

When Grief & Trauma Intersect

When grief and trauma intersect, grief can feel especially overwhelming and complex. Trauma may intensify grief responses, making it harder to process grief, feel safe, or make sense of what has happened.

What is Grief?

Grief is a natural response to loss. Everyone grieves differently, and there is no set time frame for grief. You can grieve anything, or anyone you value; a person, a place, an ability, a pet, an identity, a relationship, an imagined future, or the state of the world.

What is Trauma?

Trauma is a response to experiences that feel overwhelming, frightening, or deeply distressing. What is traumatic for one person may not be traumatic for another. Trauma can result from a single event, ongoing experiences, or witnessing harm happening to someone else. Trauma can affect people in many ways. It may show up in our thoughts, feelings, body, behaviours and relationships.

Some people may:

- Feel constantly on edge or unsafe
- Feel numb, disconnected or emotionally overwhelmed
- Experience feelings of fear and anxiety
- Find it hard to sleep or eat
- Experience physical pain such as headaches or stomach aches
- Have trouble concentrating or remembering things
- Find it hard to trust people
- Experience intrusive thoughts or memories
- Avoid engaging with others

What happens when grief and trauma intersect?

Sometimes a loss is not only deeply painful but also experienced as traumatic. This can happen when a death is sudden, violent, shocking or highly distressing.

For example:

- Death by suicide
- Sudden or unexpected death
- Violence or crime
- Accidental death
- Natural disasters
- War or conflict
- Death where physical pain is poorly managed, there is a loss of dignity, or lack of closure, or aspects of the illness or care are experienced as traumatic

When grief and trauma intersect, it can make it harder for someone to process their grief. A person may feel emotionally overwhelmed, numb, unsafe or unable to fully take in the reality of the loss. They may experience intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, anxiety, difficulty sleeping or a heightened sense of fear and distress.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

When a loss involves shock, terror, or perceived helplessness, the brain and body can remain on high alert long after the danger has passed. If feelings of distress feel intense, intrusive, and unmanageable beyond a few weeks or months, PTSD may be present.

Common signs include:

- Re-experiencing the event: Vivid memories, nightmares, or flashbacks where the trauma feels like it is happening again.
- High physical arousal: Feeling constantly on edge, irritable, jumpy, or struggling with sudden waves of panic.
- Active avoidance: Going out of your way to avoid places, conversations, or reminders connected to the traumatic circumstances of the loss.
- Changes in thoughts and mood: Persistent feelings of guilt, blame, emotional numbness, or believing the world is entirely unsafe.

When grief doesn't ease

Everyone's grief is unique, and there are many complicating factors that can prevent someone's grief from easing.

Some of these factors include:

- A loss that was experienced as traumatic.
- Pre-existing mental or physical health conditions.
- Stressful life circumstances, such as housing or financial instability.
- Social isolation.
- A close relationship with the deceased.

As a result of these complicating factors, some people will experience the onset or worsening of existing mental health conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety disorders or depression. A small but significant proportion of bereaved people may also experience Prolonged Grief Disorder, previously referred to as Complicated Grief.

Symptoms of Prolonged Grief Disorder include:

- Intense emotional pain that continues long after the loss.
- Persistent yearning for the person who died.
- Feeling stuck in grief or unable to move forward.
- Avoiding reminders of the loss — or becoming fixated on them.
- Emotional numbness or isolation from others.
- Loss of meaning or hope for the future.

Strategies for Supporting Someone Through Grief

We are not taught how to support someone through grief and consequently, it can feel hard to know what to say or do. Everyone is different and will need different things while they are grieving.

Where can I find support?

If you have experienced a loss as traumatic and you are finding it hard to move through your grief, it can be helpful to seek professional support.

If grief feels intertwined with trauma or PTSD symptoms, it can be particularly important to speak to your GP. Specialised support can help calm an overwhelmed nervous system and untangle the trauma from the natural grieving process. They can prepare a Mental Health Treatment Plan to connect you with psychologists or therapists trained in evidence-based trauma and grief therapies (such as EMDR or trauma-focused cognitive therapies).

Or, you can start by exploring the supports listed.

Is there anything I can do to support myself?

The impacts of trauma and grief can be difficult to navigate alone; professional support is recommended. However, there are still things you can do to support yourself. A good place to start is by returning to things that have supported you in the past, while gently exploring new ways to care for yourself.

Below are some suggestions for caring for yourself through grief. You don't need to do everything on this list, start small, and remember that small actions can make a big difference over time.

- Support your body with rest, nourishment, and gentle movement where possible.
- Express your thoughts and feelings through writing, creativity, mindfulness, or talking with someone you trust.
- Lean on safe and supportive people, communities, or grief support forums for connection.
- Connect with spiritual, cultural, or personal practices that support you.

SUPPORT

- Grief and loss support can be accessed through SANE's RecoveryClub. To join RecoveryClub, register through the [SANE website](#).
- The grief and loss [space on the SANE forums](#) gives another safe opportunity to share, remember and find support with others navigating loss.
- Speak to your GP about accessing your local grief or bereavement service.

[National Association for Loss and Grief](#)

Access up to 12 free grief support sessions with a trained volunteer.

1300 474 33

[Red Nose](#)

Free support for anyone grieving the sudden loss of a child or young person.

1300 308 307

[Suicide Bereavement](#)

[StandBy](#)

Free grief support for those bereaved by suicide.

1300 727 247

[Thirrili](#)

Free grief support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders bereaved by suicide.

1800 805 801

SANE resources:

- Understanding Grief & Finding What Helps
- When Grief Doesn't Ease
- How to Support Someone Who is Grieving
- How to Support a Grieving Child or Young Person

Other resources:

- [What Is Your Grief?](#) – a helpful online resource for learning more about grief and loss.
- [‘This Is Grief’](#) – a gentle guide for individuals & families.