

Trauma, Grief and the Healing Process

Although the healing process is so individual and personal, there are some common steps that most people go through. Although this process is natural and normal, it is also painful and difficult. Moving through the healing process means acknowledging a painful reality and integrating it into your life in a meaningful way. That may require a lot of time and patience. The following points summarize what we know about the healing process:

Make a connection between the event and your response. The response to trauma may be immediate or delayed, mild or intense. It may include numbness, or a strong connection with another event that caused feelings of loss or helplessness. It's crucial to have the support of others and, at the right time, to make the connection between your pain and the event itself. Try to keep from sealing off your reactions and feelings.

Find a safe environment for emotional sharing. A very natural human response to a trauma is to deny or "wall off" the painful reaction to the event. While you may need privacy to deal with events and feelings in your own way and your own time, you also need to talk about these feelings, either with friends, family and colleagues, or with a counselor or trauma specialist.

Make an effort to think the event through, either individually or in a group. It's important to be able to acknowledge your feelings of sadness, anger, confusion or guilt. If others went through the trauma too, talking about it together can help all of you make sense out of what may have been a senseless event.

Ask the questions that don't have easy answers. For example: "Why does it always have to happen to the good guy?" "How could someone do this?"

Allow memories of painful events in the past to surface, even if you feel that you have already dealt with them. Trauma brings back memories of trauma. Although it may seem unfair, an incident can make you remember and sometimes rework experiences that don't usually intrude into your everyday life. This is normal. By consciously remembering and re-experiencing these painful events, the memories will eventually recede into the background. The mistake is to push them down again too fast, too soon.

Examine for yourself, as an individual as well as a member of the group, what this event means to you. An example: "As a result of this, we recognize how important we are to one another and how little time we spend communicating. We need to examine our values more closely." This helps encourage acceptance of a new, more difficult reality and the beginning of being able to move on with life.

The healing process doesn't always proceed in a straight line. You may seem to be recovering, but then something - the anniversary of the incident or hearing about a similar incident - can cause a setback. But if you keep in mind these points about the healing process, you'll be better- equipped to eventually work through the pain.

CARING FOR YOURSELF

In a crisis, do you forget to eat? Do you have to be reminded to get some sleep? Do you revert to old habits like smoking, or find that nagging physical ailments flair up? If so, you're not alone - all of these are common reactions.

At a time like this, eating a balanced meal or getting your three-times-a-week workout may be the last thing on your mind. But that's precisely why it's important to take care of yourself physically. Emotional upheaval can make you especially vulnerable to physical illness, so good health habits are especially crucial now.

This is **not** the time to make big changes in your lifestyle, such as quitting smoking or starting a diet. Instead, think in terms of maintenance. Reinforce the good habits you have, and try to minimize the bad ones. Pay special attention to the areas outlined below.

⇒ **Stress** is completely normal at a time like this. Acknowledge that you're going to feel a lot of unpleasant emotions - sad, angry, out of control, impatient, etc. Learn a couple of relaxation techniques and use them frequently. Try, to cut down on responsibilities in other areas of your life until you've had some time to recover from the crisis.

⇒ **Sleep** is always important - but especially so now, when you're probably not getting enough of it. Nightmares are a common reaction after a crisis, and this can disrupt your sleep. Make sure you allow enough time each night for a full night's sleep. If you have serious difficulty sleeping, and the difficulty lasts for more than a week or so, consult a physician.

⇒ **Exercise** can help clear the cobwebs. Gentle exercises like brisk walking are not only good for the body, but they can have a calming effect on your mind as well. If you are already a regular exerciser, resist the temptation to use exercise as a way to literally "run away" from your feelings. A relaxed exercise session can help combat stress, but an intense workout every day can sometimes be another way to avoid facing a painful reality. Also, over-exercising can easily lead to an injury, a problem you don't need right now.

⇒ **Smoking** is always a health risk. Unfortunately, many ex-smokers become current smokers during a crisis. The act of smoking is often a way to repress feelings and put distance between yourself and a problem. A stressful time like this is probably not the best time to try to quit - but try to avoid using cigarettes as a crutch.

Alcohol and other drugs may be tempting - but they can cause far more problems that they solve. People under extreme stress may tend to "self-medicate" with alcohol, tranquilizers, coffee, and other drugs, both legal and illegal. When you're in pain, it's hard to tell how much is too much, so perhaps the best idea is to try to avoid mood-altering substances as much as possible. Instead of a drink, try taking a walk. Instead of pills, try talking to a friend or family member.

After A Critical Incident: Things to Try

Things for you to try include:

- Physical exercise alternated with relaxation may help with some of the physical reactions. Consult your doctor if they persist.
- You are normal and having normal reactions--don't label yourself as abnormal.
- Talk to people; talk is the most healing medicine.
- Spend time with others. Resist the tendency to isolate.
- Help your coworkers as much as possible by sharing feelings and checking out how they are doing.
- Give yourself permission to feel rotten and share your feeling's with others.
- Keep a journal; write your way through sleepless times.
- Don't make major life changes.
- Do make as many daily decisions as possible, which will **give** you a feeling of control over your life.
- Get plenty of rest and eat regular meals, even if you don't feel like it.
- Recurring thoughts, dreams or flashbacks are normal. Don't try to fight them. They will decrease over time and become less painful.

Things for family and friends to try, include:

- Offering your assistance and a listening ear even if you haven't been asked for help.
- Don't take stress reactions experienced by others (anger, irritability) personally.
- Spend time with each other. Keep talking about what happened.

FINDING MEANING IN A TRAUMATIC EVENT

Finding meaning in a traumatic event can be a long and difficult process, but it's very important. Without putting the event into some sort of perspective, it can be difficult or impossible to let the wounds heal and move on with your life.

While you may never forget the trauma, you can recover and rebuild your life. The points below are some things to think about:

- ⇒ **Remember that you are not a "target".** When tragedy strikes, it's easy to feel as if you're being punished or singled out by some evil force. But the fact is that bad things can happen randomly - to good people, to bad people, and to everybody in between. Don't add to the pain you're already feeling by trying to lay blame or establish your own "guilt."
- ⇒ **Reach out to others.** It's very natural to withdraw and think that no one can understand what you're going through. But human contact can help you heal. People who care about you want to help, although often they don't know how. They may keep their distance, afraid they'll upset you more. Now is the time to contact the people who mean the most to you.
- ⇒ **Get in touch with your spiritual dimension.** "Spirituality" doesn't have to mean religion, although religious beliefs can provide comfort and a framework for dealing with traumatic events. A tragedy can cause you to reexamine your values and the basic beliefs that give meaning to your life. Ask the questions that have no answers: "Why does it always happen to the good people?" "What's the point of living if we can be struck down so suddenly?"
"If there is a God, then why does He (or She) allow things like this to happen?" Talk it over with people who went through the trauma with you, or with others that you trust.
- ⇒ **Give it time.** It may take some time before you can find any meaning in a traumatic event. First the shock, then the pain may prevent you from being able to think clearly about the event and put it into some sort of perspective. Normally, however, the pain will begin to subside, and you'll find it easier to think about the incident.
- ⇒ **Seek professional counseling if necessary.** If you're not getting over it on your own, if things seem to be getting worse instead of better, or if you're worried that it's affecting your life and work, then you may want to seek professional help. Some places you can turn for referrals are your company's Employee Assistance Program, the crisis consultant (if any) who has been called in to work with your company, your community mental health center, your physician, local hospital, or friends and family who have seen a counselor themselves.
- ⇒ **Don't expect to be the same as you were before.** "Healing" after a tragedy doesn't necessarily mean going back to exactly the way things were. Circumstances have changes and, chances are, you've changed too. While the pain will eventually recede, you probably, won't forget about the event. That's why it's especially important to find a way to understand the event and make it part of who you are.

