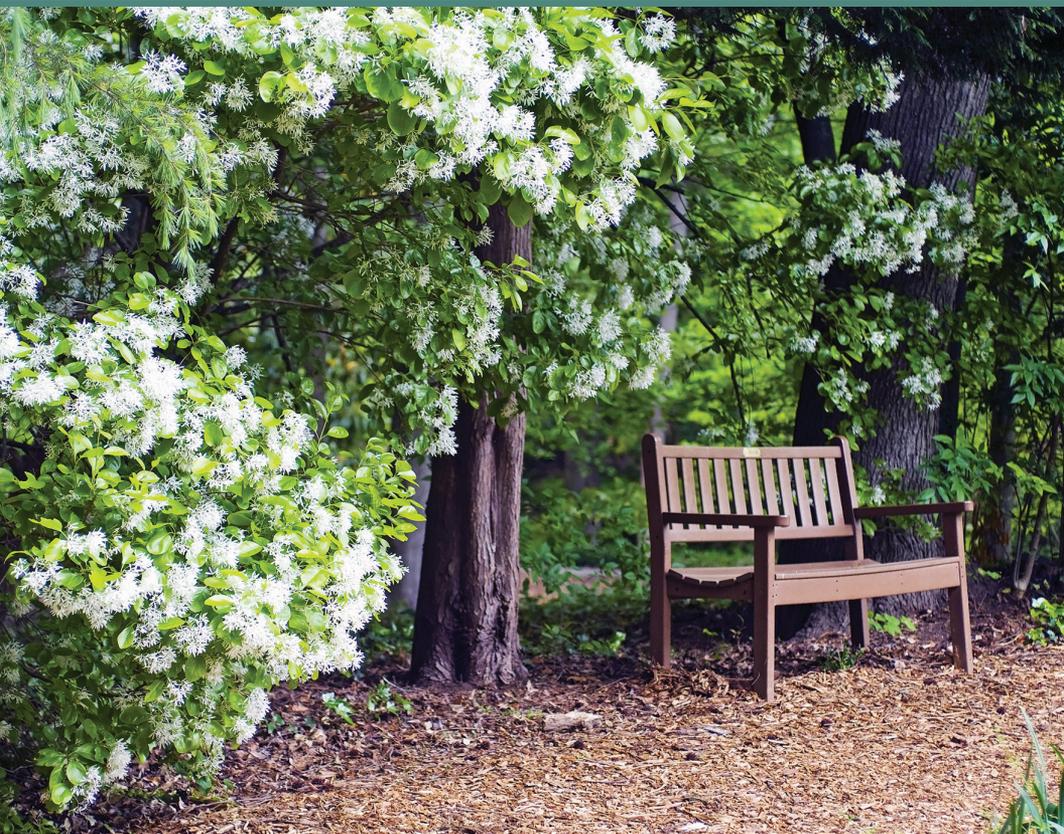


Grieving A
TRAUMATIC LOSS

ACCIDENT • HOMICIDE • OVERDOSE • SUICIDE

Jason Troyer, PhD



Traumatic loss — including losses due to an accident, homicide, overdose, or suicide — can be especially difficult for the griever. I have written this booklet to summarize some of the most common reactions and challenges after the traumatic loss of a loved one. It also provides strategies for beginning the process of healing. I hope it helps you as you mourn the death of your loved one.

Sincerely,
Jason Troyer PhD



Common Challenges

There are several common challenges for those who are grieving a traumatic loss. Unfortunately, many people grieving a traumatic loss will receive less support from family, friends, and the extended community. Losses related to homicide, overdose, and suicide continue to carry an unnecessary stigma, and people often do not understand how important it is to offer support to the bereaved.



Many people grieving a traumatic loss will have some common physical, emotional, and cognitive grief reactions. These may include difficulty concentrating, replaying the event in their minds, dreams and nightmares, difficulty falling and staying asleep, agitation, restlessness, and feeling hopeless and powerless. Your initial reactions may also include denial and disbelief at what has happened. You might find yourself starting to call or text your loved one before remembering what happened.

You may find that you have a strong need to understand what happened and the circumstances of your loved one's situation. Questions like "What happened?" and "What went wrong?" are common. You may also find yourself going through "What if..." scenarios and feeling guilt or remorse because you didn't stop the sequence of events (even though you likely could not have stopped it). It is normal to want to make sense of the events and re-establish some sense of control in your life.

Another common challenge is feeling traumatized by seeing news reports and social media regarding your loved one's death. Furthermore, your grief may be impacted by a court case or extended investigations related to the loss. All of these factors may lead you to have a longer than typical grief process.

Grieving a traumatic loss does not follow any specific roadmap or set of stages. In fact, your personal reaction will likely be different from family and friends who are grieving the same person. It is important to understand that your initial grief can feel intense and overwhelming for several months and there may be circumstances that cause it to last even longer. Furthermore, your long-term grief will be something you wrestle with for many years. That does not mean you will never feel joy or happiness again – you certainly can.

Loss by Accident

The loss of a loved one due to an accident can feel overwhelming and unexpected. You will almost certainly feel a sense of shock and disbelief. At times, it may feel like you are walking through a terrible nightmare and uncertain of what has happened.

It is common to want to make sense of the accident and what exactly happened. It is also common to feel anger at those who you view as responsible for the accident. This can be unsettling if it was your loved one's actions that unintentionally led to the loss. Depending on the circumstances, you may also experience "survivor's guilt" and question why your loved one died when you or others did not.

Loss by Homicide

Being angry with those who are responsible is one of the most common responses when grieving a loved one who died by homicide. Your anger may be directed toward the perpetrators as well as the people you feel should have protected your loved one. Furthermore, you may turn your anger inward at yourself for not predicting the situation or failing to protect your loved one – even though there was no possible way to predict or control the outcome.

Loss by homicide may also disrupt your sense of safety. You may find that you and other family members feel less safe and more distrustful of others. It is common to feel that no one else understands your feelings of grief, powerlessness, and fear.

Loss by Overdose

Your grief after a loved one dies from an overdose can be greatly influenced by your expectations and experience. For example, some families have dealt with a loved one's substance use for many years and may not be surprised to hear the news of their death. Families in this situation may even feel that it was inevitable to get this call one day. But other families are completely shocked because their loved one was just beginning to experiment or had hidden their substance use. These families will experience the same shock and disbelief as those bereaved by accidents or homicide.

You may feel a wide range of emotions after an overdose loss. You may feel a sense of powerlessness against addiction, especially if you saw your loved one endure numerous relapses. It is also common to feel that a great deal of potential was wasted. You might be angry with the people who introduced substances into your loved one's life and fed their addiction. Finally, all people grieving a loss by overdose will experience judgment from others and a stigma associated with the cause of death.



Loss by Suicide

The loss of a loved one to suicide will often come as a shock. It may take weeks or longer to come to terms with what has happened. You may find yourself wrestling with unanswered questions like “Why did this happen?” and “What led to this?” and “Why didn’t they reach out?” It is also common to replay specific situations in your mind and wonder about your loved one’s last moments. Unfortunately, you may not find clear answers to your questions.

Those bereaved by suicide often feel a sense of helplessness and rejection. You may also feel anger toward your loved one as well as frustration that the situation did not turn out differently. There are many misconceptions and myths surrounding suicide and, unfortunately, you and your family may feel judged and excluded by others due to the nature of your loss.

Strategies for Grieving Traumatic Loss

Find Your People

Because family, friends, co-workers, and community members often do not know how to support those grieving a traumatic loss, it is helpful to seek out people and resources who understand your situation. I encourage you to look for books, websites, and support groups that specifically focus on your type of traumatic loss. People associated with these resources will have first-hand experience dealing with the same challenges you are experiencing. They can provide realistic expectations for you and your family as well as an example of how they have navigated their loss.

Enlist Professional Help

Grieving a traumatic loss is often more challenging than other types of loss. You may benefit from working with a mental health professional who specializes in grief and loss. Mental health professionals will help you feel understood and work with you to develop healing strategies.

See My Other Booklets

You may find it helpful to read one of my other booklets if your traumatic loss involves your spouse, parent, or child. You may also find my booklet on helping grieving children and teens to be useful.



Need More Help?

Visit www.GriefPlan.com for helpful videos and articles to help you heal, remember, and rebuild after loss. These resources cover topics such as:

- ❖ Helping children as they grieve
- ❖ Healing after the loss of a spouse, parent, child, and other loved ones
- ❖ Dealing with traumatic losses due to suicide, overdose, and accidents
- ❖ Recognizing signs that you may need professional help
- ❖ A step-by-step video program to help you through your grief

About the Author

Dr. Jason Troyer earned his master's degree in counseling and his doctorate in counseling psychology. He is a published author, grief researcher, and former college professor and therapist.

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