

**MOMENTUM** 2022 Annual Conference and Trade Show - August 30 - September 1, 2022 *LeadingAge Ohio*

## Supporting Grievers of Traumatic and COVID-19 Loss

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### Learning Objectives:

At the end of this presentation, the learner will be able to:

- ✓ List common manifestations of grief, including those with traumatic loss
- ✓ Describe strategies to help grievers of traumatic loss deal with the difficult emotions of grief

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### Relevant Research Facts

- Can trigger mental health issues in adults with **no** history of psychiatric disorders (Keyes et al., 2014)
- Mental health disorders are more elevated after such a death than following natural deaths (Kristensen et al., 2012)
- The trajectory of recovery appears to be slower after sudden traumatic death (Kristensen et al., 2012)
- Associated with painful consequences in every area of life.

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*"A death is considered traumatic if it occurs **without warning**; if it is **untimely**; if there is **damage** to a loved one's body; if it was caused by a perpetrator with the **intent to harm**; if the survivor regards the death as **preventable**; if the survivor believes that the loved one **suffered**; or if the survivor regards the death, or manner of death, as **unfair and unjust**."*

Wortman & Latack (2017)

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In light of the COVID crisis, the definition of traumatic death has been expanded. In the past, traumatic death had been defined as primarily having been **sudden**. Now, the consideration of **traumatic circumstances** have been included in the definition.

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*Types of Traumatic Deaths*

- Accident or disaster
- Suicide
- Homicide (including terrorism and war)
- Acute natural death
  - Medical events
  - Acute illness

• Rando, T.A. (2021, February 2). *Twelve Care Strategies for Treating Traumatic Bereavement* (Webinar, Hospice Foundation of America).

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### COVID-19 Deaths as Traumatic Loss

- Recent research study reported in Omega: Journal of Death and Dying:
  - Two major findings in grieverers:
    - Very high levels of post-traumatic stress, with 94.6% of the sample to be in the diagnostic range of post-traumatic stress disorder
    - Levels of post-traumatic growth were very low (Carson et al., 2021)

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### Factors in COVID deaths contributing to traumatic loss

- Death is largely sudden and unexpected
- Individuals prohibited from being with their loved ones
- Death perceived as capricious
- Anger at those who exposed loved one
- Guilt for not doing more to protect
- Shaming from others
- Traditional rituals and social support interference

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### COVID Grief in the Context of Larger Societal Losses

- Social distancing/isolation
- Health concerns/fear of infection
- Economic/job loss
- Loss of the assumptive world
- Political turmoil

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*“Grief is the rope burn left behind, when that which is held is pulled beyond our grasp”*

Stephen Levine  
 “Unattended Sorrow: Recovering From Loss and Reviving the Heart”

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**About Grief....**

- Normal acute grief is intensely painful, exhausting and consuming
- What is “normal” varies widely among individuals
  - Every bereavement, like every death, is unique
  - Grief permanently changes the griever

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PHYSICAL EXPRESSIONS

•Sleep disturbances	•Breathlessness
•Nervousness/tension	•Dry mouth
•Muscle weakness	•Lack of appetite
•Physical pain	•Heart palpitations
•Exhaustion	•Weight gain/loss
•Lack of energy	•Gastrointestinal disturbances
•“Slowness”	•Overly sensitive to noise
•Restlessness	•Lack of sexual desire
•Tightness in the chest/throat	•Increased susceptibility to illness

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EMOTIONAL EXPRESSIONS

- Loneliness
- Emptiness
- Depression
- Vulnerability/Helplessness
- Yearning/Pining
- Abandonment
- Powerlessness
- Shock/Numb
- Sadness
- Anger
- Relief
- Guilt
- Anxiety

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COGNITIVE EXPRESSIONS

- Auditory/visual hallucinations
- Sense of presence of the deceased
- Fearful of losing control
- Fear of "going crazy"
- Flashbacks/nightmares
- Disbelief/denial
- Confusion
- Thought preoccupation
- Difficulty concentrating
- Inability to process information
- Forgetfulness

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BEHAVIORAL EXPRESSIONS

- Tearfulness
- Sleep disturbances
- Avoiding reminders of the deceased
- Appetite disturbances
- Absentmindedness
- Social withdrawal
- Searching/calling out
- Restless over-activity
- Vivid dreams of the deceased
- Difficulty starting/maintaining organized activity

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SPIRITUAL EXPRESSIONS

- Concerns about the afterlife
- Exploration of spirituality
- Issues of guilt and forgiveness
- Struggles with competing value systems
- Search for meaning
- Questioning faith/belief systems
- Loss of faith/belief system
- Confirmation of faith
- Anger at God

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*“Timeline” of Grief*

First month: Shock/numbness

Months two to four: Intense grief/recognition of permanence setting in

Months five-ten: Adjustment/more good days than bad

Months ten-thirteen: Resurgence of intense pain as anniversary approaches and passes

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*Issues Complicating Mourning Following Sudden, Traumatic Death*

- The capacity to cope is diminished
- The assumptive world is violently shattered
- The loss does not make sense
- There is no time to say good-bye/finish unfinished business

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*Issues Complicating Mourning Following Sudden, Traumatic Death*

- The mourner may obsessively reconstruct events in retrospect
- The death may provoke a post-traumatic response.
- Grievors tend to have relatively more intense emotional reactions

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*Additional Factors Often Involved in Traumatic Loss*

- Witnessing the death
- Multiple deaths
- Having to make life-support or organ donation decisions
- Media attention
- Being blamed for the death
- Prolonged court proceedings
- People asking intrusive questions about the death

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*Remember: Just as every individual and loss is unique, each person's grief process is also unique.*

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*Common Struggles (Grievers of Traumatic Loss)*

- **Shattering of assumptive world and a sense of safety**
  - Assumptive world is "a person's mental set, derived from past personal experience, that contains all a person assumes, expects and believes to be true about the self, the world, and everything and everyone in it"
    - Encyclopedia of Death and Dying

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*Common Struggles (Grievers of Traumatic Loss)*

- Significant anxiety as a result of hyper-vigilance and the perceived loss of safety
- Preoccupation with issues of causality, responsibility and blame (including anger and personal guilt)
- Focus on issues of suffering and not being with the loved one at the time of death
- Feeling people cannot understand their grief

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*Common Struggles (Grievers of Traumatic Loss Through Suicide)*

**Shame:** "Will my loved one always be remembered by this one act?" "How will others treat me?"

**Anger:** "How could they do this to me?" "To our family?"

**Guilt:** "Was there something I could have done to prevent this?"

**Relief:** Which can lead to guilt

**Rejection:** "Why did you choose to leave me?" "What is wrong with me?"

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**Styles of Grieving**

Styles impact the way individuals express and experience grief  
 An individual's personal style of grieving can occur anywhere along the continuum  
 Stronger tendencies toward one style will result in greater use of that style's coping strategies  
 People that rely on strategies from both domains may be said to have a "Blended"

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Intuitive Blended Instrumental

(Doka & Martin)

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**Intuitive Style**

- Feelings and emotions are intensely experienced
- Need to express and experience feelings
- Tearful
- Body language expresses sadness
- Want to share inner experiences with others
- May experience prolonged periods of confusion, inability to concentrate, disorganization
- Prone to physical exhaustion and or anxiety

**Instrumental Style**

- Thinking the preferred method for dealing with grief
- Feelings are less intense
- Desire to master feelings rather than express them
- General reluctance to talk about feelings
- Prefer to discuss problems
- Mastery of oneself and the environment are important
- Energy channeled into focused and problem solving activity

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**Helping Grievers Deal with Anxiety**

- Rooted in suddenness/loss of assumptive world and helplessness
- Those exposed directly to the trauma and aftermath are at risk for developing PTSD and will likely need professional help
- Teach self-stabilization skills (self-soothing/grounding)

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### Helping Grievers Deal with **Anxiety**

- Address physical manifestations of anxiety through relaxation exercises and exercise
- Help griever identify helpless self-talk and replace with strength-based self talk
- Teach mindfulness skills
- Be vigilant for signs griever is self-medicating

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### Helping Grievers Deal with **Guilt**

- Unresolved, can lead to depression or desire to self-harm
- If extended, can be a coping strategy to avoid other difficult emotions or moving forward
- Understandable, as griever is focused on deceased and events
- If "real guilt", address forgiveness. Writing a letter to the deceased may help

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### Helping Grievers Deal with **Guilt**

- If "imagined guilt", discuss difference between guilt and regret
- Provide the tools to reality test
- Encourage the "head" to counsel the "heart"

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## Helping Grievers Deal with Anger

- Needs to be expressed , not rehearsed.
- Often covers sadness or fear, which are experienced as more vulnerable emotions
- Explore directing anger in productive ways
- If sense underlying anger towards the deceased, gently ask questions such as:
  - "What don't you miss about him/her?"
  - "How did he/she disappoint you?"

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## Dealing with Flashbacks

-  Takes a good assessment and discernment on the part of the counselor
-  Relax/Replace technique
-  Importance of strength-based self-talk and grounding
-  EMDR can be very helpful

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## Helping Grievers Deal with Loneliness

- After most intense emotions subside, griever will usually be left with longing for the loved one for a lifetime
- Help grievers build competency with being alone
- Encourage extending support systems
- Build in plans for times loneliness is most acute

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### Worden's Four Tasks of Grief

- To **acknowledge** the reality of the loss
- To **process** the pain of the loss
- To **adjust** to a world without the deceased
- To **find an enduring connection** with the deceased in the midst of embarking on a new life

Worden, 2018.

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### Additional tips for helping

- Encourage realistic expectations for the grief process
- Encourage healthy self-care: nutrition, hydration, exercise, sleep, support
- Assist in finding meaning in the loss
- Facilitate goodbyes

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### Just a word about **suicide**:

- Reassuring statistics: the vast number of grievors do not seriously consider suicide, make suicidal attempts, or complete suicide
- However, risk is higher in those grieving traumatic losses
- Many grievors talk about wanting to die
- Must take all references seriously and inquire further

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### Vicarious Grief and Trauma

- Genuine grief that is stimulated by someone else's loss
- Griever experiences assumptive world disruption – produces shattering of personal security and safety
- May need support in same fashion as those experiencing personal close loss

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Every day is an opportunity to choose where we place our care.

Be sure to include yourself in that choice.



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