

Providing Support to Crisis Affected People

Most people involved in frightening and traumatic events will experience strong emotional reactions. (Some of these experiences can be direct – through trauma or fear experienced, or direct grief and loss – and others indirect, through highly distressing media reports of the incident.)

Although each person's experience is different, there are a number of common responses that are experienced by the majority of those involved. Experiencing or being on the receiving end of these emotional responses may be very unpleasant, however it is important to remember these are normal reactions in a normal person to an abnormal event.

Individuals experiencing grief are likely to feel – and project – a range of emotions as they work through the grief process.

Understanding the process of grief and loss



Moving forward through the grief process

Many people struggle, and go forward, and regress many times over as they “work through” the process. It is important to acknowledge the individuality of each grieving person and to be careful not to impose your expectations of grieving on others.

Some of the most important needs of the person experiencing grief can be summarised as follows:

1. To feel support. We need to recognise that loss raises all sorts of feelings, and that to cope people need the support and understanding of others.
2. To face reality. The process of recovery is linked directly to acceptance of the loss. Acceptance will not come until reality is faced.

3. To express feelings (emotional release). Grieving people should be allowed to express their feelings. This may mean tears, talking, and other emotional displays.
4. To move towards the re-establishment of self (on going living). For many this is difficult and for a period of time, often many months, painful and at times unthinkable.

Common individuals responses – how to react and assist

Shock and Denial

- Thoughts spinning out of control.
- Allows traumatic information to filter in at a rate the individual can handle.
- Stunned
- Supportive Behaviour
- Accept feeling of helplessness.
- Gentle reassurance.
- Listen without judging.

Disorientation

- Confused in relation to time, place and person.
- May not remember what is happening, details in conversation.

Supportive Behaviour

- Expect that more time may be required when dealing with them.
- Be patient, don't rush.
- Allow for errors and accept 'muddle-headedness'.
- Provide an environment where it is permissible for them to share their feelings.

Expressions of Anger

- Ranging from mild frustration to intense rage.
- People need permission to express their anger – allow this.

Supportive Behaviour

- Being passive provides environment for expression of anger.
- See their anger as part of survival.
- If anger becomes destructive to self or to others, think safety first or seek help.

Guilt and Regret

- Often a pleading lament and expression of sorrow.
- The person is attempting to right wrongs.

More Information

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Supportive Behaviour

- Permit the expression of the feelings.
- Don't judge the rightness or wrongness of the feelings.
- Allow the person to talk.
- Listen to the pain and anguish, and don't be tempted to offer premature reassurance – allow its ventilation.

Depression / Sadness / Loneliness

- Usually occurs weeks after the event, but may occur earlier.
- The time when numbness is wearing off, and finality is sinking in.
- Often the time when friends and relatives have returned to normal routine, but the grieving feel life will never return to normal.

Supportive Behaviour

- Allow the expression of emotion and sadness.
- Check that they have effective ongoing social support.

Beginning to Reorganise

- A sense of logic and an ability to make plans for the future appears.
- Difficulties are much more of a functional nature.
- May be some backsliding, such as the appearance of guilt; or entering a despondent state.

Supportive Behaviour

- All these experiences are normal and need compassionate acceptance, as per suggested supporting behaviours.

Assisting others through the grief process

First stage handling of an affected person:

1. Listen to the person (allow the person to vent without interruption, remain calm, speak in a firm and low voice).
2. Be aware of your own feelings, and manage them appropriately.
3. Acknowledge the person's problem or situation (use empathy appropriately, acknowledge emotions, acknowledge point of view without agreeing with it).

4. Advise and explain the options available.
5. Try to involve them in deciding what option to take.
6. Confirm what actions have been agreed, or what actions will be taken.

Additional DOs and DON'Ts

These are simply some practical suggestions that may be appropriate in many situations:

1. DO be friendly and compassionate, even if people are being difficult.
2. DO listen and hear what is being said.
3. DO acknowledge that each person's experience of grief and loss will be unique.
4. DO remember that nobody has to justify their feelings to you.
5. DO realise the person has suffered a loss, even if you don't perceive it as such.
6. DON'T prevent the person from expressing their guilt or anger if they need to.
7. DO remember that many who give support immediately after a trauma may be delayed in working through their own grief.
8. DON'T personalise knock-backs to your efforts to assist.
9. DO encourage those who hold a common response to support one another if they can.

Support services available to you

If you feel you would benefit from further support consider contacting your line manager, HR, or EAP provider.

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