

A butterfly with orange and black wings is perched on a lavender flower. The background is a soft-focus field of lavender flowers.

THE TRAUMATIC GRIEF HANDBOOK



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Trauma + grief = ++pain

Grief is our natural response to the death of a loved one. We miss our person. We feel their absence and we have to adapt to life without them. As we adjust, we experience a range of thoughts and feelings that can make it challenging to cope.

Trauma occurs when we experience a disturbing event that challenges our ability to cope, causes feelings of helplessness and distress. We can experience flashbacks, nightmares and other symptoms that interfere with our ability to concentrate and complete routine tasks.

When death is combined with a traumatic experience, this complicates our pain and creates additional wounds to be healed. It can be confusing to separate the symptoms of trauma from the symptoms of grief, and it can take additional work to recover.

It takes time to heal.

Grief and trauma are different, but they are similar in the fact that it takes time to heal from both types of emotional experiences. People talk about “closure” or “getting over” grief, but it’s true that when you experience the death of someone you love, you carry that grief with you for the rest of your days. Similarly, when you have experienced trauma, that event becomes a part of your story, too.

It makes sense to talk about healing as learning how to carry your grief, and the story of your trauma experiences in a such a way that they are not as painful to you. The work of recovery becomes a process of seeking ways to reduce the emotional charge you feel when you think about your loss or your wounds. These events become a part of your personal story and not the only thing you can think about.

Stigma happens.

Some causes of death are considered too difficult to talk about, leading people to avoid the grievers. Similarly, some traumatic experiences make people so uncomfortable, they just don’t want to think about it, let alone spend time with you as you navigate your healing journey. When grief and trauma occur together, this can compound the effect, leaving you feeling isolated, overwhelmed and broken.

You are not damaged. You are not alone. You can find your way through the emotional maze. There is information and there are people who can help you find the way to carry these experiences in your own way and at your own pace.





What Can You Do to Cope with
Trauma and Grief





Learn About Trauma's Impact

When everything is going reasonably well in our life, our brain generally works as intended. This means that the front part of our brain takes care of logic and higher thinking, while the middle part of the brain processes emotions and the brain stem takes care of basic body functions like breathing, digestion and circulation.

When trauma happens, it sets off an alarm in our survival centre. The amygdala is activated and sends a cascade of chemicals intended to help us react to a threat with our fight, flight or freeze response. This is a biological process that happens automatically and can't be prevented or by-passed.

Accept the Full Range of Your Experience

As a result of the combined experience of trauma and grief, you are likely to have several symptoms that are powerful and can be persistent. When we resist the natural feelings related to such difficult experiences, it can cause further distress. Our emotional states need understanding and attention in order to be sorted into a manageable state that we can carry as part of our story.

Have Self-Compassion

Everyone experiences pain and suffering in life. Be gentle with yourself when you find yourself in difficult situations. You are doing the best you can, and it is enough for this moment. You are learning and growing, even as you make mistakes and even as bad things happen in your life. Rest. Reflect. Revitalize through self care. When this trying time passes, you will feel stronger and ready to take on the next challenge.

Select Strategies for Safe Expression

There are many ways to work through your feelings. As you develop more awareness of your feelings, you may also notice what helps you feel better when those difficult emotions hit. Think of it from the perspective of mind, body and spirit as you consider the strategies offered on page XX of this handbook. You can begin to explore what helps you cope when facing painful situations that may evoke a chaotic swirl of emotions.

Set Boundaries

You can decide how you move through the tasks of mourning and healing trauma. It can be helpful to have the support and guidance of a professional at times, particularly when you're experiencing powerful symptoms that interfere with your functioning. You can choose who you include in your recovery process, what steps you will take and what timeframe you will work in. Ultimately, you have the strength and ability to make a plan for your healing that suits you, even if you choose to involve others as consultants to provide information and support.





What's the Benefit of Dealing with Your
Trauma and Grief?



Trauma and Grief Treatment is an Adaptive Process

When you are overwhelmed by symptoms of trauma and grief, it can be hard to know where to begin as you think about healing these deep, raw emotional wounds. Involving a professional with expertise in these areas can give you access to information about what's happening to you as a result of your experience, and that can be reassuring. Additionally, you may receive ideas and strategies you can try to help you adapt to the reality you face as you learn how to carry the stories of trauma and loss in your life, balancing the pain with hope for healing.

Trauma and Grief Treatment is an Empowering Process

Effective therapy offers you choices, allowing you the opportunity to heal your way at your pace. It's true that if you reject many or all of the options you are offered, you may continue to feel stuck in a painful situation with symptoms that are powerful and impact your daily functioning. However, in strength-based, client-centred counselling, you will be the person who decides when you are ready to try something different.

An experienced and informed professional can help you to notice what's happening and understand the experience. By pointing out some of your patterns, and noticing trends in your thoughts, feelings and behaviour, they can offer a different perspective about your experience. This neutral, non-judgmental observation can help you see things differently, which may allow you to make new choices and that process may lead to healing.



Pitfalls and Challenges

Expectations Can Get in the Way

People in your life have ideas about how grief should happen. They may also have ideas about how to handle traumatic experiences. Some people in your life may be uncomfortable with your experience for a variety of reasons, and sometimes they distance themselves from you because of their own fears and distress.

Your own expectations are often part of this equation, too. You may struggle to understand what's happening to you. You may even feel that you are going crazy, or that you should be doing things differently or better than you are. Check in with yourself if you're feeling frustrated and seek consultation to gain perspective about what's reasonable to expect in your experience.

Getting the Right Support Can be Tough

If you have experienced trauma and grief, it's important to have the support of people who understand the differences between the symptoms related to trauma and the experience of grief. Both of these responses you may be experiencing are normal reactions to the events in your life, but they require different approaches for healing.

Trauma therapy is important to address the symptoms that are related to the horrific details of the experience. When the trauma is not resolved in a way that allows you to reduce the emotional charge and integrate the experience into the fabric of your life, then your grief symptoms are likely to remain unresolved as well. You can feel stuck, repeating the same difficult thoughts, feelings and behaviours.





There is No Manual

Your experience of trauma and loss is unique. Even though others may have a similar story, their details will be different than yours, their people are different than your people and they are not you. While it can be very useful to connect with others who have had something similar happen, helping you to know others are struggling with the same type of thoughts, feelings and behaviours, it's important to remember that your journey is your own. There is no one right way to recover from such tragic circumstances.

People will often compare your way of coping with their own, and if you are doing something different, they may judge it as inappropriate or ineffective. In part, this is a reflex reaction related to the fear that if you are doing something different than they are, one of you must be doing it "wrong", and since they don't want it to be them, they land on the assumption that your way is incorrect. This reaction fails to recognize that there are as many ways to grieve as there are people who grieve. There can be many "right" ways to process your feelings, manage your thoughts and adapt your behaviour to your current circumstances. Having grace and dignity during difficult circumstances means that we can allow others the space to grieve and heal in the ways that best suit them rather than trying to impose the things that help us.



What Can You Do Now?





One Breath at a Time

We breathe automatically, with the rhythm of our breath regulated by our central nervous system. This means that when our system is in an alarm state due to powerful emotions, we tend toward rapid, shallow breaths. This contributes to a heightened state of distress and can interfere with handling the situation well.

There are many types of breathing exercises that can help calm your central nervous system.

4-7-8 Breathing

- Find a comfortable position.
- Inhale as you count to 4.
- Hold the breath and count again, this time to 7.
- Exhale slowly and count to 8.

Belly Breathing

- Rest one hand over your heart and one hand over your belly.
- Breathe in, feeling your chest and belly rise.

Make sure to breathe deeply enough to expand your lungs fully, which contributes to the rise of your belly under your hand. These long, slow breaths will stimulate the vagus nerve, which then sends a calming message to your system, helping to relax your muscles. It also helps bring more oxygen to your system, which can help you think more clearly.

Box Breathing

- Inhale as you count to 4.
- Hold as you count to 4.
- Exhale as you count to 4.
- Hold as you count to 4.

Imagine that each step in this breathing process creates one side of a square, and when you have finished one full cycle you have constructed a box. This focused breathing can help you calm your mind and prepare to focus when you are about to handle something important.



Set SMART Goals

Specific

Break your bigger goal down into small steps. For example, if you want to improve your nutrition, a specific goal would be to add vegetables to lunch and dinner.

Measurable

Decide on your ideal numbers. For example, you want to add 1 serving of vegetables to lunch and 2 servings of vegetables to dinner.

Achievable

Choose something you believe you can do with the resources you have. For example, can you add 1 serving of vegetables to lunch and 2 servings of vegetables to dinner everyday, or would it be better to start with 5 days each week, or perhaps just on workdays or days off?

Relevant

Pick a goal that is related to your need or desire. For example, adding vegetables to lunch and dinner is more likely to improve your nutrition than cutting out chips or candy, which still leaves you plenty of non-nutritious choices to make.

Time-bound

Set time frames for your goal. For example, you will begin adding vegetables to lunch and dinner tomorrow after your weekly grocery shop, and you will continue to add vegetables to lunch and dinner for at least 30 days.



Soothe and Strengthen

Consider the things you do that relax you and bring you a sense of ease. It may be listening to your favourite music or taking a hot bath. Perhaps it is a cup of tea or a bowl of homemade soup. Make time and make sure you have the supplies you need to do whatever soothes you and does no harm.

As you do these things, soak in each moment of ease you find. In the beginning, and perhaps for a long time, these moments may not last long. Keep trying. If the things that used to soothe you aren't working, experiment with new activities. In time, the moments of ease will last longer, and you will be able to find them more frequently and these moments will fortify you for the waves of pain that will continue to rise now and again.

Give yourself one or more physical outlets to strengthen your body and release physical tension. Choose any physical activity you like to do. Add it your calendar, using the SMART goal concepts (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound). Maybe you will do yoga before bed two days and walk around the block after work 5 days this week.

Movement helps our body, mind and spirit. Try to do some of your activity outdoors for the added benefit of feeling connected to nature, which is also good for you.



Acceptance and Expression

When something terrible happens, it's quite common for our mind to reject the knowledge. Denial and numbness are protective measures our brain takes to prevent us from being overwhelmed all at once by horrific and tragic circumstances.

Over time, you will have opportunities to accept the reality of your painful loss as you adjust to the current situation. This may mean that your daily routines have changed, or that your traditions must be adapted. Sometimes you will stop some activity you used to participate in regularly and enthusiastically. This may be an interruption as you find a way to return to some of your routines once you begin to recover from the shock and raw pain that can take over every moment of your day after trauma and loss. It may be that you never return to some of your former habits, replacing them instead with new traditions that suit your changed situation.

It's also important to find ways to express your feelings. Talking about your experiences can help you organize your thoughts, and it can also help you make sense of what's happening as you sort through the details. Some people find they need to talk about what happened over and over to begin to make sense of it and settle it into a story that they can carry more easily. Others find that they are unable to talk about their situation without increasing symptoms such as nightmares and anxiety. If this is true for you, you may find that it can be helpful to explore ways to express your feelings that don't involve repeating the details, focusing instead on soothing the pain.

However you adapt to the facts of your situation, and however you find ways to express your feelings as you come to terms with what has happened to you, remember that you have a right to move through this process in your own way and at your own pace. There are no shortcuts to adjusting to tragedy. You have to do your work on your own timeline one step at a time, even when that means two steps forward and one step back.



How Can Counselling Help?





Counselling offers you a personalized opportunity to talk about your thoughts and feelings about your experiences. Typically, a session is 50-60 minutes dedicated specifically to you. With an effective counsellor, you can untangle the complex threads of your experiences to better understand yourself and find the best way forward in your life.

Good counselling offers:

A neutral perspective and safe zone for exploration. Your counsellor should be accepting and non-judgmental. They should focus on you, learning your story and your perceptions without imposing their experience or world view on you. Your counsellor should be curious and ask questions to discover details without making assumptions about you or your situation.

Education, validation, reassurance. Your counsellor should offer general information about the situation you face based on research and learning. They can provide you with evidence that confirms what you are experiencing, which helps to validate your thoughts and feelings. They may share data and examples that reassure you as you move through difficult situations toward healing.

Ideas and tools for coping strategies. Your counsellor should offer you a variety of suggestions to try. Ideally, the counsellor will invite you to try different exercises that may help you, and if you don't want to try them, or if you try them and they don't work, your counsellor will work with you to explore this and adapt the strategy. The process of healing is a trial and collaborative adventure where your counsellor is a knowledgeable and skilled guide, but you are highly involved in planning the course and itinerary of your work.



What to look for in counselling:

A person you feel is interested in you and your story. Take the time to call before scheduling an appointment if you can. Even in a short telephone conversation with a counsellor you can find out a lot about how talking with them feels for you. The working relationship is a very important part of effective counselling. That first conversation may give you a strong positive or negative feeling about the counsellor, and it's good to trust your instincts. It may be that you feel neutral, and in that case, it doesn't hurt to schedule an appointment and get to know the counsellor a bit more before making your decision to go ahead or to look for someone else.

Someone who has knowledge and experience with the type of challenges you're facing. You can often find out if a counsellor has a particular area of expertise when you receive a referral by someone you trust, such as your family doctor. You can also research the counsellor on their website or through an internet search, which may tell you the focus of their work. A good relationship is very important, but you also want someone who has information and skills that will apply to your situation.

A space where you feel comfortable talking. Ideally the counsellor's office will be welcoming, soothing and convenient for you to travel to. Accessibility may be an important concern to investigate as well, particularly if you have any mobility issues. If counselling will be virtual, the counsellor should be experienced with telephone, email or video counselling strategies. They should be able to explain the challenges of virtual counselling compared to in-person counselling as well as the plan to maintain privacy and overcome technical glitches when they occur.



Some Practical Next Steps





Create a personalized self-care menu.

Print the PDF template and add menu items, including a variety of your favourite self-care activities. Post it somewhere you will see it frequently as a helpful reminder of possibilities when you need them.

Connect with family and friends.

Make that date with someone you love for an in-person or virtual hang out. Consider making it a regular, recurring event that you can look forward to without having to go to a lot of trouble organizing.

Find peer support by joining a group.

Look at community resources for information and support groups dealing with the challenges you face. These are often free and may be supported by professionals with knowledge and skills in the topic area. If you can't find a group that meets your needs, consider getting help to start one.

Get professional support.

Schedule a therapy session as a mental health check-up, even if you're not in distress now. Make it a semi-annual or annual event and you'll build a relationship with someone who has the ability to help you when you do find yourself struggling.



About the author:

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SELF CARE MENU

APPETIZERS

5-10 Minutes

ENTREES

30-60 Minutes

DESSERTS

15-20 Minutes

BEVERAGES

1-2 Minutes

CHEF'S SPECIAL

1-2 days

Give Your Self



A Hand!