

# **Coping with Grief and Trauma: When Tragedy Turns Life Upside Down**

# Coping with Grief and Trauma

- When a tragedy or disaster happens, it can change your life in an instant.
- For example:
  - › An accident
  - › Community violence
  - › A death
  - › A fire
  - › A flood
  - › An overdose
  - › A suicide

These are just examples. You can grieve any loss or change.

## **When this happens, it can be helpful to remember:**

- › It is common to have a strong reaction to these types of events.
- › These events can be hard to go through. Any reaction is a natural part of the healing process.
- › Try to be gentle with yourself as you work through this.
- › Acknowledge your experiences instead of ignoring them. This is how you can start to recover.

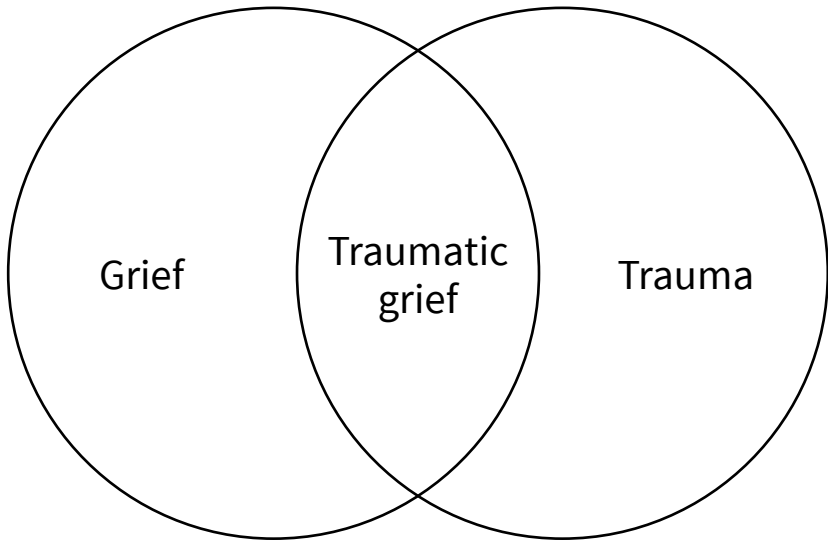
# Understanding grief

- **Grief is normal.**
  - › It is a human response to loss and change of any kind. Sudden and tragic death can be even harder. Grief does not follow a timeline or happen in stages.
- **Grief is not just sadness.**
  - › It can impact your physical, emotional, mental, social, and spiritual wellbeing.
- **Grief can feel like a mix of emotions.**
  - › You may experience sadness, anger, relief, shame, guilt, and other emotions.
  - › You may experience these feelings all at the same time, or not at all.
- **Grief is as unique as you are.**
  - › There is no “right way” to grieve. It is **your** grief.
- **Infants, children, and youth also grieve.**
  - › They can grieve just as much and deeply as adults do.

## Understanding trauma

- Trauma can happen after an overwhelming event. It can keep your nervous system on high alert even after the danger is gone.
- Trauma affects people differently. Your nervous system sees trauma as a threat and can respond in different and unique ways.
- Avoiding certain thoughts, memories, and feelings only helps for a short time. This can cause them to be more intense when they come back.
- Trauma can make grief even harder to cope with.
- While not every exposure to trauma will cause traumatic grief, it can happen when a loss is sudden, unexpected, and extremely upsetting.

## What is traumatic grief?



### Traumatic grief

- Having intense reactions to an overwhelming event is normal. When it keeps affecting your daily life, it may be time to ask for help. See page 7 for information on how to find resources.

### Traumatic grief can look like:

- › Fear or not feeling safe
- › Feeling “stuck”
- › Trouble in relationships
- › Flashbacks
- › Inability to focus and memory problems
- › Intrusive (unwanted) thoughts, nightmares, trouble sleeping

- › Lack of self-control
- › Strong emotional reactions that feel overwhelming or disproportionate (not equal) to everyday situations
- › Numbing your feelings with drugs or alcohol
- › Changes in your beliefs or sense of meaning in life
- › Refusing to believe someone has died
- › Having thoughts of joining the person who died

## **What can help?**

- Follow healthy practices and routines, starting with easy changes.
  - › Check in with yourself often.
  - › Take steps to get enough sleep.
  - › Eat healthy meals regularly.
  - › Drink enough fluids.
  - › Move (go for a walk, exercise, sports).
  - › Do activities you enjoy.
- Acknowledge and validate how you are feeling.
  - › Let yourself grieve without judgement.
  - › Experiencing grief can honour your loss.

- Try to find ways to be in relaxing environments.
  - › Go for a walk, spend time in nature, or listen to calming music.
  - › Take breaks from reading the news, scrolling social media, or anything that shows violence or death.
- Lean on others.
  - › Reach out to a family member, a friend, a faith leader, a trusted coworker, or a neighbour.
- Be gentle with yourself.
  - › Take a break from people who are not supportive.
  - › Give yourself space to grieve.

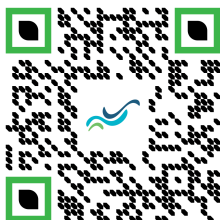
## Resources

### Online grief education

#### Let's Talk About Grief

- › [www.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources/2516](http://www.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources/2516)

Scan the QR code on your device (open the camera on your device, point the camera at the code, and tap the banner or border that appears)



- › [www.nshealth.ca/lifechanges](http://www.nshealth.ca/lifechanges)
- › [www.nshealth.ca](http://www.nshealth.ca) (search “grief”)

#### MyGrief.ca – Canadian Virtual Hospice

- › [www.MyGrief.ca](http://www.MyGrief.ca)

### Grief support in your area

#### Healing Pathways-Grieving Well™

Nova Scotia Hospice Palliative Care Association

- › <https://grievingwell.nshpca.ca>



## **211 Nova Scotia**

- › Phone: 211
- › Phone (toll-free): 1-855-466-4994
- › <https://ns.211.ca> (search “grief support”)

## **Kids and youth grief**

### **Dougy Center – The National Grief Center for Children & Families**

- › [www.Dougy.org](http://www.Dougy.org)

### **KidsGrief.ca – Canadian Virtual Hospice**

- › <https://Kidsgrief.ca>

### **The National Child Traumatic Stress Network**

- › <https://nctsn.org>

### **Kids Help Phone**

- › Phone (toll-free): 1-800-668-6868
- › Text CONNECT to: 686868
- › <https://kidshelpphone.ca/>

## **Mental Health and Addictions support**

### **Peer Support Phone Service**

- › Phone (toll-free): 1-800-307-1686
- › Hours: Wednesday to Friday, 5 to 11 p.m.  
Saturdays and Sundays, 11 a.m. to 11 p.m.
- › <https://mha.nshealth.ca/en/services/peer-support-phone-service>

### **Access Wellness Nova Scotia**

- Access Wellness is a free single-session supportive counselling service for individuals, couples or families.
  - › Phone (toll-free): 1-833-691-2282
  - › <https://accesswellness.lifeworks.com/nova-scotia-en>

### **Mental Health and Addictions Intake Service**

- › Phone (toll-free): 1-855-922-1122
- › Hours: Monday, Wednesday, Friday,  
8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.  
Tuesday, Thursday, 8:30 a.m. to 8 p.m.
- › <https://mha.nshealth.ca/en/services>

## Provincial Mental Health and Addictions Crisis Line

- › Phone: 902-429-8167
- › Phone (toll-free): 1-888-429-8167
- › Hours: 24 hours a day, 7 days a week
- › <https://mha.nshealth.ca/en/services/provincial-mental-health-and-addictions-crisis-line>

This pamphlet is just a guide. If you have questions, please talk to your health care provider. We are here to help you.

# Notes:

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This pamphlet is for educational purposes only. It is not intended to replace the advice or professional judgment of a health care provider. The information may not apply to all situations. If you have any questions, please ask your health care provider.

Find all patient education resources here:  
[www.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources](http://www.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources)

Connect with a registered nurse in Nova Scotia any time:  
Call 811 or visit: <https://811.novascotia.ca>

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To be reviewed October 2028 or sooner, if needed.  
Learn more: <https://library.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources>

