

Grief and Loss: Reactions to Sudden or Traumatic Loss

Grief is a normal, natural process following a loss. With a traumatic loss, the process is more complicated. People often describe it as feeling like "they are going crazy without a road map of how to do it". Like all grief, the experience and process of traumatic grief is different for everyone.

Traumatic grief generally occurs when a death is:

- Sudden, unexpected, and/or violent.
- Caused by the actions of another person, an accident, suicide, homicide, or other catastrophe.
- From natural causes but there is no history of illness.

A traumatic death shatters the world of the survivor. It's a loss that doesn't make sense as the survivor tries to make sense and create meaning from a terrible event. The family searches for answers, confronting the fact that life is NOT fair. Bad things DO happen to good people and the world doesn't feel safe.

This shattering of belief about the world and how it functions compounds the tasks of grieving. Many times, one's spiritual belief system may no longer work; another loss for the bereaved. In the initial days, weeks, and months, the individual may go from periods of numbness to intense emotions in brief time

periods. In general, it takes two years or more for people to go through the grieving process and adapt to a major loss. With a traumatic death, the time period may be longer. Over time, the intensity and frequency of painful periods diminish.

Over the years, holidays and special family events increase the feelings of grief. When a similar traumatic event occurs, people may feel re-traumatized or that they are reliving their own loss.

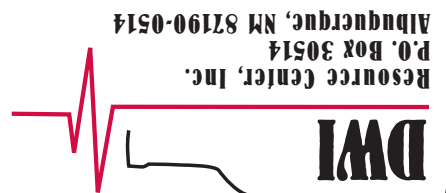
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Dear Readers,

On November 11, 2006, a drunk driver killed five members of a Las Vegas, NM family. Paul Gonzales, 36; his wife, Renee, 39; and their daughters Jacqueline Gonzales, 11, Selena Gonzales, 10; and Alicia Garcia, 17 were all killed when their minivan was hit by Dana Papst, a Colorado man with a BAC of .34, four times the legal limit. The sole survivor of the crash was the couple's 15 year old daughter, Arissa Garcia.

The DWI Resource Center extends our deepest sympathy to the Gonzales family, whose loss is immeasurable and will be felt for many years to come. We will keep you and all those who were touched by this family in our thoughts and prayers.

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Involvement with lawsuits or the justice system can cause upsurges of grief during the entire course of that involvement. As these things occur and if the coping gets more difficult, it may be time to seek some counseling.

Common Physical Reactions

- Numbness
- Tightness in the throat or chest
- Shortness of breath
- Sensitivity to loud noises
- Forgetfulness and difficulty concentrating
- Agitation and restlessness may also be experienced which will decrease in time

Because an event has occurred that is beyond one's control, people feel out of control. Regular exercise may help to control these experiences. Putting more structure into a daily routine will help one to feel more in control. It's often helpful to keep lists, write notes, or keep a schedule.

Common Emotional Reactions

Shock: The physical and emotional shock may be prolonged. Persistent memories or dreams about the event may occur for months. Talking or writing about it can help to break the cycle of obsessive thoughts.

Fear and Anxiety: Simple activities, like taking a shower, being in the dark, or opening a closed door, may cause fear or anxiety. This is a normal response, but if the anxiety prevents normal routine for a prolonged period, it's important to see a physician or therapist.

Guilt: Guilt over things done, or not done, regrets about the past, and guilt for surviving. Much of the guilt that people feel is emotional and not rational but knowing this does not help to alleviate those feelings. When guilt persists, people can often find help in support groups or with a trained grief counselor or therapist.

Anger: Anger and rage come from the feelings of helplessness and powerlessness one feels after a traumatic death and can be overwhelming for family members. There are many support and advocacy groups to help deal with the anger brought on in traumatic death.

There are new roles to learn. New problems to solve. New systems, like the media, legal, and/or criminal justice system, are now involved in one's life. It takes time to adapt. Allow yourself to do that.

Factors Which Compound Grief

1. No positive confirmation of the death or no physical body is recovered. Or when the loved one's body is available, but the family may not be able to view it. This factor makes it difficult to grasp the reality that the death has occurred. It is only when that reality is grasped can

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A DWI on an employee's record can be an indicator of alcohol & drug-related problems, lack of personal responsibility, and poor decision-making skills. Check your employees' records before you hire! The DWI Resource Center offers employers a free online DWI offender database, containing records from the last five years. Check your employees' records today by visiting our website:

<http://www.dwiresourcecenter.org>

people begin to move from the trauma to the full realization of the pain of grief.

2. Since the death was not anticipated, legal and financial affairs may be complicated. Loss of income can threaten the family's security; another loss for the family.
3. The role the loved one held in the family is lost. It takes time for the family to reorganize.

How to Help

- In the early days and weeks, offer help aggressively and concretely. Many times, the family may not know what you can do to help. Offer to prepare meals, help with childcare, answer the phone, or help to make calls or arrangements. If the media is involved, it may be helpful to run interference for the family. They can feel besieged by the intrusion.
- After a few months, support is most needed. Allow victims time to talk about their grief if they want to, but be prepared to listen. It is not usually helpful for those who are grieving to hear about your losses unless the circumstances are very similar. Ask how you can help. You might offer to go with them to a support group if it's appropriate.
- As time passes, be mindful of anniversaries, holidays, or the birthday of the person who died. On these difficult days, people want to know that their loved ones are remembered.

The DWI Resource Center is a 501c3 tax-exempt New Mexico organization formed to reduce the social and economic impact of DWI in New Mexico through public awareness, education, prevention programs and research. The Center also provides assistance to victims and serves as a central clearinghouse for information on DWI and victims' rights.