

# Personal Responses to TRAGEDY

Sometimes we have the opportunity to anticipate grief and loss;  
at other times, shocking events simply overwhelm us.

## Reaction to Tragedy

Initially, there is shock and disbelief that the event has actually occurred. Even after extensive media coverage, there may be denial relative to the magnitude of the losses. For example, we choose to believe missing persons will be found alive and alright.

Emotional reactions may wash over us like in waves. Crying, anger, guilt, depression, disbelief, and yearning, as well as feelings of emptiness may occur unpredictably, and in any order. Feelings of numbness and detachment can be just as likely. With events of great magnitude, some people will worry about their sanity. Secretly or openly, the many ask: *Did I miss the signs? Could I have done something to prevent this? Am I losing my mind?* Many of those who are grieving these tragedies will experience hallucinations and feelings of unreality.

This rollercoaster of emotions is part of the grief reaction. Some of us are confused about normal grief and believe that stoic, silent, and emotionally controlled behaviour is the ideal, and that being emotional is self-indulgent. But in fact, the discharge of emotions can be a healthy response.

The physical signs of grief may include feeling weak, loss of appetite, tightness in the throat, and shortness of breath. These can come and go over a lengthy period of time. For some people, a good cry can help release emotional tension and bring a sense of relief.

We get caught up in thinking that we need to resume our normal routine right away. Take the time and give yourself permission to feel.

## When Will I Get Over It?

There is no fixed time in which grief becomes resolved. It can take some time before we move from the initial shock of the tragedy, to reorganization. Reorganization refers to the acceptance of losses, the realisation that life will never be quite the same again, and the acknowledgement that life goes on and that it is possible to get involved or reinvested in activities again. This is especially true for those families and communities who have actually suffered the losses of loved ones or neighbors.

With time, it becomes easier to extend ourselves to others and accept the support they offer. Even though sadness will still well up on occasion, our peace of mind will return, at least in part. For many, the losses and grief they experience will lead them to spiritual explorations, to a re-examination of their values, and to a more direct questioning of the meaning of life.



## What If Am Can't Get Over It?

During the course of grief, the intensity and frequency of emotions normally diminish over time. This is not to say that images, thoughts, and memories will not continue to unpredictably grab our attention. However some individuals do become stuck, usually in-

- one repetitive emotion
- feeling nothing at all (delayed or repressed grief)
- social isolation or
- patterns of distracting or detrimental activities that create more problems, and alienate others (unwise expressions of hostility)

Time alone does not heal. It is important to note that those who faced personal losses a short time before the tragic event, may feel more stresses.

## What Can Help Me Become "Unstuck"?

Direction may be needed to become unstuck. Focusing on some goals can help move us from pain and despair to a renewed sense of hope and wholeness.

One focus may be on self-care to enhance your emotional stamina. This includes-

- Plenty of rest
- Well-balanced meals
- Exercise
- Practicing stress reduction techniques
- Structuring your time
- Doing something that makes you feel good
- Engaging in practices that are meaningful to you
- Connecting with others

Talk with your family about the events and listen to what each has to say. Share your feelings with extended family, close friends, church and community. Participate in community activities that may assist the victims' families or commemorate their tremendous losses. You may also gain focus and feel empowered by offering support to others.

Although we all can become transfixed with media coverage, try to limit the repetitive reviewing and discussion of the events, especially graphic television images.

Respond to your and your family's concerns about safety. Review your family's safety procedures in the home and discuss normal safety practices with your family (eg Never accept a ride from a stranger)

**You EFAP can provide confidential support and counselling.  
If you or family members are feeling stuck, anxious or fearful,  
give you EFAP a call.**



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