

# Supporting Youth who Experience a Traumatic Loss

## What is Traumatic Loss?

"A death is considered traumatic if it occurs without warning; if it is untimely; if it involves violence; if there is damage to the loved one's body; if it was caused by a perpetrator with the intent to harm; if the survivor regards the death as preventable; if the survivor believes that the loved one suffered; or if the survivor regards the death, or manner of death, as unfair and unjust." **Wortman & Latack (2015)**

### Additional examples of traumatic losses:

- Community violence
- Homicide or violent death
- Childhood victimization
- Physical or sexual assault
- Natural disasters
- Circumstances in which the survivor witnessed the death
- When their own life was threatened
- When the mourner experiences multiple deaths
- Sudden death

### In addition to the nature of the death, other trauma risk factors include:

- Media attention
- Limited opportunities for social support
- Being blamed for the death
- Prolonged court proceedings
- Having a prior history trauma

### What is the impact of experiencing a traumatic loss?

Generally speaking, it has been shown that traumatic death, especially violent deaths, lead to increased distress. When someone experiences a traumatic death, their challenges become two-fold. One, they must cope with the trauma and two, they have to cope with their grief. The experiences of trauma and grief are two different things unto themselves, yet after a traumatic death, they get thrown into one big emotional blender. Things get tangled, thoughts and emotions get fused. Understandably, it is not uncommon for youth who've experienced a traumatic death to experience significantly more intense, pervasive and prolonged symptoms.

## After a Traumatic Loss One May Experience:

### Shattered assumptions about the world, themselves and others:

Experiencing a traumatic death, something that feels profoundly meaningless and unjust, can shatter a young person's sense of security and lead to a sense that the world is unsafe and unpredictable, that others are malicious and evil, and that one is powerless in protecting themselves.

### Ruminations:

Youth who have experienced a traumatic death might experience increased rumination as they seek to answer questions such as:

- Why did this happen?
- Who is to blame?
- Did my loved one suffer?
- Were they afraid?

Many youth fail to find the answers they are searching for, and they continue to struggle with the senselessness of the death as well as the pain of imagining what it must have been like for their loved one at the time of their death.

### Feelings of guilt and self-blame:

Even when a person is clearly not at fault, it is common to struggle with feelings of guilt and self-blame. For example, one might feel guilty for circumstances that preceded the death, but which could have played a part in the chain of events. Negative thoughts about guilt and self-blame can impact how a young person adjusts to bereavement and are often associated with feelings of depression and anxiety.

### Poor social support:

Evidence suggests that social support can reduce the impact of stressful life events. Sadly, after a death, many people don't receive effective support for a number of reasons. This is especially true after a traumatic death when the enduring impact of acute grief can last much longer than society has been taught to expect it. A few reasons why people do not receive effective support after a death include:

- People don't know how to provide grief support.
- People make comments that minimize grief, discourage expression of grief and discussion of loved ones, and push mourners to move on.

### Adapted:

- What's Your Grief, "Grief After Traumatic Loss," Written by Litsa Williams and Elanor Haley <https://WhatsYourGrief.com/TraumaticLoss/>
- National Association of School Psychologists, "Helping Children Cope with Loss, Death and Grief"

- The bereaved youth may be inclined to physically and emotionally isolate, especially when they feel misunderstood by others.
- The bereaved youth may feel ashamed, abnormal or weak because they continue to struggle.

After a traumatic loss, it is important to find ways to help youth process and cope with complicated emotions and reactions regarding the death and the trauma.

### The following are some recommendations to help staff support youth:

- Give youth the opportunity to share their story and their experiences.
- Don't lie or tell half-truths to children about the tragic event. Lies do not help the youth through the healing process or help develop effective coping strategies for life's future tragedies or losses.
- Help all youth, regardless of age, understand loss and death. Give the youth information at the level that he/she can understand.
- Encourage youth to ask questions about loss and death. Treat questions with respect and a willingness to help the child find his or her own answers.
- Be aware of your own need to grieve. Focusing on the children in your care is important, but not at the expense of your emotional needs.