

WHEN TRAGEDY STRIKES THOSE NEAR US

All of us might want our own lives and the lives of others to be relatively settled. However, there are times when unexpected tragedies or crises occur in the lives of our friends or acquaintances, or others in our wider community. We may not be directly involved in the event, yet we can be affected too. When this happens people can react in many different ways:

Thoughts: People sometimes struggle to make sense of an event that disrupts life's expected pattern, raising questions like "How could this happen?" Such an event can make existence seem so tenuously, and everyday things seem meaningless, shallow, or trivial.

Feelings: It's natural to experience a range of emotional responses such as shock, disbelief, sadness, anger, worry, irritability, fear, or blame. At times, people can struggle with a sense of guilt about not having been directly affected by the event itself.

Imagination: Sometimes people imagine themselves in the other person's place. "What if that happened to me? What would I do in that situation?"

Memory: This event can trigger the memory of some tragic or upsetting experience in one's own life, reviving feelings and thoughts.

Thinking About Others: It's common to wonder, "How can I help someone who I know has been directly affected by this tragedy?"

These kinds of responses are natural, and there are many different ways to help yourself and others. Here are some ideas:

Ways To Help Yourself:

- Talk with people you feel close to, and make use of other supports like ANU Counselling Centre. Talking with a variety of people can sometimes help you to get different perspectives and ideas.
- Take some time for internal reflection to help make sense of changing feelings and thoughts as they arise. Some people also find it helpful to write or draw their thoughts as a way of "getting it out there", whether this is shared with others or not.
- Give yourself time to come to terms with the event. Try not to judge your responses as "good" or "bad".
- People sometimes find that doing something different that provides some distraction (exercise, music, dance, reading, movies, etc. etc.) also helps. You may find that "taking a break" from trying to deal with the effects of the event gives you some relief and renewed energy.

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Ways To Help Others:

- Keep practising your own ways of helping yourself, so that you can remain available for others.
- Acknowledge people's reactions and avoid judging them as "good" or "bad". Keep in mind that shock and denial can allow people to slowly absorb the reality of the event, and may therefore be very useful in the short term.
- Stay with people if they are distressed or upset, but try not to crowd them.
- Listen as long as people want to talk – often "just listening" is all you need to do.
- Help people with simple practical tasks that might be difficult for them to do in the short term. But be prepared to step back as soon as they begin to feel they can be in control.
- Don't make light of the situation or other people's reactions – it takes time to come to terms with tragedy or crisis.
- Try not to react personally in the face of strong emotions that people may express. Allowing people to speak freely rather than "bottling it all up" can help relieve strong emotions.

We do not have a choice when tragedy strikes others near us. We do have a choice about how we address its effects.

If you would like to talk to a Counsellor at ANU Counselling, please contact us.
Phone: 6178 0455 or email us: counselling.centre@anu.edu.au

Or visit our website <https://www.anu.edu.au/students/health-safety-wellbeing/counselling> to find resources for managing personal and academic issues.