



# Helping someone who has experienced trauma or loss

When a friend, loved-one, or colleague is coping with a traumatic event or grieving a significant loss, we often don't know what to say or what to do. We hope this information will help you to help them get through this difficult time.

## Important information about grief and trauma

People experience grief and respond to traumatic events in their own way. It is important to know that, because a lot of what we think we know about grief and trauma is simply not true.

For example, there is a popular but misguided belief that grief has stages to work through, with different emotions at each one. This idea often causes pain and guilt for people who do not go through these stages. They may feel bad for not grieving "properly", or for having other normal and common reactions that they feel are unacceptable, like relief. **It is important for helpers to know that grieving and recovery from trauma are individual processes and every person has their own path.** Most people will find their way through their own process and emerge a little bit stronger than they were before. A smaller number of people will have more trouble and will need extra help.

Another belief that can be harmful to people going through trauma or grief is that they need to spend as much time as possible "working through their pain". Friends and family may pressure them to stop everything and "take care of themselves". When people dealing with grief or trauma find ways to carry on with their daily lives, helpers may even tell them they are avoiding the pain, or that they are in denial. They often warn that this pain will resurface later in life. However well-meaning these messages are, they are simply not true. **People who are suffering need time to take care of themselves and their pain, but they also need breaks from their suffering.** They should not have to feel guilty for throwing themselves into their work or finding ways to distract themselves, if this is what helps them get through the day. These can also be healthy ways to cope.

## How to help

To help someone going through such a painful event, it is important not to impose our view on their experience. It is far more helpful to simply listen with compassion and to help out

with practical things than to try to come up with something to say that will make the person feel better about what is happening to them.

**Often, what people need most is someone who can listen without trying to solve the problem and without giving advice.** Let the person talk. Listen for signs of resilience and reflect that back to them: *"This is so difficult. How are you managing to cope so far? What helps you get through the day?"*

If you can, avoid platitudes and cliché responses like *"Life doesn't give us more than we can handle"* or *"Everything happens for a reason"*. These messages may be true, and they may even be helpful for some people, but they can also give the impression that you are trying to minimize the person's pain or that you just want to shut down the conversation. Often, simply listening is the most helpful thing you can do.

### **Don't underestimate the importance of practical help.**

Not everyone who is in pain wants to talk about their feelings all the time, and not all helpers are comfortable with these discussions. People who are coping with trauma or grieving often appreciate simple gestures like help with meals. Of course, it's important to make sure that the person really wants this help. You might offer:

- Meals to stock their freezer
- Help with housecleaning or pet care
- Transportation to an appointment
- Help taking care of the yard

If you can, check in again a few weeks after the event when they may still be struggling but have fewer people around them.

**Remember that people may need activities that distract them and give them a break from their suffering.** You can help them feel better by reminding them that it's okay to use healthy ways to escape the pain when they can. If

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they feel guilty about this, you can be there to remind them that it's okay to keep on living, and that sometimes throwing themselves into their work or some other activity is the best way to get through the day.

**Most of all, if you are worried about someone and you are not sure how to help, reach out for some guidance for yourself.**

## Signs that someone may need more help

Again, most people will find a way to cope, and they will emerge from a period of grieving or a traumatic event a little bit stronger than they were before. Most people will find that this difficult event changes their lives in some way for the better- helps them focus on their priorities, make important decisions about how they want their lives to be going forward, or make positive changes in their relationships. Your kindness, compassion, and practical help will contribute to their recovery.

However, a small number of people will have more difficulty and will need even more support. It can be overwhelming to find and arrange for appointments when you are struggling with grief and trauma. **Helping the person to connect with services and to get to their appointments can make a big difference.**

Some people may even be thinking about suicide as a way to escape from their pain. If someone is talking about suicide or dying, or showing signs that they might be thinking about suicide, it is important to get help for them and for yourself right away.

Crisis Services Canada has detailed information about what to look for if you are worried that someone is thinking about suicide. You will find it here: [www.crisisservicescanada.ca](http://www.crisisservicescanada.ca)

It is important to remember that some of the less obvious signs of suicide are also just normal symptoms of grieving or recovery from trauma (e.g. difficulty sleeping). If you are worried that someone may be thinking about suicide, don't wait to be sure before you act.

**Ask a direct question:** "Are you thinking about suicide?" If you ask the question with kindness and compassion, you will not make them feel worse and you will not give them ideas. If you are not sure that you should ask about suicide, or if you need help asking the question, call the suicide prevention centre. They will help you decide what to do next.

**If the person says they are thinking about suicide**, call the suicide prevention centre to get immediate help for them and for guidance about what you can do to continue to be supportive. **If the person refuses** to call with you, call the number yourself. The suicide prevention centre will help you figure out what to do next. **If the person says they are not thinking about suicide**, tell them you can help them get help if they ever do have these thoughts.

Suicide prevention centre  
1-866-appelle

24 hours a day / 7 days a week  
Free, confidential

## Other free services

Employee assistance program:

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**Information and Referral Centre of Greater-Montreal:**  
[www.info-reference.qc.ca](http://www.info-reference.qc.ca) / 514-527-1375

**Info-social:** 811, option 2

**Crisis centre:** [www.santemontreal.qc.ca/en/public/support-and-services/crisis-centres](http://www.santemontreal.qc.ca/en/public/support-and-services/crisis-centres)

**Crime Victims Assistance Centre:** 1-866-532-2822

**Services for victims of sexual assault:** 514-933-9007

## Resources and additional reading

Bannink, F. (2014). *Post Traumatic Success: Positive psychology & solution-focused strategies to help clients survive and thrive*. NY: W.W. Norton & Company.

Bannink, F. (2015). *Solution-focused questions for help with trauma*. NY: W.W. Norton Company.

Bonnano, G. *The other side of sadness: what the new science of bereavement tells us about life after loss*. New York: Basic Books.

O'Hanlon, B. (2011). *Quick steps to resolving trauma*. NY: W.W. Norton & Company.

Tedeschi, R.G. & Calhoun, L.G. (2010). *Facilitating posttraumatic growth: a clinician's guide*. NY: Routledge.