

COPING WITH A TRAGEDY

When tragedy affects you or a loved one, it can be helpful to keep in mind the following:

Intense emotions are normal and healthy in the face of such fear. They do not imply weakness or craziness. Powerful feelings of anger, sadness, fear, helplessness, disbelief, numbness, etc. may be a part of your emotional landscape for some time. If they are appropriately expressed and directed, such feelings will provide you with the passion and energy necessary to effectively cope with the loss.

Spend time with people you care about. While you might not feel like being around anyone, the resulting sense of loneliness typically makes people feel worse.

Ask for support from people who care about you and who will listen to your concerns. It often helps to speak with others who have shared your experience so you do not feel so different or alone. People are often surprised to realize how much support is available through their immediate relationships (friends, families, partners, classmates, etc.).

Remember that people deal with emotions differently. There is no formula for healing from this type of emotional trauma. Some people may become overwhelmed with emotions, while others appear quieter and more reserved. Avoid comparing your reactions to the event to those of others.

Refrain from judging others' responses and demanding that everyone think, feel, or act the same way. It is important to respect others' perspectives and to provide support at a level and in the manner that they desire. Ask others about how you can be helpful and what the limits are.

Be a good listener. Simply giving people the opportunity to vent and "get something off their chest" is tremendously helpful and healing to them. Saying the "right thing" isn't nearly as important as feeling connected to and supportive of others.

Take action. The desire to "do something" is life-affirming and healthy, and it should be encouraged. Suggestions include attending community service events, religious services and/or setting up your own observances.

Take good care of yourself. Take care of your body by watching what/how much you eat; your use of alcohol, drugs, caffeine, nicotine, sugar, and medicine; and by practicing safe sex. Eat well-balanced meals, get plenty of rest, and build physical activity into your day.

Remind yourself that some things are out of our control. After a tragedy when hindsight is 20/20, people often torment themselves with things they "should have" done. It is important that you resist letting this kind of guilt take over your life.

Seek balance in your life. When a personal loss occurs, it is easy to become obsessed, overwhelmed, and pessimistic. Balance that viewpoint by reminding yourself of people and events which are meaningful, comforting, and encouraging. Striving for balance empowers you and allows for a healthier perspective on yourself and the world around you.

Appreciate a sense of humor in yourself and others. A day must come when it is okay to smile and laugh again. Humor relieves stress, produces body chemicals that improve mood, and helps us to gain a more balanced perspective. Do not postpone joy and laughter should they come your way.

If problems persist or you need immediate support, seek professional assistance. If you are having difficulty managing intense reactions and/or functioning in your daily activities, or if you want to consult with a professional about how to help a loved one who is struggling, please contact Mental Health Services at the Colonial Health Center at (202) 994-5300.



Colonial
Health Center
MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

(202) 994-5300
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