

Coping with Tragedy: A Guide to Dealing with Shock and Grief



In one tragic moment, the world can become unpredictable and frightening. The damaging impacts of tragedy can be lasting and powerful for everyone involved. Understanding and expressing your thoughts and feelings in a safe and open manner is one of the most positive things you can do to help yourself and others throughout the coping process.

The Shock of Tragedy

When we suddenly learn of tragedy, the brain and central nervous system immediately act. They cover our emotions with a protective “blanket” commonly known as shock. Shock, also referred to as the trauma membrane, allows us to function in our lives without feeling severe pain. Those who have experienced shock often report feeling a strange sense of “unreality,” a numbness and distortion of time and space. It is also common to experience difficulty sleeping and changes to appetite. This is very normal; it means your brain and central nervous system are taking good care of you.

From Shock to Grief

Shock is typically experienced as one of the first stages in the grief process, and eventually it wears off. For some, shock recedes very quickly. For others, shock lasts for hours or days. Everyone is different and there is no right or wrong way to experience shock.

As shock fades away, emotion gradually makes its way to the surface. An emotional trauma is similar to a physical injury. If we cut our finger, for example, the first thing we usually want to do is wash it. Our emotions wash and cleanse emotional injuries. Tears, anger and fearful feelings wash our emotional wounds and prepare them for healing.

It is normal to feel a “roller coaster” of emotions following the shock stage. Grief is nature’s way of healing. If we can cooperate with grief and allow it to take us through its natural process, we can be healed and whole. If we resist grief, we sometimes feel stuck in our pain.

The Gift of Grief

Healing through grief doesn’t guarantee you will never feel pain or sadness about the tragedy. We want to always remember important people and things we have lost. What healing through grief does provide is a heightened appreciation for life, those we love and the values we cherish. It can awaken us to new possibilities for living with commitment to that which we consider truly important. It can also deepen and enliven our inner lives, because it has forced us to reflect and search our souls. Finally, grieving together with coworkers and friends strengthens and deepens the bonds we share. When we have gone through difficult experiences together, we can experience a revitalizing intimacy.

Healthy Ways to Cope

Here are some ways people choose to cooperate with grief:

- Attend a funeral or memorial service.
- Share feelings with those we love and trust. Talk about it!
- Pray, meditate or attend religious services.
- Use creative outlets: journal writing, music, painting, etc.
- Exercise.
- Engage in activities that let you get in touch with yourself and self-reflect.

When coping with tragedy, here are some things to avoid:

- Excessive alcohol consumption and drug use.
- Excessive eating in an effort to dull emotional pain.
- Denial: denying the tragedy and its personal impact.

