

Coping with Grief after a Tornado

After a natural disaster, it is common to experience grief. This grief can come from losing a loved one in a disaster. It can also be in response to sudden changes in your way of life, such as losing your home.

Grief responses may appear similar to reactions to stress and trauma. These can include feeling numb, sad, or angry. Physical reactions such as shakiness, nausea, or trouble sleeping may also occur. You may experience nightmares or want to withdraw from others.

In the long run, you may also experience positive changes, such as becoming more understanding, appreciating your relationships more, or increasing your spiritual connection.

Coping with Grief

- ▶ **Talk to others who understand how you feel.** These can be family members, faith leaders, friends, and others in your community.
- ▶ **Understand that while the feelings may be intense at first, they will become less intense over time.** As you start to process and heal, the feelings of grief may still arise, but they will be less distressing over time.
- ▶ **Take care of yourself physically.** Remember to eat regularly and get enough sleep.
- ▶ **Allow yourself to feel your emotions.** Let yourself feel joy, sadness, or anger without judgment. It is normal to feel a variety of emotions when experiencing grief. Cry when you need to.

Complicated Grief

When experiencing grief, sometimes symptoms may be complicated, or tied to trauma. If you experience any of the following symptoms, you may benefit from reaching out for help to move forward with the healing process:

- ▶ Having nightmares
- ▶ Not being able to think about anything other than your loss
- ▶ Feeling deep anger about the loss

- ▶ Not wanting any reminders of the loved one
- ▶ Deep feelings of loneliness
- ▶ Feeling distrustful of others or the world around you
- ▶ Feeling bitter about life
- ▶ Being unable to fulfill responsibilities
- ▶ Being unable to remember happy times with the loved one
- ▶ Being unable to enjoy life

If you experience these symptoms, please reach out to your doctor or another healthcare professional.

Survivors Guilt

Following a disaster, it is common to experience guilt or shame about what you did or didn't do. Some people may also experience "survivor's guilt," which is when you feel guilty that the disaster didn't affect you as severely as others. Specifically, you may feel guilty that you lived when others did not or that your property was undamaged while others suffered serious damage. These feelings can include exaggerated beliefs about your ability to predict the outcome or feelings of wrongdoing on your part. These feelings can increase the severity of other symptoms of distress following the event.

Ways to Cope with Survivor's Guilt

- ▶ **Accept and allow the feelings.** Acknowledge what happened and allow yourself to feel the emotions that come with it.
- ▶ **Connect with loved ones.** Share with others what you are feeling. You may turn to friends, family, religious leaders, or others in your community. It may also be helpful to join a support group with others experiencing similar issues.
- ▶ **Remind yourself that you are not alone.** It's common to feel like you are the only one experiencing these feelings, but you are not alone.
- ▶ **Do something to help others.** Helping others can help you feel better and is helpful to others in your community.

When to Seek Help

If you continue to experience guilt for a time after the event, seek assistance from a mental health professional. This is especially true if nightmares, loss of interest, flashbacks, anger, and other strong feelings accompany the guilt. Mental health professionals can help you process the event and your feelings of guilt and help you find ways to cope.

If you have experienced thoughts of suicide, it is important to get immediate assistance. You can dial 988 for the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, or call 911.

References

Leonard, J. (2019). *What Is Survivor's Guilt?* Medical News Today. <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/325578>

Raad, D. (2018). *What Everybody Should Know about Survivor's Guilt.* Psychology Today. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-empowerment-diary/201801/what-everybody-should-know-about-survivors-guilt>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). (2017). *Tips for Survivors: Coping with Grief after a Disaster or Traumatic Event.* <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/Tips-for-Survivors-/SMA17-5035>

Resources

Disaster Distress Helpline

1-800-985-5990

SAMHSA's National Helpline

1-800-662-HELP

National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline

Call or text 988

Chat online at <https://988lifeline.org/chat>

Crisis Text Line

Text "HOME" to 741741

Strength After

<https://strengthafterdisaster.org>

Disaster Distress Helpline Online Peer Support Communities

<https://strengthafterdisaster.org/peer-support>

National Alliance on Mental Illness HelpLine

(Mon. to Fri. 10 a.m.–10 p.m. ET)

1-800-950-NAMI

Text "HelpLine" to 62640

Find treatment in your area for mental health and substance use:

<https://findtreatment.gov/>

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