

Surviving Traumatic Grief

When Loved Ones Die in a Disaster

A book by people who have survived traumatic grief

This is a joint project of the Sue Evans Fund for Families, the Red Cross and the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement



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Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement
McCulloch House
Monash Medical Centre
246 Clayton Rd
Clayton
VIC 3168 Australia
www.grief.org.au

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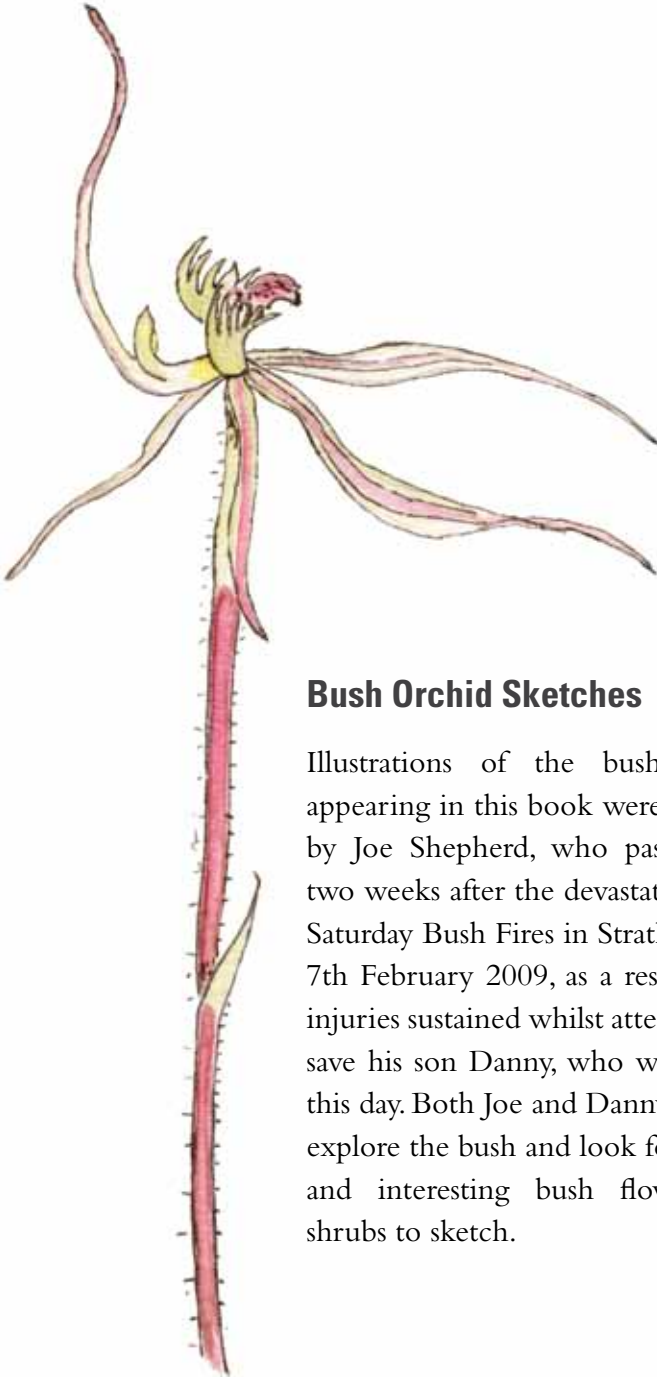
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DEDICATION

The book is dedicated to the memory of the 173 people who perished in the Victorian bushfires on 7th February 2009. They will never be forgotten and our lives will never be the same again.



Bush Orchid Sketches

Illustrations of the bush orchids appearing in this book were sketched by Joe Shepherd, who passed away two weeks after the devastating Black Saturday Bush Fires in Strathewen on 7th February 2009, as a result of the injuries sustained whilst attempting to save his son Danny, who was lost on this day. Both Joe and Danny loved to explore the bush and look for orchids and interesting bush flowers and shrubs to sketch.

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FOREWORD

Grief is hard to bear at the best of times, but when those mourned have died in traumatic circumstances, the grief is often derailed by the horror of their situation. When trauma is part of a large disaster, the pain of each person is mirrored in the others who have suffered. If home, environment and community are destroyed, a sense of bewilderment and dislocation compete with grief for the available energy. Worst of all, multiple traumatic griefs seem too great for feelings to comprehend. At these times, the experience of being outside the scope of familiar reactions can result in a loss of bearings which makes it difficult to know how to get through it, what to expect or even how to react. It can overload the relationships with those most needed.

Although nothing can dim the pain of tragedies, much can be done to help bear it and ensure that slowly there is movement through it. After the first impact has been absorbed, there is often a longing to bridge the terrible sense of aloneness and hear how others have got through similar experiences: to hear through their words how they have understood it and what they can do to give words to what seems inexpressible. The power of words is that they give form and clarity to feelings that otherwise engulf and reduce the sense of self.

This book has been written as a step towards reducing the isolation and increasing understanding for people embarking on traumatic grief. It is the initiative of people bereaved by the 2009 Victorian bushfires, who found much of what has been written to assist those in grief, did not describe their particular experiences. It has been prepared from the comments and descriptions many of them have offered, combined with the

understanding of experienced professionals working in the field of traumatic grief. This contribution has taken great generosity and courage from those who are survivors of traumatic grief.

We hope that reading this book will assist those confronting this experience, not only to a greater understanding and a sense of not being alone, but also to hope that they too, in time, will emerge from the pain and be able to resume creative lives.

Dr Rob Gordon, PhD.



ABOUT THE BOOK

This book contains insights from 21 people who lost loved ones in the February 2009 Victorian bushfires and were interviewed 18 months after the fires. They lost parents, partners, children, grandchildren, brothers, sisters, nephews, nieces, extended family and friends. There is also a short section with comments by a person who has survived traumatic grief following the loss of a loved one some years ago, which shows how recovery is possible. It also includes insights from professionals who have worked to help others through traumatic grief.

The contributors have been willing to reflect on their personal experiences and to contribute in this thoughtful and generous way in the hope of helping others who may experience the tragic death of people they love in other disastrous ways. Losing loved ones in a disaster is different to other deaths. These contributors believe that it would have been helpful if they had something to read about what to expect and how other people had coped and survived and they would like to pass on to others the knowledge and insights they have gained. While most of this book draws upon experiences following the Victorian bushfires, the insights will be helpful for people affected by other traumatic deaths. Two mothers independently said:

“I can’t think of a better way to honour and remember my son than to be involved in something which will help others.” (Carol and Chris)



THE TRAUMATIC NATURE OF DISASTERS

Disasters by their very nature are disruptive and destructive and can involve the most serious consequences of all – loss of life. The public nature and extent of a disaster have a distinct influence on both the early and later responses of those involved. For example, after the bushfires people had to cope with the horrifying nature of the disaster. This was similar for those people who experienced the Bali bombings. In both cases, they did not know what had happened to their loved ones for some time and were trying to comprehend the large number of deaths, even the loss of whole families.

In natural disasters such as bushfires or cyclones, people are faced with the extent of the devastation – the loss of homes, possessions, memorabilia, pets, communities, businesses, wildlife and natural environment, loss of a sense of belonging, sense of safety and way of life. Those who are grieving may also have been exposed at firsthand to the trauma of the event. They may have been personally in danger, had frightening experiences, or helped out as a volunteer, either formally or informally.

The sudden and unexpected nature of disasters often does not allow for warning or preparation. Even when warnings occur, people may not act upon them because of uncertainty or difficulty accepting the reality of the danger. Afterwards, there is confusion and the social systems required for dealing with the consequences of the tragedy are unable to do so adequately for some time.

After the Victorian bushfires everyone, including emergency services and other agencies, was coping with an apparently chaotic situation, which had not been experienced within the living memory of most people.

“Over time I realised that the chaos and not knowing what to do was as common amongst the authorities as it was in families. This is not a criticism – it is a hard-learned reality of what catastrophes are like.”
(Rhonda)

Traumatic loss may also be caused by terrorist acts, mining disasters, industrial accidents, transport accidents such as rail or plane crashes or criminal acts. All these events share the elements of tragedy and destruction and have a similar impact on the people involved. One complicating effect is that the event and those who died catch the attention of the wider community who now feel strong involvement in all that happens and often have strong views about those in the midst of it. However, the complexity of the experience is not often understood by those outside it.

“When you find yourself involved in a national disaster or catastrophe it is hard and isolating if people label you only as ‘a bereaved person’... because in addition to the bereavement/s you may also be highly traumatised from your own experience, or you might have concerns about missing persons, or about criminal aspects of the disaster.”
(Rhonda)

In natural disasters and when legal processes are involved, it takes many weeks for the situation to conclude or stabilise. Uncertainty adds particular difficulties and prevents recovery from starting.

“Those fires went for weeks – it was trauma plus.” (Gaye)

There are often competing responsibilities for those involved between being a griever, a traumatised survivor with urgent needs or as executor of the deceased’s affairs.

“Going back to my brother’s house and clearing it out, what was left, was tough.” (Vera)

Deaths in disasters are violent, disturbing and occur in desperate, horrifying circumstances. Sometimes, the way people died suggests pain, terror and loneliness. Thinking of this makes coming to terms with the fact of the death itself far more difficult and complex. Often people swing between horror and grief.

“It is hard to comprehend the whole thing. And you’ve got the trauma side of it too...thinking about what they must have gone through. You try not to think about that, but sometimes it just haunts you.” (Carolyn)

“I imagine their last moments together – talking to each other, the horror of what they must have been facing, sharing their love for each other and even thinking of the rest of their family and telling each other that they loved us and each other... Thinking about that gets me away from the horror.” (Robyn)

Any sudden death is tragic. But deaths where there is horror, delay, confusion, destruction and other losses involving multiple casualties including from the same family have unique challenges for those grieving. Some special features of deaths in disasters are described in the next sections.



STRAIGHT AFTER THE DISASTER

Because disasters are disruptive, uncertain and destructive, it is often unclear what has happened. Accurate information is hard to get, as emergency services are coping with more immediate problems and not yet able to devote resources to collecting and providing needed information. Many familiar modes of communication are disrupted along with the normal community routines. There is usually a painful period during which people think their loved ones may have been lost, but cannot confirm it. This is very hard to bear and people easily get into a state which makes it hard to know what to do or where to get help. Lack of a clear plan about what to do next makes the situation worse.

The disaster shatters feelings of familiarity, security, confidence and safety. It is harder to trust the situation and people in official roles; even slight impatience, misunderstandings or lack of tact have profound effects leading to feelings of being unimportant, alone, unsupported and lost in a chaos of meaningless official activity. Being able to find out what is happening not only reduces uncertainty but helps regain a sense of control and predictability. Each person needs to get through this period of inevitable confusion; they need to work out what will help them survive until certainty and contact with their support people is established and to be prepared to ask for it. The most urgent needs are for information, emotional support and a less affected helper who can think clearly and do things for them.

“We didn’t know who to turn to for help, what government department might help. It was a long time before we knew what had happened.”
(Vicky)

“We found out from the police on Monday morning (two days later). It was hard not knowing if they were alive or dead.” (Carlene)

“I woke up to the TV saying Marysville was wiped out. I thought Mum was dead. I was trying to call her, but there was no reception.”
(Amber)

Here are some suggestions from the Red Cross:

- Listen to a local radio station for information about what is happening and where to get more help or information. ABC local radio has a role in disasters to provide regular updates and relay official information about what services and help are available and how to get them.

- Check government websites for information and helpline numbers. If you don't have access to a computer, ask a family member or friend to check for you.
- Make direct contact with relevant government agencies (police, emergency services, local government, etc.) but remember they often are overwhelmed with requests and may often not have the detail needed.
- Talk to local people who you trust about what is happening, but remember word of mouth may not always be accurate.
- If you are not confident about talking to the authorities, particularly if your first language is not English, or you do not understand what the information means, ask someone to help you.
- If you know someone who is vision or hearing impaired, check with them to make sure that they are able to access information.

As soon as the danger is past, people gather to find out what has happened to those they know and to work out what to do next. There is a tendency for people to disregard normal privacy, to mix freely and put aside everything except the current situation. While this is helpful in the short term, it means that normal life is suspended and the unusual situation keeps people high, on edge, suspended and unable to get on with familiar, reassuring routines. Official requirements often interfere with personal needs and it may feel as though intimate parts of life have been invaded by unfeeling bureaucrats because most people have had no prior experience of these systems and their processes. The longer this period lasts, the harder it is to begin coming to terms with the losses. Privacy, routines and familiarity are needed to adjust to painful realities.

“I heard on the radio. I drove home to find people everywhere in the driveway.” (Chris)

Some people may also lose not only their loved ones, but their homes, livelihood, pets, identity, routines and their community, which can make the process much more difficult and complicated for them.

“Usually after a death you have a funeral and you go home. But with us, we didn’t have that... there’s nowhere to go and you wait and you wait. The funeral director says ‘I’m sorry but you can’t see your father/your husband... because it took so long’. And you can’t go home to your house where everything is, because there is no house, no photos, nothing.” (Mary)

“Until Sam’s body was released from the Coroner’s Office (seven weeks) we were all in limbo... Normally when somebody dies you have a week or ten days before the funeral and you focus on the ritual and other arrangements. But we were told ‘We don’t know if it is your son and it could be weeks or it could be months’. The hardest thing for me was not being able to look after him after he died and the fact that he was property – that he wasn’t a person. He was the person you think was your son. We were all really struggling with the terrible guilt that our son had died and then that we had abandoned him, because we couldn’t do anything for him.” (Carol)



How you might be affected

What you have experienced is something outside your previous experience. Suddenly you may find yourself or family in the public glare, the centre of attention for a time and you are having to deal with a range of people and organisations that you have never had to deal with in the past, including police, coroner's office, state and federal government departments, local governments, health services, non-government agencies, insurance companies, as well as spontaneous well-wishers and helpers, some of whom you may not have known well in the past.

Many other people are affected by what has happened to your loved one, such as family members, close and not so close, colleagues, neighbours, friends, sports teammates and school communities. Their reactions are likely to be varied and often they are so focussed on their own distress or need to know that they lack sensitivity to those most involved. This is a difficult time as they may be looking for support, information and answers and guidance on what to do and how they should be feeling from you when you are feeling you are in greatest need.

The situation is so unusual that people find themselves having feelings that do not make sense, seem quite bizarre or just wrong. This leads to confusion, guilt or a sense of not knowing yourself. But the feelings are responding to a situation outside previous reality and whose meaning does not fit into the past patterns. Although intense and unusual, the feelings settle as the situation becomes more predictable as privacy and intimacy are re-established.

“The day the Coroner’s Office rang us to say that he was ready to be released I remember having this peak of euphoria and I was really happy and it just hit me like a brick. I remember thinking ‘My God, I’m really euphoric because now I can bury my son. Yes, I’ve got him.’ I was almost jumping around the room with happiness. When I realised this, that really messed with my head.” (Carol)

“When I found out that all my family members had been together (and not separated) I was pleased and said ‘I have good news, they were all found together’.” (Karen)

“It’s like the wild wild west, those first weeks and months. It’s crazy, nothing makes sense, you can’t get answers from anybody. You know it’s your family, but we were told ‘We can’t tell if it is your family’... It’s bizarre, picking up newspapers and finding out information that you were desperate to know – the media were told before us.” (Rhonda)

It is not unusual for some people to be unable to grasp the reality of what has happened, or only to feel it for moments. Grief and sadness may be swept aside by numbness, detachment, anger, self-blame, blame towards others, fear about the future, or intense activity focussed on dealing with all the new urgent matters. The appropriate emotions may only occur when supportive people are available to allow responsibilities to be temporarily let go of, or in moments of rest or inactivity.

“I was numb. It’s like you’re there but you’re not there. You are just going through the motions. It’s like a wall is there but you can’t get past that wall and you don’t really want to know what’s behind that wall.” (Mary)

It may seem like people are asking the same questions over and over again or assuming you know things you have never heard. They may have provided you with information, but in the

haze of what has happened, you may not have heard what has been said or forgotten it. People who are desperate for some specific information often do not absorb other things and later when they hear it, do not recognise it.

You will inevitably be seriously affected, but each individual is different. Don't expect too much of yourself. Some people gradually begin to feel less distressed as time passes, but others find that once the shock subsides, their grief becomes more acute. However, it is typical that the feelings come and go, alternating with being busy and doing what has to be done. There are also many different feelings, which can be a response to the various aspects of the situation. They cannot all be felt at the same time, so they tend to alternate. People sometimes feel confused because when they have started to get one feeling a little under control, they are distressed in another way about some other aspect of the tragedy.

“There were times of being able to cope amazingly and just get stuff done and then I'd fall in a heap... Let yourself just go with it... The bad times have lessened over time, but at the start I would think ‘Is this ever going to end?’ But I can say now that the things that I gave up, I'm wanting to do again... these things are coming back.” (Vera)

The sudden loss of loved ones fills the mind with them and memories can play like a loop, alternating between familiar moments and then the tragedy. They can crowd out everything else so that it is hard to concentrate on other things and it absorbs all available energy so there is little else for what has to be done. Even the simplest things seem too difficult when they have nothing to do with the loved ones.

“My head was full of them. All the memories were there all the time... Every day was like climbing Mt Everest. No-one can take that pain away. You’re living with it 24/7.” (Carolyn)

The intensity of the emotions and the extreme situations cause intense, unfamiliar bodily reactions. Emotions are body states as well as mental states. Heartbeat, breathing, sweating, skin colour, balance, gut reactions, hearing and sight, energy level, ability to move or keep still are all dramatically affected. No two people react the same way. The body can express very intense emotions without ill effects, but at the same time if physical distress continues, it is wise to seek medical advice. However, it is important to allow people to express their emotions in whatever way they need to, but to provide support and a safe environment for them to be in and reassure them that they will come through it in time.

“People aren’t aware of what your body is going to go through. My friend thought she was going to have a heart attack and she was panicking. But just having the information about what to expect in the first two years and seeing that what she was doing and feeling is normal, helped her.” (Gaye)

These immediate reactions are the first stage of adjustment to the tragedy, which has its own phases and time frame. The body and mind have their own survival mechanisms, but people without previous experience of such reactions often need information and reassurance about how to understand and take care of themselves and their loved ones so that they get through it in the best way possible.

“I wish I had been given a ‘heads-up’ that there may be immediate, medium and long term impacts on the surviving siblings and parents... and given some tools and strategies to cope with this.” (Rhonda)



Dealing with legal processes

Following the sudden and unexpected deaths of loved ones in a disaster you are likely to have contact with emergency and coronial services. The law requires that all unexpected and unnatural deaths be reported to the Coroner. In a mass disaster, it is usually the police who will be reporting to the Coroner those persons who are missing suspected to have died. The Coroner conducting the investigation into that reported death is required to determine the identity of the person reported and the cause and circumstances of their death. Another significant purpose of the Coroner's investigation is to investigate whether there are any recommendations that could be made to contribute to the reduction in deaths occurring in similar circumstances or the promotion of public health and safety. Police, as agents of the Coroner, attend the scene and conduct an investigation. Sometimes there may be delays in

the deceased's remains being removed, particularly if the scene is unsafe or severely damaged or scientific and forensic experts need to attend the scene to enable those experts to thoroughly examine the scene to provide evidence to the coroner about cause and identity and circumstances surrounding the death.

When a mass disaster occurs in which people die in circumstances that make them no longer visually identifiable, there are strict internationally agreed procedures for determining identity. Police and medical and scientific forensic examiners are trained both nationally and internationally to work in mass disasters using these international standards and to provide their investigative briefs to the Coroner using these standards.

Coroners rely on these trained and expert investigators who work to these international standards and provide the results of their investigations to the Coroner who must then decide if there is sufficient evidence to come to a conclusion about identity before a deceased's remains can be released. In some cases it may be a long and difficult process and there may be delays before funerals can be arranged.

The Coroner's Office can be contacted to find out how they are progressing in identifying your loved ones. Sometimes government services organise Information Sessions to explain the coronial process, trauma and grief and services to assist. If these are available they can provide an opportunity to ask questions and to gain information about what to expect. It may be helpful to let the Coroner's Office know about what would be helpful during this time.

You may also find that you need to deal with other formal processes, such as managing the estate of your loved one,

insurance, selling properties. These all take time and it may be best to have someone with appropriate experience help you sort through and prioritise these issues.

As time goes on, you need to be aware that the disaster might be the subject of an Inquest, formal judicial inquiries, criminal proceedings, or civil proceedings. These may involve your participation in varying degrees. However, they will often only take place months or years later. It may be helpful to consider keeping some form of diary to help your recall. They are likely to trigger reactions, as they will be reported in the media. The courts have services to support people involved in emotionally distressing cases.

Protecting yourself and managing the situation

Those closest to the deceased after a disaster find themselves suddenly plunged into an unfamiliar turmoil of emotion, people, tasks and official processes. All of these make demands at a time when the mind is least able to cope with them. One danger is the emotions get the upper hand and it is not possible to play any active role in what happens. This can cause difficulties later when the person wishes they had been able to participate more in the tasks and organising things for their loved one. The other danger is that the emotions are shut down to allow the person to get on and do everything that has to be done. This can cause a tendency to numbness that may make it hard to connect to the real feelings that will enable the grief to work through to recovery. It is important for each person to find a balance between respecting their feelings and being able to keep functioning. There are some simple strategies that may help this.

Have someone to monitor calls, visitors and letters

It can be helpful to nominate a close friend or family member to screen calls and to act as your representative and contact person. They can open your mail, read the contents and explain the meaning in simple language, as there may be official letters relating to the coroner's process or about services that might be of assistance.

“In the early days I only wanted to talk to my immediate affected family. My husband took all the phone calls.” (Gaye)

“Melanie became the spokesperson or gatekeeper for the family... It's good if one member of the family is strong enough to screen calls and act as a spokesperson to the media.” (Gary and Robyn)

Keep a diary and make sure all records are stored where you can find them

Memory and attention are affected by strong emotions. It is difficult to absorb information and what is not needed at one time is ignored only to find it is important later on. It is also a good idea to ensure that you keep a record of all important information and contact numbers. Remember your needs may change and what is not needed now may be needed later.

Organise friends or relatives to help with normal routine tasks

Close friends and relatives often want to help. Think about how they can take over some of the routine responsibilities to free your mind to deal with the issues related to the disaster. Ask one person to coordinate all the assistance (meal roster, clean up roster, child minding etc.) This reduces the pressure

on you and your family and allows a bit more time for being together in a supportive way.

“All the family went to Pauline’s (sister). She used to be the rock. We stayed there for one to two weeks from 8 am to midnight. We needed to be together. We couldn’t make food for ourselves.” (Carlene)

Make sure you get rest and quiet time with close family

It is easy to get lost in the emotional distress and the turmoil of all the activity and to keep up unproductive activity. Each person in the family will react differently and misunderstandings grow if there is no opportunity to communicate with each other. It is especially important to make opportunities for children and teenagers to feel comfortable to talk about what is going through their minds. This enables family members to understand and support each other. Half an hour quietly together before bed or over meals may make all the difference to how supportive everyone can be.



DISASTER GRIEF – SOME SPECIAL ISSUES

The nature of disasters

Disasters are public events with an impact on the whole community as well as those immediately involved. There is often intense attention and it is hard to find privacy. Those affected are thrust together for many different reasons and every aspect of life is disrupted. Sometimes people feel as though they lose who they were before and no longer have the usual foundation from which to deal with problems. There are also so many people affected in such different ways that it can be hard to know how to feel about your own experience. There are competing demands that it is hard to know which problem to focus on. Those grieving are often also trying to deal with their own trauma and the disruption of having lost property, livelihood and community make it hard to give full attention to the grief.

The nature of grief

Grief is the natural and normal response to the death of a loved one. It is both the reaction to the loss and the process of recovering from it. But everyone's grief is different. Your grief will depend on what the person meant to you. No-one knows this but you and so no one can judge what it should be – it just is what it is. Grief is exhausting, particularly when it has happened in a traumatic event. Traumatic grief is sudden, unexpected and unprepared and strikes to the core of who we are.

“Part of your heart dies; your heart's broken.” (Vicky)

“There are no right or wrong experiences. Even within my own extended family the range of needs and reactions is from one end of the scale to the other. They are all okay and all are right. Living through this experience makes you learn and appreciate that there is no right or wrong or prescriptive solution. Respecting other people's needs to have, and to work out, their own journey that works for them (or doesn't work) is really important.” (Rhonda)

Traumatic grief is very public – impact of the media

After a disaster there is a lot of media attention, which can be distressing. It might be short-lived, or continue for a longer period and you may unexpectedly see pictures of loved ones and stories run about them in the electronic and print media. It is difficult to grieve privately when there is a lot of media attention and people know you are affected.

“When there is a high public profile and media attention as with the bushfires, it is hard to get any respite. The trauma triggers fly at you often. I experienced, and many people mention, being ‘bowled over’ unexpectedly and often (by media reports).” (Rhonda)

The media will also develop various “angles” on the disaster, which may seek to attach blame, show that things should not have happened as they did or suggest the deaths were unnecessary. This can stimulate many other emotions and be confusing and disorienting for grief. But in the end recovery starts by accepting what has happened and beginning to come to terms with it.

It might seem as though you are defined by the event – as “the bereaved” and quite often the media attach labels “Black Saturday”, “Ash Wednesday”, “Bali bombings”, “Port Arthur” which may feel as though they simplify or make them into a commodity. Most people have little experience of being the centre of media attention and to find themselves in this situation in the midst of intense grief can be emotionally confusing. Privacy is essential for grief.

“It is Black Saturday. This is in our face for the rest of our lives – more so than for other deaths. You can’t grieve privately. It’s on the radio, in the newspaper... The phone rang and neighbours wanted to give us their condolences, but the deaths were not confirmed yet.” (Gaye)

“We have to mourn publicly. When you lose an individual you mourn as a family and life goes on. With the bushfires we mourned as a country, and life hasn’t gone on for us, because we don’t know everything about what happened.” (Carlene)

“It’s like our right to privacy doesn’t exist and it keeps re-traumatising us every time it is in the media. Your loved ones’ photos and names can be published in the newspaper without you even knowing.” (Chris)

Media focus may increase around anniversaries. The Australian Journalist Association’s Code of Ethics, includes the following:

“Never exploit a person’s vulnerability or ignorance of media practice”
and *“Respect private grief and personal privacy.”*

If you feel journalists are being too intrusive, you can remind them of this and ask them to respect your privacy. At the same time feel free to protect yourself from constant reminders of the tragedy, by limiting exposure to them, e.g. TV, newspapers.

“I hate seeing the bushfires on the news. When they showed the flames I used to leave the room, but now I look away. I keep thinking about the horror of it afterwards. I try to think about something else. I say to myself ‘Don’t think about it, don’t think about it’. The serenity prayer, Desiderata, makes me focus on something positive – on hope. Also the ‘dragonfly’ story is comforting... it tells me that they are OK.” (Di)

It is as well to remember that the new social media is a powerful tool, used a lot by younger people and can quickly spread information, some of it accurate, some of it not. At the same time some people find great solace in joining internet forums for people around the world with similar grief experiences.



The current tragedy often re-opens old grief

Many people have other experiences of grief and trauma in their past experience. These are likely to be reactivated by what has happened and unresolved issues of many sorts can present themselves and both need to be attended to. Past and present griefs may compete for attention, or fuse together in a mass of painful feelings.

“I lost my husband suddenly 22 years ago... Through this trauma I just went straight back there. It brought it all back.” (Gaye)

Grief comes in waves

Grief is not a simple process: it is complex, unique and involves everything that was important about the person who has died. Be prepared for grief to come and go. After a difficult time there may be a period of feeling better, then sometimes a fresh wave of grief is triggered by unusual details, small things, or by nothing you can identify, you may just wake up one day feeling very sad.

“I get waves of sadness. That is different to other grief I have experienced before... I tell myself ‘That’s OK. I’m allowed to feel sad. I know I can’t escape this grief journey.’ Getting help helps you go forward.” (Gaye)

“Sometimes I start to feel better then it comes crashing back.” (Ellie)

“In the first months I used to describe how my grief was like a tsunami that is crashing down on you every single day and then as time went on the water wasn’t so strong, just waves, then it would go to ripples and then the waves would come back and the tsunami would come crashing down. Now as time has gone on I feel there are ripples there,

but it's only every now and then that the waves come crashing and they come less often... I don't recognise the triggers, I don't know when I am going to break down. It's like I feel strong and comfortable and competent one minute and then the strangest feeling comes over you – this incredible sense of sadness.” (Pauline)

Memory and concentration may be affected

It can be exhausting dealing with all the emotional and practical things that happen as traumatic grief involves your full mental and emotional focus when it is present. This can affect your memory and concentration, which in turn causes further disruption and difficulty.

It is important to change your routine and use various forms of help to compensate for these effects and minimise their impact. You may find it helpful to keep a small notebook and pen with you to write down questions and lists, to refer back to. This can help jog your memory, particularly when you have to talk to officials or support workers. Try and do things one at a time and don't try to do too much at once. It can help to put a little more time into planning and organising how you will do things.

“It was comforting and reassuring when other people said how affected their short term memory had been too.” (Rhonda)

“I've always been a reader, but since the fires I'd be lucky to have read two books. I just can't concentrate... I used to be very good at multi-tasking, but now I get distracted.” (Gary)

“My memory is shocking... I'm a slower thinker now. It's the shock of having our family taken from us in such horrific circumstances.” (Di)

Try to avoid making important decisions while in the midst of grief, or if you have to make sure you involve a trusted person who is not so affected. It is easy for judgement and priorities to be distorted.

“You shouldn’t be put in a place where you need to make important decisions. It took six months before I was able to really concentrate on something – figures for instance.” (Jill)

Anger and anxiety

Sometimes anger can be part of grief. It can also result from a sense of injustice that someone was to blame for the deaths, or that the people who died were given wrong advice. Anger is a normal part of the grieving process. It may be triggered by the smallest of things, or unexpectedly. It is important to follow up and deal with the issues causing the anger if that is possible or find another outlet to deal with the stress. In the end recovering from grief begins with acceptance of what has happened and continuing anger may make this difficult. Some people, however, don’t experience anger.

“The first few months I did feel angry, but now I feel less angry. What helped in the early days to relieve the anger was keeping busy and going to the gym.” (Carolyn)

Blame is often a part of anger and it is easy to focus on what went wrong, the mistakes people have made and how it all might have been different. However, natural as blame is, it often interferes with recovery and successful grieving. In some circumstances individuals, organisations or equipment are responsible for tragedy. It can be tempting to link the pain of grief and loss to the anger that goes with blame. They are two

distinct problems. When they are confused, it is easy to feel that the only thing that will help is for the people or organisations, which are to blame, are brought to justice. However, many factors are likely to interfere with this and lead to outcomes that do not match the sense of justice. If this happens, the feeling of blame can never be resolved and can easily change into bitterness, pessimism and depression and prevent the grief resolving.

“You want someone to be held accountable. To be held publicly liable for causing the deaths.” (Chris)

It is helpful to keep in mind that each person’s recovery is in their own hands, and although long and painful, most people can in time resume their lives. However, blame and punishment are in the hands of others and outside our control. While we may need to contribute to legal processes, and political activity arising out of the disaster, it is best to try and keep the anger and grief separate to be resolved within our own feelings and not depend on external events to resolve them.

It is usual to experience anxiety as a result of the loss of sense of security and safety caused by the disaster. The general sense of security and confidence can be undermined. Many small things seem big problems and people can become jumpy and fearful. We can feel anxious, particularly when there are reminders of the disaster, e.g. hot windy days, storms, trains. It is important to recognise and acknowledge these emotions when they are triggered or seek help to develop strategies on how to manage them.

“Now I lose my cool a lot less often... but I still get anxious about things. My phone frightens me when I’m not expecting it – short, sharp noises affect me more than they used to.” (David)

Grief changes people

Many people feel that their grief is life-changing. Traumatic grief is such a momentous experience that people feel they can never be the same as they were; and they usually do not want to be, because they have lost people who meant so much to them. They talk of finding a “new normal” – what was normal before is different now.

Previous beliefs and assumptions are often totally changed and what was important is also changed. People speak of the disaster drawing a line, defining life before and life after it. Where possible it is probably wise to avoid making major decisions that cannot be reversed in the early days.

“We are not the same people we were before. It’s like everything is before the fires and after the fires. The fires are the defining line of your life.” (Vicky)



“I consider myself a bit of a schizophrenic now... I put on a skin, a professional skin. It protects me. People see a ‘strong, brave and courageous’ side – and then I get in the car and I just fall apart. It’s the relentless nature of it, it just goes on and on and on. I’m sure that’s the same for anybody who has lost someone, but nineteen months have gone past and I still don’t have a home. And I think ‘when am I going to get my life back?’ Then I realise that actually this is my life and I have to adapt to this being my life.” (Carol)

“I think I have had a real problem in coming to terms with the fact that grief changes you – that I am a different person... I look back at the old Ellie and she was a bit more naïve. There was that general understanding that nothing is going to go too wrong, bad things happen to other people... I guess I was a bit more carefree before this... At the start everything was horrific 24/7 and then you start to feel a little bit better, and then you feel guilty because you are starting to feel a little bit better and then it starts crashing in on you again – that whole emotional rollercoaster.” (Ellie)

In time people can notice that new qualities develop in their personality and different things become important. These changes gradually work through to make them different people: perhaps they change their friends, their work, the way they relate to others and how they express themselves. Some of these changes may be temporary and a means of getting through the grief process. Others are permanent changes that lead to a different approach to life and all that goes with it.

“These fires have changed me totally... I’m stronger... and I’m not. I take care of myself more now.” (Gaye)

“I regard life and relationships as being more precious now... I make the most of happy moments now because I know they can pass and I can be sad again.” (Vera)

“I really love helping people, that’s my priority and purpose now, showing that you care about people and thinking about why you are on the planet... I have a feeling of urgency just to get things done and move on to the next thing.” (Carolyn)

Some changes are helpful and make people stronger and clearer about what is important or they are able to value the good things they have more. Other changes undermine capacities that were there before and leave behind lasting attitudes and feelings that reduce life to a narrower frame. Opportunities for both will come out of the tragedy. Grieving people need to build a support system to take them through dark times so they do not become fixtures in their character but help them catch hold of experiences that lead to post traumatic growth. These changes take time and the support system needs to last the distance to have the best outcome.

“I’m aware of the fact I’ve changed – I have a great deal less self-confidence... Prior to the fires I was a very competent and able and technically astute person. Now I have to doublethink everything I do.” (David)

“I’m the complete opposite – I find I’m actually a bit more confident now. I spend a lot less time picking faults with myself. I think life’s too short to spend so much time trying to work out what I should be doing.” (Ellie – David’s daughter)

“I always saw myself as a really strong, outspoken person who always stood up for people who weren’t as well off as I was. When this happened I lost that person, I lost that strength.” (Pauline)

“Before I was carefree and would go with the flow. I knew what I wanted and knew where I wanted to go. Now I get irritated easily. Now I don’t know who I am. When Mum died I lost direction... but now my boyfriend is starting to help me to find direction again.”
(Amber)

One of the most important areas of change is in beliefs and philosophy of life. Extreme experiences of traumatic grief change the whole feeling about life and the world. Although these experiences are difficult to express the changes are real and affect everything. It is important to find people and groups where such things can be shared and clarified, or it can lead to isolation and detachment from other loved ones who have not changed in this way.

“I’m not frightened of death itself, because while I have no religious beliefs I firmly believe that there is something after.” (David)

Traumatic grief in families

Each family member will be affected by his/her own grief and by each other’s grief. Family members will all have different ways of showing their sadness and methods of dealing with it. The meaning of the loss will also be different for each as they had their own individual relationship with those who died. It is important to encourage communication within families – as sharing, talking and listening is vital for them to understand each other.

There is a tendency to try to protect our loved ones from our own pain when they are suffering too. However, isolation, misunderstanding and loneliness make grief worse and undermine support. It is often the way we communicate that

is important. Try to describe what you are feeling rather than expressing the raw emotion. This can lead to shared emotions that are often helpful in the long run, by getting the family members onto the same wavelength.

“The wisdom of the young... Ellie (daughter) did teach me it was good to share my grief with her – not all the time, but some of the time.” (Carol)

“I hate talking about my grief, but all the research suggests it’s quite a good idea.” (Ellie)

“We were a family of four and now we are a family of three. That hole is there. My previous experience of grief was when my mother died. I was the primary griever and Dave could be there to give me a lot of support – he could be sad but not in the same way that I was grieving, and likewise when his parents died, he was the primary griever. Now we are all (as a family) going down this parallel path where there isn’t a primary griever, where everyone has got their pain that is the same but different and we all grieve in very different ways.”(Carol)

“A week after, someone said ‘Don’t cry every time your Mum cries’. I thought that was a bit unfair, but then started thinking I had to be strong for Mum. You are grieving for other people as well as yourself.” (Carolyn)

“It’s not just the people who have died, it’s the ongoing loss... like losing the rock of our family. It’s affected the structure of the wider family... we lost our mother on that day (metaphorically). She didn’t die but she hasn’t been the same person since that day.” (Karen)

There are special difficulties if family members are estranged and it takes energy to keep communication going. However, it is important that everyone’s grief is acknowledged and that

they all have the information they need and opportunities to grieve and mourn in the way that is best for them. Where communication is blocked, it is hard for all parties to move through their grief.

Also be mindful where there may be new relationships involved or where families have not “approved” of relationships, such as in same sex relationships, or both parties are young and the relationship is new.

Each person and each family needs to do it in their own way. There may sometimes be good reasons for individuals to protect others from their feelings. However, it is wise to look for another source of support such as friends, clergy, or a counsellor. There is no right or wrong way to grieve; it is unique for each person.

“I didn’t have to put on ‘that face’ for my friends... I could cry with them. But I did have to put on that face for my kids, I had to be strong for them. I was adamant that they needed structure, I didn’t want them seeing me a mess all of the time. That was exhausting.” (Karen)

“I don’t talk about my grief to other members of the family because if I break down others in the family will break down. Even though we are all grieving we don’t want to share it.” (Pauline)

Sleep difficulties, health and lifestyle changes

Problems with sleeping are very common in traumatic grief. It may help to develop a routine to prepare for going to bed. Take time to wind down, spend time reflecting on the day, bring concerns into the front of your mind and work out what to do to put them aside for now. Consider physical relaxation such as hot baths, massage, gentle exercise and meditation or yoga-style breathing. Wait till you are tired before going to bed and be prepared to wake up during the night. Have some comforting food or drink readily available or something to read. If you are wakeful, it may be better to get out of bed and wake fully up and then try again instead of tossing and turning for hours.

“I sleep too much. I go to bed at 9.30 pm and have trouble getting up at 8 am.” (Robyn)

“I got only about two hours sleep each night for the first twelve months. Every time you wake up you think ‘Oh, I’m still here’ and you wish you weren’t. Sometimes the thoughts (about the horror) just come in the middle of the night. That’s when I say the Serenity Prayer.” (Di)

“I slept all right. It was just waking up and remembering that was hard. It was sort of like the shock again.” (Leanne)

Traumatic grief is highly stressful and can take a toll of health. Often the health problems do not show up until time has passed and exhaustion has set in. It is often good to check in with a GP early, schedule regular appointments and have them accompany you through the process keeping track of your health for you. Blood pressure, diet and energy can all be affected.



Alcohol and drugs

People may try to numb their pain and anxiety with alcohol and prescription or illicit drugs, but it is wise to avoid this and seek help early if you need to. It is easy to just think about getting through the moment and not worrying about tomorrow, but when habits and lifestyle changes occur during grief they may be hard to change and lead to seriously reduced health in the long term.

“In the beginning I just couldn’t eat. I had to have a glass of wine when I did start eating to make me relax so that I could eat... but I made sure I didn’t drink too much. I didn’t want any sedatives.” (Di)

“I must admit I probably drank too much in those first couple of months. Sometimes when I had a few too many drinks it helped me to sleep... you just don’t sleep. I was on sleeping tablets for a while, but I made sure they were not addictive. I ended up going to the doctor about a month later when I got the anti-depressants.” (Gary)

Special days – anniversaries, religious celebrations

Many bereaved people find that the days and weeks leading up to special occasions such as anniversaries, Christmas, New Year and birthdays are sometimes more difficult than the actual days. School graduation may be a painful time for children. There are so many reminders of the absence of loved ones – changing seasons, religious celebrations such as Easter, Ramadan and Passover, the start or finish of sporting seasons, particular rituals that people undertake, for example: “We always used to go to the Boxing Day Cricket Test, or on summer holidays together”.

Having a plan and discussing your wishes with others can assist in making a tough time more bearable. While you may have made a plan, when the day dawns, you may feel you cannot participate in that way. So listen to your own feelings and make changes that you feel comfortable with. The important thing is to think about what this day means to you and then how you want to manage it and not to expect too much of yourself. Expect to have a difficult day and organise some supports and recovery time afterwards.

“Christmas was sad. I tried to keep myself busy and invited people who didn’t have anywhere else to go.” (Vera)

“Coming up to the first anniversary was very, very hard, from Christmas through January, until a couple of days after the anniversary. But the build up was the worst.” (Vera)

“At Christmas there are six people missing.” (Gaye)

The second year

In general, the media and the community are less concerned in the second year than they were in the first year. However, for those who lost loved ones their grief is still very painful. Sometimes it is important to remind family and friends that the grief is still present and entering a new stage rather than fading. Some people report feeling the first or second anniversary of the tragedy more deeply than the actual event. This is likely to happen if they experienced a state of shock or had serious disruption to their lives at the time. When routines are re-established and things are back in order there is more opportunity to have the full range of feelings. Events such as legal inquiries, criminal trials or civil legal actions may also bring attention back into the public arena.

“We braced ourselves for the first year for all the milestones and events, but the second year can be worse than the first.” (Gaye)

“In some ways it is harder now. The reality has really set in that you are never going to see them again.” (Vicky)



LOSING A NUMBER OF PEOPLE/MULTIPLE DEATHS

There are particular difficulties when someone loses a group of family members or friends who died together. People may feel troubled by all the decisions that must be made in the early days and all that need to be done. In multiple grief people are conscious of reminders everywhere.

You may find special challenges if there are different opinions amongst family members about funeral arrangements. But there are other ways of honouring your loved ones. In situations of extreme stress such as this, small differences become magnified and lead to strong emotions. Try to take time to work out common ground before deciding and think about what will be best for the family in the long term. Anyone from any group or family can hold a separate memorial service at any time and the right sort of ceremony to express how you feel about someone is very helpful for grief.

“When there are multiple deaths, the number and complexity of decisions is really quite awful and overwhelming... having to decide whose name goes first, whose eulogy goes first, whose coffin goes first, etc. It felt like having to allocate a priority or order of importance even though that was far from the truth. There are no easy solutions and in the end you muddle through as best you can... I wish I had discovered sooner to use the game of ‘rock-paper-scissors’ with my surviving family as a way of resolving agonisingly impossible decisions... I learnt that as a surviving person you can turn yourself inside out trying to resolve these decisions OR you can use ‘rock-paper-scissors’ as an active and respectful decision tool to sort out an outcome and feel satisfied... I guess chaotic left field circumstances warrant left field solutions.”
(Rhonda)

There are unique feelings and problems related to multiple grief. People often feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of their loss and it can be hard to focus on each individual as they would like. Grieving for one gets in the way of grieving for another. They are not sure who they should concentrate on and easily feel guilty that they do not feel equal grief for each person. It is hard to work through the grief for one because the feelings for others interrupt it and it goes back and forth. But their grief for each person will be different, because each person meant something different to them.

“Sometimes you might think of losing one child or family member, but you never think they will all die together.” (Gary)

“You can’t grieve for all of them together. I’ve probably had a day here or there where I’ve just grieved for one person. But I’m consumed by the loss of my sister... she was so much a part of me... we were so close... It was like losing your own future in a way, looking at your own mortality.” (Carolyn)

It is important to be patient with yourself and others in this situation. In time the grief will resolve and each person will gain their time and place in your feelings, although it will not be orderly but driven by the way the feelings change and move back and forth. It is important to trust your feelings and have confidence that in time it will resolve.

“Sometimes I realise I haven’t thought of one member of the family for a while, for example my daughter-in-law, but I know her mother is thinking about her. So, I have no problems now if I don’t think of her as often as I think I should... If something comes to mind about the fires overall, like a news item, then I think about all of them. If it’s something to do with a school I think about the kids (grandchildren). If it’s something to do with work I think about my son because we worked together.” (Gary)

“When my father died some years ago, it was a single loss which I could work through and tend to get over. And he was older, the natural order. But when there’s five, one keeps replacing the next... with multiples, it’s day in and day out... I think of my son and then of the boys (grandchildren) following Essendon, and then something else comes up, and I’m constantly moving from one to another and back again. So, when I read the books on grief, it’s all singular, all relating to one person’s death. It’s that times five.” (Gary)

“The memories are triggered all the time. Whereas with a single person you mightn’t think about that one person all the time, when it’s multiple you think about them all the time... I talk to each of mine. Losing my kids and grandkids, it’s not just about us. It’s about them, their lives and what they have missed.” (Di)

Loss of multiple family members is distressing even just to think about and many family and friends are likely to be affected to some degree in their own right by what has happened. They often feel unsure about what to do and are fearful of making things worse in such a painful situation. Don't hesitate to give them guidance about what you will find helpful and ask them for what you need. Without these guidelines they will have to come up with their own ideas which may miss the mark for you.



PEOPLE FOUND DIFFERENT THINGS HELPFUL

There is no single thing that helped everyone. Some people found some things helpful and others didn't. However, it is important to try to determine what works for you and then to do that. You will need to take good care of yourself over this very difficult time. Useful fact sheets are available from the Department of Human Services (DHS) in your state.

Support from family and friends who are also grieving

There is no doubt that having the love and support of family and friends, is one of the most important ways that grieving people manage personal crises and tragedies. Grief is a process or journey, and people don't "get over" profound grief, but they do eventually learn to live with it. For most people

their immediate family and friends came to be with them immediately after the news and they were the best help. But it can be complicated when your own family and friends are grieving too.

“My best support was my husband. He cooked the meals for the first four months because going to work was enough for me – I couldn’t come home and cook a meal. The hardest was my family – my brothers and mother. They had their own pain and grief and we were all torn apart and didn’t get along. That was hard, because I always thought family would stick together.” (Vera)

“Originally we were all drowning in our own grief so much, but eighteen months later we can help each other.” (Chris)

Condolences, acknowledgement, support and practical help

People may not know what to say to you or how to help and they may make mistakes. But it is a good idea to let people help you if you feel they are sensitive and concerned about you. They can show that they care in different ways: by visiting, phone calls, bringing food, flowers, cards and letters, or even in small ways. Providing meals can be a great way for a community, such as a school community, to help.

Let them know that it is helpful to be able to express your feelings with them and they do not have to make you feel better. Keeping you company where you are is the help that is most effective, because the truth is you can’t move away from there or change the feelings until the grief process allows you to. What you need in the meantime is people who can stay with you.

“Let people help you, because they want to.” (Carolyn)

“Some people say ‘I’ve been thinking about you’ – that’s helpful.” (Di)
“And that’s enough.” (Robyn)

“I think there’s a general idea that being sad is not a good thing. People want to stop you feeling sad, so they just don’t talk about it. I want to say ‘It’s OK to be sad.’” (Ellie)

“I don’t want to cry, but my body cries. The minute I start talking about it, the eyes just go. Unfortunately it stops people talking because they think they are upsetting you... People should not be worried about tears. The person who is grieving is the one who should control the discussion. If I want to cry or blabber, keep talking about it. I’ll tell you if I can’t handle it or I can get up and leave the room if I have to.” (Gary)

“I like to talk about them (my family who died), not about how they died. Recently when the conversation became descriptive, I said I don’t want to talk about that... Take control of the situation.” (Di)

“My close friends might ask ‘How are you?’ and I might say ‘It’s not a good day today’ and they understand. It might be a 60% day, or a 20% day, or maybe you got up to an 80% day.” (Gary)

“I felt really sad that often people didn’t say anything about what had happened. I saw children and adults suffer terribly under the added burden of invisibility... The expression of condolences really matters... Often it was a smallest of gestures, even like a text message, that were the lifelines that got you through to the next day and the next week.” (Rhonda)

“My closest friends are fellows who used to work with me. They’ve been very supportive. They have been there when we want some

company and they don't expect anything in return. And my work has been very supportive, the way they've allowed me to have time off, the flexibility and the concern.” (David)

“I've got really good friends from high school and a friend from uni. They are just there. We don't have big deep and meaningful about it, but at the same time, they don't completely ignore the subject. They act normally.” (Ellie)

“In the early days we were all in shock and people who did practical things helped. Some people brought food and that was great... You are not even capable of making a cup of tea for yourself let alone for other people. So the best thing people can do is to come in, bring some food, or do the shopping.” (Di)

“We had a house full of flowers, but the most beautiful thing that came was a basket of fruit, because the family hadn't eaten anything until that fruit came. If that sort of thing happened again, I'd bring a basket of fruit.” (Pauline)

“All my time and headspace was consumed trying to sort out the chaos of the deaths and the disaster. I would have been really grateful for much more day to day practical help... A meal, a hand with washing or housework and a mow of the lawn make huge practical difference.” (Rhonda)

“People feel that they don't want to intrude, so they will wait until you ask – but of course you are not going to ask.” (Carol)

It is important for people offering support to remember that after a disaster there will be people seriously affected who do not live anywhere near the area of the disaster. However, their loved ones did. These people could easily be overlooked when the focus is on the rebuilding lives and communities.

Qualities of helpful people

“People who’ve lost loved ones or family members and who know what you are going through are the most helpful. There are other people whose families are very close and very precious to them... some of those people can put themselves in your shoes.” (Robyn)

“They let you talk if you want to talk. They don’t feel uncomfortable with your grief. They just take whatever you give them and they show great empathy. Maybe people who have suffered.” (Di)

“They go one step further than they used to before the fires. I said to one friend, I’m going up to the property on my son’s birthday. He said ‘Do you want me to come?’ That was really important to me.” (Gary)

“Often my age group (young adults) don’t know how to deal with talking about it, or they think I can’t talk about it. I don’t know anyone my age who has lost a sibling... but when a friend said ‘Do you want to go for a walk next week?’ – that’s helpful.” (Leanne)

Meeting the friends of those who have died

Some people find it helpful to talk with friends of their loved ones. They are able to talk about them, to enjoy stories about them and to remember. But some people find it unhelpful.

“It helped us to meet the friends of our adult children and grandchildren... I find being around those kids very helpful. Now we know more about our kids and grandchildren through their friends... and they make me laugh. Our children’s friends supplied most of our food for the first three months.” (Gary)

“At the ceremony of remembrance at Kinglake on the first anniversary there was a butterfly for each deceased person. It was really funny

when one butterfly wouldn't fly – we pushed and prodded it but it wouldn't fly – until someone flicked the lid, commenting 'That's right! Stubborn like Eric!'" (Gary)

"We have become good friends with Sam's friends, but it is bitter-sweet." (Carol)



Returning to work and keeping busy

Many people found that it helped them to have the distraction of being busy and occupied. For some people the structure provided by a known and supportive workplace was very helpful. It provided some respite and an opportunity to focus on other things for a while. However, not all workplaces were supportive.

"Going back to work was my saviour because they were so understanding. It was a break... I do keep busy, that keeps me sane." (Vicky)

"I hardly took a day off work – it was very supportive – a safe place to be. People did check how I was for six months." (Vera)

"My son worked with me, so going back to work was terribly hard." (Gary)

“My work colleagues were wonderful to me. The first week I went back, every time I cried my boss would make me a cup of tea. I had to tell him to stop giving me cups of tea because I had to keep going to the loo.” (Carlene)

“If you’ve got something to do that you hate and that is not supportive, then that is very detrimental. Since I’ve finished work I’m more relaxed, but the danger with that is that you don’t have any structure... My daughter laughs and tells me that I don’t have a switch-off button. I keep going and going like a Duracell Bunny. But that’s because when I push my switch-off button, it just comes like a wall...” (Carol)

“I find structure quite important. I was at an absolutely total loss and in a total shambles in the first months before I went back to work.” (Dave)

“The only way I could really survive is being with people and doing things. I hate weekends because they are the times when normally I was doing things together (with my partner)... I’m probably not doing enough for myself. I’m doing too much for everyone else, but I find that to be a good way of dealing with things. I’m on heaps of committees.” (Mary)

“I ended up quitting my job. I see life differently now. I treasure family more and my niece.” (Leanne)

Spending time alone

Being alone helped some people to put things in perspective and some needed it while others wanted to be with others. It is important for each person to indicate what they need to those around them.

“There are those who like their own space... A lot of people don’t want to be connected to everyone. That’s their choice... We are all doing it differently.” (Mary)

“I like having time on my own.” (Ellie)

Going away – holidays

Many people found it was a welcome break and distraction to go away for a holiday. The distraction takes your mind off it for a while, and this helps recapture a bit of normality, but it is often hard coming back.

“It was good to get away, to forget everything, but it was difficult coming back though. Everything flooded in again. I didn’t want to come home, I wanted to stay there and not come home, but I had to.” (Leanne)

“We went on a long trip and it was great to get away. But when we came back we fell in a heap.” (Vera)

Faith

For some people their faith helped them to cope. But for some people, it may cause them to challenge their faith. It may take years for some people to work out what the tragedy teaches them about their beliefs.

“God, you are just going to have to get me through the day, because I can’t.” (Vera)

“The very few times in my life when I’ve thought I can’t do it anymore, and I have said ‘God, I give it all up to you’, it just falls into place immediately.” (Gaye)

“We started going to church again. Our son and daughter-in-law were very religious. The people from their church have been excellent to us and also their minister – far more than you would expect.” (Gary)

Journaling

Writing about the day to day experience of working through trauma and grief has been found consistently to benefit the recovery process.

“I journal. In the early days I used to wake up feeling sick and I’d just journal and journal until I felt alright and then I could get up and deal with the day... I was terrified of forgetting, so I just let my mind go. If I have a memory I document it. If people are really struggling I suggest journaling – it’s a saviour for me.” (Gaye)



Distractions and ways of finding comfort

Regular exercise can help to use pent-up energy and it also helps to keep healthy. Also doing things that are relaxing or soothing, such as reading, watching TV, massage, meditation, acupuncture and aromatherapy can be helpful. Listening to music can also help, music can be very emotional and can reflect the mood that you are in. You may listen to the favourite music of the person who is gone, your favourite music, or new pieces of music or songs may speak to you with a meaning. Music listening patterns may also change over time.

“For me, going to the gym everyday has been helpful. Exercise can ward off depression.” (Chris)

“You have to make a conscious effort to keep physically well.” (Ellie)

“My neighbour comes for a walk with me and my dog every morning now... it helps me to get up in the morning (knowing she is waiting for me).” (Di)

“In the car I listen to music my son really liked... which is the stuff I really liked. So I get some comfort that he liked the music I liked. It’s a connection.” (David)

“I have to read before I go to sleep – novels that are fairly light that I find comforting. That gives me a bit of respite which is helpful.” (Di)

Humour

Humour is a part of grief and it shows sides of the loved ones that we do not want to be lost. But uncertain supporters or those inexperienced in grief may not be confident to respond to humour. Reassure them that humour is a normal response

to grief and provided it is tactful is beneficial. At the same time too much black humour can be a way of detaching from a reality that is too painful and is not helpful in the long run.

“Humour has always been fairly important in our family. It’s taken on an extra dimension since Sam died – it’s really quite black humour at times.” (David)

“I use a lot of black humour and inappropriate comments – that is part of saying to myself that I’m not going to let this beat me.” (Carol)

“I’ve learned that humour is very important.” (Gary)

Creating things in memory

Creating and doing things in memory of loved ones who have died can be a good way to honour and celebrate them, a way to keep busy whilst still thinking about them and a way to express our innermost thoughts and feelings. Some of the things people have done include creating an award in the name of the person/people who died, scrapbooking, mosaic letter boxes, memory gardens, a fairy plaque, tattoos, a cabinet with precious things in it...

“I’m trying to bring myself to make a scrapbook. But I want to get a tattoo on my wrist on Mum’s birthday. I’ll try to keep the house in the way that Mum did... she would appreciate that I guess.” (Amber)

“I don’t really need a memorial for him because he’s here (in my heart). But on the practical side I want to get the property back as much as I can to how it was... I’ve done a small farming course now... so I hope he will be proud of what we’ve achieved.” (Mary)

Trying to make sense of it

After a great loss, people often try to reach some understanding or way of making sense of their loss. There may be dreams, a sense of the presence of the person who has died, or a realisation that there is a new meaning or purpose for life.

“Sue has ‘visited’ me many times. I have seen a ring of lights above my head, or angels, or felt the comforting sense of her touching me... She’s fine, it’s just us... I know they are in a better place and I know we are doing the hard work down here. I still have lessons to learn, that’s why I’m still here.” (Carolyn)

“I need to honour Haydn’s memory and make a new life for myself – looking after myself, exercising, getting through the day, being involved in this booklet.” (Chris)

Remembering...

“We like to talk about them and share stories and memories – but not be consumed by it. We don’t want to lose any memories. I was scared I wouldn’t remember what her voice sounded like.” (Carolyn)

“We are so proud of her, she was an earth angel – very generous, very much liked, heaps of personality, full of life, with a bubbly, vivacious nature. How could that have all ended?” (Carolyn and Vicky)

“They were wonderful parents and I’m passing that on to my children.” (Carlene)

“My husband was the best family man and provider and we loved each other so much. We never ever wanted anyone else.” (Mary)

“My legacy from my Mum is probably her saying ‘Tough times never last, but tough people do’. That’s probably the one thing that has kept me going.” (Amber)

“I have learnt that life is so precious. It can be there one day and gone the next – never take it for granted.” (Anne)

“I found a little sock behind a cabinet in the laundry. I was delighted to find it. I washed it and I think I might keep my mobile phone in it.” (Robyn)

“I’ll always remember them as seven and eight years old.” (Gary)

Being with others bereaved through the disaster – support groups

Support groups can be very helpful for some people because they know that the people in the group have a real understanding of what they are going through.

“People say, ‘Black Saturday? Wasn’t that last year?’ Even friends I thought were close say ‘It seems like a long time ago to me, but I suppose it only feels like yesterday to you.’ Everyone’s saying ‘look we’ve moved on, come on’ and it’s not long enough... That’s why I really value this group. Because it’s so hard to talk about this outside.” (Vera)

“I rely on the group if I’m going through a tough time. Especially after the (Royal Commission) Report came out I did a bit of a nose-dive. If I lost the group I’d have to go back to a counsellor.” (Vera)

“None of us are following the same path, but all the paths are heading in the same direction, as it were... We can talk at length here, whereas we think that if we chat to friends like that, then it will get to a point

where... they can't handle it any more. And they can't give you the same sort of feedback – not like here where we have this enormous amount of commonality.” (David)

*“Others have got no point of comparison in their own experience.”
(Ellie)*

“I've made some wonderful friends here that I wish I'd never made, because the only reason that I made them is that we have all lost family members and we would never have met otherwise.” (Carlene)

*“You feel a friendship towards these people and we never knew them before. It's like we have something in common. I feel I've known them forever and I've only known them for less than twelve months. I know what they are feeling and we don't need words. You just feel at home.”
(Pauline)*

“I have attended a meeting of The Compassionate Friends (for bereaved parents) which has helped me to realise I will survive this. You don't think you will survive but these women are two and five years down the track. It has been very good support.” (Chris)

Counselling

Many people found individual or family counselling helpful, not so much in the early days, but later on. There is often a stigma about seeing a counsellor, particularly amongst men and younger people. A counsellor is a trained professional who can help you express your thoughts and feelings so they become clearer and can be more easily managed. Communicating with an independent person allows you to say things you would hold back or express differently with family and friends. Counsellors do not replace them but complement them as part of a full support system.

The counsellor is trained and able to assist to you in a positive way by helping you to clarify the issues, explore options, develop strategies and increase self-awareness. Counselling involves a supportive relationship that will last some time with varying frequency depending on your needs. Counsellors need to be experienced with both grief and trauma, when seeing people in highly traumatic circumstances.

If you are not sure where to find a counsellor, talk to your local doctor first about what you need. If you find you are not comfortable with your counsellor, you can change at any time, as it is important that you feel safe and confident in that person and that it feels like a good “fit”.

“The counsellor who comes to see me is brilliant... It took a little while to jell with her, but I persevered and she got me to really open up.” (Gaye)

“If it hadn’t been for the help I received I would be dead now... But don’t send me someone who is twenty years of age (or is inexperienced).” (Chris)

“You’ve got to be happy with the counsellor you’ve got. If not then find another one.” (Gary)



DOWN THE TRACK...

Although time itself does not “heal all wounds” nevertheless grief cannot resolve without time. Even the most painful moments will pass and lead to changes. What seems unbearable and unchanging will in time be bearable and change provided the natural healing process of grief is supported. It is important to keep this in mind to help get through the worst moments.

In October 2002, Merna Curnow’s daughter, Kristin, died in the bombing in Bali. Kristin was a beautiful young woman who had been on holiday at the time. Her body was not identified until six and a half weeks after her death. Merna and her husband joined a support group for people who had lost someone close to them in the bombing. They came to the group every month for eighteen months and sometimes other family members came too.

The lead up to the anniversary...

“It is the lead up to the anniversary that is the hardest. I was expecting it to be worse on the day than it really was. I worried so much about what it would be like, that when the day came it was almost a relief that it was the day and that the first year would have passed.

The first year

In that first year I was always focussed on what we would have been doing together a year ago. As times goes on, you don't think of the immediate past so much, but focus more on the memories. When you are less focussed on the event, the good memories flow back more easily. And it can be at times when you aren't expecting it and it is lovely when it just happens.

Over time

It's not true to say 'time heals'. 'Healing' is not the right word. It is a slow process, gradually getting used to the fact that this is my life now. As time goes by your thinking adjusts and you can go back to the memories of good times together and not focus so much on the immediate event and the sadness. Some of the silliest memories can make you smile.

I never expected to be able to think of Kristin without the pain of losing her. I used to think of Kristin and I'd cry and now I think of her and often I can smile. The tears still come sometimes now, but it's not as tough as it was and I know it's OK to cry. For us as a family we talk about Kristin, she is still part of our family.

Things that helped

At times I wanted to talk and at other times I didn't. But most what I really needed from people around me was to let me talk and to just listen, even over and over, without being judgemental about how often I wanted and needed to talk. Having a busy job was a good thing. It gave me a purpose to get up in the morning.

After Bali, family and friends kept the TV off and tried to protect me from that... and at the time of the tsunami some years later I relived a lot of my distress after Bali. It was in the media all the time.

We find that the lead up to Kristin's birthday and the anniversary of her death is difficult, harder than the actual days. I still make a birthday cake every year for her. It is a way to observe the day.

We were given four booklets about grief by the funeral director, which were a great help. They normalised our grief.

I have a strong faith, which has been very helpful, because I know I will see Kristin again. When anyone we know dies, we know Kristin will be there to meet them.

Writing has been good for me. I have written down a lot of my precious memories of Kristin and I have also found that writing about my fears and worries also allows me to let go of them.

I am so thankful for wonderful memories. I think of her all the time, so many things remind me of her. I remember being worried that I would forget some of the little things. I remember thinking that it was so important to remember these things so that when her brothers have

children I would be able to tell them all about their 'Auntie Kristin'. I started to write down my memories and I asked other people to do the same. I have put this all together. One day I will type it all up.

You need to allow yourself time to grieve. You think you won't be able to go on, but you do cope... You never lose the love that you shared together."

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS...

“Had you told me ten years ago that this would happen I would have said I’d be dead by now. So I’ve found out I’m stronger than I knew... and I have learned that worrying is a waste of time. I always worried about them having a car accident in the rain and fog, but I never worried about them in regard to bushfires because I knew their plan was always to evacuate, which they did in 2006, when they got a warning.” (Di)

“I have discovered incredible resilience and strength in myself and met and encountered extraordinary and beautiful people and situations while at the darkest of places and therein has lain my hope and path forward.” (Rhonda)

This book is a collection of the lived experience and shared wisdom from those who have suffered deeply from traumatic grief and input from professionals who have worked along side them.

It is hoped that this gift helps you on your grief journey and has achieved its purpose of providing you with hope for the future.



SPECIAL THANKS

Contributors

Rhonda Abotomey

Mary Avola

Gary Brown

Leanne Brown

Robyn Brown

Amber Cunningham

Merna Curnow

Anne Davey

Gaye De Petro-Garner

Pat Egan

Vicky Evans

Carlene Gough

Vera Hardiman

Karen Howell

Carol Matthews

David Matthews

Ellie Matthews

Chris McMahon

Di Rolands

Jill Sheridan

Dr Carolyn Westall

Pauline Zealley

Designer and production editor – Alison Raven

Booklet steering committee

Gary Brown

Dr Carolyn Westall

Vicky Evans

Chris McMahon

Gilliam Moseley

John Richardson

Vivienne Bateman

Anne Giljohann

Annie Norrish

Illustrators

Alison Raven – Front cover photograph,
Dedication page, pages 9, 13, 26, 29, 44, 48, 63 & 67

Joe Shepherd –
opposite Contents, pages 16, 21, 34, 41, 53 & 56

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John Richardson

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Sincere thanks to the many people and organisations who donated and contributed to this project in various ways. Some of these are listed on the Sue Evans Fund for Families website.

SOME USEFUL CONTACT AGENCIES

Emergency (Fire, Police, Ambulance) – 000

Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement (Victoria) –
(03) 9265 2111

Beyond Blue (National) – 1300 224 636

Centrelink (National) – 136 240

The Compassionate Friends (Victoria) – 1800 641 091

Country Fire Authority (Victoria) – (03) 9262 8444

Headspace (National) – (03) 9027 0100

Kids Help Line (Victoria) – 1800 551 800

Lifeline (National) – 131 114

Mensline (National) – 1300 789 978

Nurse On Call (Victoria) – 1300 606 024

Parentline (Victoria) – 13 22 89

Relationships Australia (National) – 1300 364 277

Red Cross (National) – (03) 9345 1800

The Office of the State Coroner's in your state

State Emergency Service (National) – 132 500

State Government Departments of Human Services and
Department of Health

WEB ADDRESSES

The Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement
www.grief.org.au

Australian Child & Adolescent Trauma, Loss & Grief
Network
www.earlytraumagrieff.anu.edu.au

Australian Red Cross
www.redcross.org.au

Beyondblue: the national depression initiative
www.beyondblue.org.au

The Compassionate Friends
www.thecompassionatefriends.org.au/TCFAustralia.htm

Centrelink
www.centrelink.gov.au

Department of Human Service Victoria
www.dhs.vic.gov.au

Headspace – Australia’s National Youth Mental Health
Foundation
www.headspace.org.au

Kids Help Line
www.kidshelp.com.au

Lifeline Australia
www.lifeline.org.au

MensLine Australia
www.menslineaus.org.au

Relationships Australia
www.relationships.com.au

Queensland Government Emergency Services
www.emergency.qld.gov.au

Victorian State Emergency Service
www.ses.vic.gov.au

READINGS SOME PEOPLE HAVE FOUND HELPFUL

This is the last text message that Sue Evans sent to her sister, Carolyn Westall.

I have a little angel
She's way up in the sky
I've told her to watch over you
She replied "OK, but why?"
I told her I really love you
And that you mean so much to me
She said she'll take much care of you
And how your life should be
So when you feel the warmth at night
She's letting you know she's near
She's right beside you wherever you go
Filling your life with cheer

A Prayer

Author unknown

Our lives go on without you
But nothing is the same.
We have to hide our heartaches
When someone speaks your name.
Sad are the hearts that love you
Silent the tears that fall,
Living our lives without you
Is the hardest part of all.
You did so many things for us
Your heart was kind and true,
And when we needed someone
We could always count of you.
The special years will not return
When we were all together,
But with the love within our hearts
You will walk with us forever.

The Dragonfly

Author Unknown

Once, in a little pond, in the muddy water under the lily pads, there lived a little water beetle in a community of water beetles. They lived a simple and comfortable life in the pond with few disturbances and interruptions. Once in a while, sadness would come to the community when one of their fellow beetles would climb the stem of a lily pad and would never be seen again. They knew when this happened; their friend was dead, gone forever.

Then, one day, one little water beetle felt an irresistible urge to climb up that stem. However, he was determined that he would not leave forever. He would come back and tell his friends what he had found at the top. When he reached the top and climbed out of the water onto the surface of the lily pad, he was so tired, and the sun felt so warm, that he decided he must take a nap. As he slept, his body changed and when he woke up, he had turned into a beautiful blue-tailed dragonfly with broad wings and a slender body designed for flying.

So, fly he did! And, as he soared he saw the beauty of a whole new world and a far superior way of life to what he had never known existed. Then he remembered his beetle friends and how they were thinking by now he was dead. He wanted to go back to tell them and explain to them that he was now more alive than he had ever been before. His life had been fulfilled rather than ended. But, his new body would not go down into the water. He could not get back to tell his friends the good news. Then he understood that their time would come, when

they, too, would know what he now knew. So, he raised his wings and flew off into his joyous new life!

Desiderata

Written by Max Ehrmann in 1927

Go placidly amid the noise and haste, and remember what peace there may be in silence. As far as possible without surrender be on good terms with all persons. Speak your truth quietly and clearly; and listen to others, even the dull and ignorant; they too have their story.

Avoid loud and aggressive persons, they are vexations to the spirit. If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain and bitter; for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself. Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans.

Keep interested in your own career, however humble; it is a real possession in the changing future of time. Exercise caution in your business affairs; for the world is full of trickery. But let this not blind you to what virtue there is; many persons strive for high ideals; and everywhere life is full of heroism.

Be yourself.

Especially, do not feign affection. Neither be cynical about love; for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment it is perennial as the grass. Take kindly the counsel of the years, gracefully surrendering the things of youth. Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune. But do not distress yourself

with imaginings. Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness. Beyond wholesome discipline, be gentle with yourself.

You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars; you have a right to be here. And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.

Therefore be at peace with God, whatever you conceive Him to be, and whatever your labours and aspirations, in the noisy confusion of life keep peace with your soul. With all its sham, drudgery and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world. Be cheerful. Strive to be happy.

SUE EVANS FUND FOR FAMILIES



Sisters do not come much closer than Sue and Carolyn. Their photo portrays their kinship, friendship and love. They shared their lives and their dreams. Their hearts were sufficiently full as to look to the needs of others.

Sue, Carolyn's sister, tragically died in the Black Saturday bushfires in Strathewen, along with Sue's partner, Bob, Sue's son, Jon and his two mates, Haydn and Kaya. Sue and Bob owned the pet shop in Diamond Creek for nine years and were well-known and well-liked in the community and gave so much of themselves. The bushfires were the worst in Australia's history and have had a devastating impact across Victoria.

Sue and Carolyn were going to start a charity together before the bushfires. To make their dream a reality, Carolyn has taken the baton alone and is following through on their planned dream – Sue Evans Fund for Families.

Carolyn said: "We would like to be able to help the community in this way, in memory of Sue and her beautiful family".

Our first priority was to raise \$25,000 for this booklet. Thanks to many generous donors we have achieved this. Thank you so much to everyone involved. Without these donations this book would not have become a reality.

Our second priority is to establish new wellbeing groups for parents to reduce the incidence of postnatal depression. The groups will be research-based and will create a model to be replicated in other Shires.

In the near future, we would like Sue's charity to become a foundation and for a healing centre to be established in her name in the Diamond Creek area.

For more information please visit www.sueevansfund.com.au or contact Dr Carolyn Westall 0400 292 410.

In writing this book, we have tried to capture a range of experiences of traumatic grief and provide some useful information and support. If you would like to contribute to our future editions, please contact the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement Counselling and Support Service on (03) 9265 2111 or email counselling@grief.org.au

NOTES PAGE

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