “don't worry” or “don't be upset”** – it is natural to want to protect them from fear and difficult emotions, but they need to have their feelings acknowledged and validated as a normal response.
4. **Try not to be over-protective**, again this is a natural thing for a parent to do, but as part of keeping normal routines, it is helpful for your child to be distracted by going to the park, playing

with friends outdoors etc. This helps them feel that their world is safe again, and that normal life can go on.



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Grief in children who have lost a friend or whānau member

As with trauma, how children react to grief differs from adults, and is affected by their age. When a death is traumatic, as with adults this can make their grief process more complex.

Children's beliefs about death change as they grow up

Pre-school children may see it as temporary – that the person is “asleep” but will wake up. Primary school children start to think of it more like adults, but often believe it will not happen to them or anyone they know.

Children do not always have the words to talk about how they are feeling

Children do not always have the words to talk about how they are feeling, so tend to express their feelings through behaviour – being withdrawn, sulking, being naughty, tantrums, refusing to go to school and so on. Children tend to grieve in “bursts”, so may go from seeming completely back to normal, to being distressed, repeatedly.

So it is important to be more than usually patient

It is important to be more than usually patient, and to check out how they are feeling and try to talk to them about this. As with trauma, while it is natural to try to protect your children from pain and grief, this is not helpful. Children look to adults to learn how to behave, so asking how they are feeling, asking what questions they have, and explaining things in words appropriate to their age, is key.

Sharing some of your own sadness, while also showing them that you can cope and life can go on, is helpful. Explaining death in words they will understand is also helpful. Avoid using words that may confuse them, such as “gone to sleep forever”, or “passed on”.

It is also common for children experiencing grief to become more clingy or anxious, and fearful

It is also common for children experiencing grief to become more clingy or anxious, and fearful that other important figures in their life may die. It is also, as with trauma, common for them to develop physical symptoms – stomach aches, headaches – and to also have usual sleep routines change. Reassurance and comforting are important for them to feel safe and loved.

These practical tips will help

The practical tips above are helpful for supporting your child through grief after a traumatic death. Maintaining usual routines, and ensuring they are encouraged to play, and express themselves through drawing, are all good strategies.

It is also helpful to ensure their teacher and school are aware of what has happened to your child, and to agree with the teacher how they can support your child, how this information is shared with their classmates, and what to do if your child becomes distressed at school.

As with adults, grief in children passes over a number of months, your love, consistency, and care of your child, along with continuing to encourage them to talk, and sharing information in words they understand, is what is most healing for them.

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