

Coping with grief and loss due to violence

Presenter – Brig Dunsmore, Clinical Social Worker

Hi. Welcome to Coping with Grief and Loss Due to Violence. My name is Brig Dunsmore. I am a clinical mental health counselor licensed in the State of Utah, and I will be leading this discussion today.

We're going to talk a little bit about the impact of violence, and we're going to spend some time talking about grief and other emotions that stem from acts of violence. We will also be focusing on ways to cope with grief and loss and how to help children as they cope as well.

Now, this is definitely a difficult topic. Please be aware that I will do everything I can to not minimize the thoughts, feelings, or experiences of anyone who views this presentation. And I also recognize that some of the discussions we may have could be triggering for people. So if that happens to you, if you need to pause the presentation, if you need to stop, please don't hesitate, go ahead and do that. Also, if you find that you need help to deal with your own feelings, please reach out. Whether that's to a family member, a friend, a supervisor, your employee assistance program, a doctor, or a therapist, whatever it takes to help you get the support that you need to deal with what you are experiencing.

As we discuss the impact of violence, it's really important to note that we're just scratching the surface here. Really, it would be impossible for us to explore all the ways that violence affects our society, but we'll try to bring more understanding to certain aspects of the issue, particularly as it relates to the feelings that people experience and the ways that they can cope with the grief and loss that they have.

Here's some numbers for you, and these are just astonishing, really alarming. They're heart wrenching. We present those just to help you get a glimpse of the scope of the issue. So in a single year in the United States, about 80,000 people die due to violence, and their deaths definitely have a direct impact on many people, family, friends, other loved ones. In many instances, it affects us all. I really think it's fair to say that at some point in our lives, most of us will be impacted by some level of grief and loss due to violence.

So when we talk about the people who've been affected, first of all, are the survivors, people who have actually experienced firsthand the violence and have lived. These people may experience significant feelings of guilt for having survived. They may also have injuries that need treated, sometimes over the course of their lifetime. They may be called upon to interact with the police, with the media, and that can be hard. Friends and family may also experience some of that, needing to work with the police or the media. As they deal with the loss of their loved one, they may be even asked to deal with things like identifying the body of the person who's died, and that can certainly be very hard and very traumatic for them.

First responders see the worst things that humans can do to each other, and they're often the ones called upon to offer support and help when someone has suffered a loss. They really get to deal with a lot of raw emotion.

And then the community as a whole, our society, we see media reports and we might be impacted by the story, by the depth of the detail. We can feel grief and loss. We can feel a lack of security or anxiety because of what's going on. And all of the people impacted by a violent death can have significant feelings of sadness, depression, or even post traumatic stress disorder.

Whenever there's a loss, there's a feeling of grief and there's a grief process. Often though, when the grief comes from a loss due to an act of violence, there's some additional aspects that can have a huge impact on people. These are some standard feelings that a person may experience when they've had a loss, when they've had the loss of a loved one. They may have anger. That could be towards themselves, it could be towards others, it could be to God. It could even be towards the person who's died. It's not uncommon for people to feel helpless, that they just are out of control, that they have no ability to control the outcome of the event, or to prevent the death of their loved one. When people really struggle, it's not uncommon for them to have thoughts of wanting to be dead, or taking one's own life. And I would add here that if you are having those thoughts, please, please reach out. Don't wait, don't hesitate. Reach out to someone that you trust and talk to them about the thoughts and feelings that you're experiencing.

When grief is a result of violence, there can be additional aspects that people have to deal with, shock and disbelief. These are usually very intense because the loss was often very sudden. It can seem hard to accept, it can seem unreal. People might feel like they're just in a bad dream. They can be numb and just completely overwhelmed. They may have unwanted, disturbing thoughts about the way a person died. Sometimes family members are left to kind of imagine what happened in the event. Some of this may be based on information that's given to them by the police or images that they see in the media, but it can also come from things that they've watched in movies and TV shows. These images can definitely be frightening and horrific, and they can come into thoughts and dreams and be very disruptive to a person's normal functioning.

We talked about guilt. Now, that can be common with any loss, but it can be more intense when the person has lost a loved one due to an act of violence. Often, loved ones think that if they had just done something differently, they could have prevented the death. And sometimes there were risk factors present, and people feel guilty that they didn't do more. People may experience anger and rage. Again, anger is another one of those emotions that is a normal part of grieving. Again, it can be more intense with a violent death because there can be an added desire for retaliation or for payback. There can be thoughts of blame, an outrage directed at those viewed as responsible for the loss. And there may be a sense that the death was meaningless, adding to the anger that they feel.

People can normally feel alone when they've experienced a loss. Again, it's intensified, it's compounded when there's a feeling that society attaches a stigma to the death. We see this a lot when a family member has died by suicide. People kind of get that feeling about the stigma that's there in our society.

Those grieving may feel that others don't understand the depth of the loss or the stress associated with it. Kind of like I mentioned before, when the loss involves ongoing contact with the police or the judicial system or the media. Those aren't things that people normally have to deal with when they're experiencing a loss. There can definitely be worry about the future. When there's violent death, there's a loss of security and a loss of safety. There's also can be legal actions that occur because of the violent death, and that can create big changes in people's lives.

Those grieving may experience withdrawal or isolate themselves. That can be a normal part of a grief response. They may avoid connecting with others due to fear of suffering another loss, or they might try to mask their grief by rushing into relationships or by using alcohol drugs or food, just to kind of numb their feelings. There maybe a loss of faith, wondering why God would allow violence and harm to people. There might be anger at God for the seemingly senseless death of their loved one.

Those dealing with grief due to violence can experience what we call complicated grief. Now, complicated grief is when the normal grieving process continues for longer periods of time than one would think or expect, or it's when the grief gets worse over time. And that can certainly happen. Sometimes, I think people are thrust in the... they're put into the middle of a situation where they're just trying to act and deal and cope. They've got the media, the police, they've got everything going on, and it's not until all of that goes away and there's this quiet that their emotions intensify and the experience gets worse for them. They find that it's harder and harder to cope, and that can be complicated grief.

The community at large can also experience significant trauma and grief following acts of violence. Images from media coverage can create a sense of loss and people can experience their own grief, even though they're not in direct contact with the event. People experience a loss of safety and they see what has happened in one community and realize, hey, this could happen in their own. This can create a lot of anxiety. There could be a loss of trust in others in the community, especially when those others are viewed as people who could have prevented the event or impacted the outcome. And with the loss of safety comes a loss of trust in government, especially when those in government are viewed as having a significant role in protecting the public.

So how do we cope? I think it's important to again, emphasize continually that everyone is different in how we cope. The grief process for one is different than that of another. So grief is definitely a process. I think that most of us have heard about the five stages of grief. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. I think sometimes when we hear those different stages, we think that there is this order to grief, that we're supposed to enter at denial and we're supposed to exit at acceptance, and that's not how it works. As I mentioned, everybody is a little different and people have different ways that they work through their grief. You may skip a stage, you may get stuck in a stage, you may come back and revisit several stages. It's a process, it's a process.

Knowing that, we should always remember to be kind to ourselves and to others as they work through their grief. It's okay to have strong feelings, to be sad, to cry, to even struggle at times. That is part of us accepting that we've experienced a loss and that there is pain involved with it. And it's painful adjusting our lives when someone who's been such a huge part of it is no longer there.

And I want to focus on this fourth point here on this slide, too. It is important to note that the withdrawing of energy does not mean that we are forgetting the loved one who died or that we value them any less. That's not a requirement for healing. What it does mean is that we move away from using so much of our time and energy for grief, and we find ways to use that energy to connect with others. I hope that makes sense.

Often, our strongest emotions can be driven by details that turn out later to not be true. And so when we talk about coping, it's so important for us to know the facts. We need to ensure that we're getting facts from trusted sources and not hearsay or rumor. Also, as far as our coping goes, sometimes it's really important for us to minimize the media and contact that we have. The media often tends to sensationalize stories in an effort to attract a larger audience. And so limiting media can help reduce the amount of time we spend focusing on the violent event and in turn, it will help reduce the stress and anxiety we experience related to it.

I think an example of that was when 9/11 happened, me along with most of us, I was spending hours in front of the TV just watching and seeing the latest updates. And after a couple of days, I realized that it was really having a negative effect on me. I really felt down, sad, unable to focus. It was really becoming disruptive. And so I stopped watching so much news. I would check in once during the day to get an update, but I didn't stay focused on the news and it helped me to be able to function. So sometimes we need to do that.

Distracting ourselves can be important. Doing things that we enjoy can be really challenging in moments when we've experienced a loss, and there can be a feeling of guilt for doing that, especially if we're doing something that makes us feel happy. But doing that can help relieve us of some of the pain and the hurt that we experience. Really, it can help us boost our mental health and it can remind us to appreciate the good things in life.

Making sure we take care of our basic health is hugely important. Ensuring that we get enough sleep, have a healthy diet and exercise are key ingredients to our emotional health. In times of distress and grief, it's really hard to focus on those things, but they will help keep our body in tune so that we can better deal with the grief and stress that we experience.

As I mentioned, anger and retaliation can be really strong feelings that we have following a violent death. By finding a way to honor those that have lost their lives, we can change our focus and energy away from that, towards something that is more positive and constructive for us. Honoring those lost allows us to change our focus away from how they died to the nature of how they lived. It can also help produce feelings of helplessness and anxiety because we turn our energy towards the things that we can do. That's a big key, is turning our energy towards the things that we can do. This can be things like participating in a vigil, doing something to support families and communities of those lost, planting a tree. Perhaps it's even writing a letter to a public official to advocate for changes that you think would help in the future.

And getting help is absolutely important. I keep returning to this. Getting help will look different for everyone. Some people just need a good friend or a family member to talk to, and that's enough. Other people might find that participating in a support group helps them to feel less isolated and connects them with others who may have a shared experience. Some people may need to reach out to their doctor or therapist to help them work through the thoughts and feelings that they're experiencing. So it's finding the level of help that you need and then making the effort to reach out to it.

So that's for adults. What about our kids? How can we understand them and help them through the grief and loss that they experience? Children and adolescents really are at a point in their development where they are trying to figure out how safe the world is. And when they experience violence, or even when they see it in the news, it can impact how safe they feel. This can create really significant feelings of anxiety for them. They may have nightmares or day terrors about the death of a loved one, and they might have intense feelings of anger, revenge, or isolation. Kids can experience physical symptoms. Things like stomach aches or headaches. They may have difficulty sleeping. And a child who's dealing with a violent loss may act younger than they are, or revert to younger behaviors. By that, what I mean is they might get very clingy. They might go back to sucking their thumb. They could even wet the bed. They may isolate and just not want to be with friends, or go to school.

While there's a certain amount of distress caused by violence that will never go away, we should always do our best to comfort and reassure children. We should let them know, especially the little guys, the little children, that there are adults that can handle difficult things. We can show additional love and we can certainly show some additional reassurance for a while. Kids are curious and they do want to know what's happened and what's going on, so it's important for us to give children age appropriate facts about the death or event. When they don't know the facts, they may imagine the worst or again, they may revert back to things that they've seen in television, in the movies, which may not be accurate at all. So you may not want to share all of the details depending on the child's age, but you can certainly answer questions in simple and honest ways.

I think it's also so important to let children express themselves. We can encourage them to share their thoughts and feelings. We can listen. We can acknowledge feelings without encouraging strong emotion to continue. What I mean by that is perhaps a child is experiencing a moment of intense anger and they are doing things that are harmful to themselves or to others, damaging things, anything like that. We can stop those harmful behaviors and not encourage those while still acknowledging the fact that, hey, you're hurt, you're angry, that's okay. Hope that makes sense.

Children, as well as most of us, find safety in structure. In the beginning, it might be really difficult and there can be things that disrupt everyday life, but returning to normal family routines as quickly as possible can be reassuring to children. It helps them find safety in the routine.

Often, when children experience a death due to violence, what sticks in their minds is the traumatic event. So it's important to encourage them to think about the good and the positive memories that they have of the person, rather than focusing on the way that that person died. This can help them keep from getting stuck in sadness and anger, and it allows them to have more positive thoughts and memories. Again, if a child appears to be stuck in their grief and they're not progressing, they're not doing well, seek help. Find someone to be a support to them.

One thing I would add here is that your example can be a great strength to children and to adolescence. That doesn't mean that you have to have all of the answers, it doesn't mean that you aren't going to experience your own grief and loss and have to deal with that, but you can certainly show them empathy. You can show them that it's okay to be sad, that it's okay to grieve, and that it's okay to express emotion. And you can show them how to work through difficulties and loss in healthy ways. That's why it's so important that you work on your own healthy coping skills. And again, remember that you are not alone. There may be days that your grief is such that you are struggling and really you may not be in a position where you can be attentive to your child. If that's the case, maybe it would be a wise thing to reach out to a friend or a family member and ask them to help support you and to support your child during those days when things are really hard for you.

Hopefully, that helps give you some ideas of ways that you can help children who are coping with grief and loss. I really like this quote, especially the first part of it. This is Helen Keller. “Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it.” We have definitely seen a lot of traumatic events from a pandemic to mass shootings, a lot of difficult things, but there are good things too. I just want to express my confidence in your ability to find ways to cope when there is grief and loss, especially as it's related to violence. It may be hard, but you're not alone. I would encourage you to certainly reach out, to find people that can be there to help and to support you, friends, families, supervisor, clergy, your employee assistance program. All of these things can be people that could be a strength and a support in your life.

Thank you

Thank you so much for attending. I hope this information is useful. And again, if you find yourself struggling, please don't hesitate to reach out. Thank you and have a good day.

Resources For Living

The EAP is administered by Resources For Living, LLC. This material is for informational purposes only. Information is not a substitute for professional health care and is not meant to replace the advice of health care professionals. Contact a health care professional with any questions or concerns about specific health care needs.

©2022 Resources For Living | 44.36.900.1 (6/22)