



GRIEVING AFTER A DISASTER

A disaster is an unusual event because of its sudden, unforeseeable nature and the extent of the losses stemming from it. It can disrupt the daily lives of the individuals affected from a physical, psychological, social, material, financial, and environmental standpoint. Despite the uncertainty and losses that such a situation can engender, it calls on the ability to adapt and organize of individuals, families, the community, and society, and for mutual aid and solidarity.

This information sheet focuses on grieving after a disaster. It presents the most common reactions and the stages of grieving but also the means of better adapting to the situation and information on the resources available.

What is disaster-related grieving?

The loss of loved ones in a disaster is brutal and sudden and can affect the intensity and duration of the grieving process. Moreover, grieving can also arise from other losses such as a dwelling, material goods, work, health, community, and dreams.

Against this backdrop of social disorganization, how can you grieve when there is so much to do? In addition to the pain stemming from the losses sustained, some people must contend with constraints caused by relocation, the coroner's inquest, and insurance. Individuals must respond to their own needs and those of their loved ones, reorganize their daily lives, ensure their safety, and undertake numerous procedures to regain some semblance of normal life.

Grieving is a process that can vary from one person to the next. The extent of the losses sustained, experience, beliefs, values, and the support available can affect it.

What is grieving?

Some common reactions are:

- > a refusal to believe that the event really occurred and that the loved ones have died;
- > very keen emotional pain that may seem insurmountable;
- > feelings of anger and mood swings;
- > feelings of loneliness, emptiness, injustice, powerlessness, sadness, and despair;
- > confusion, attention and concentration deficits and memory problems;
- > stress, anxiety, agitation, and tightness in the chest;
- > sleep- and appetite-related problems;
- > a calling into question of feelings of security and trust;
- > an impression of functioning as an an impression of functioning by automatism.

What are the stages in the grieving process?

Grieving occurs in several stages. A bereaved individual does not necessarily go through all the stages and does not necessarily go through them in the order presented. Several stages can overlap. A bereaved person can also return to a previous stage.

The shock and denial stage

This stage can last several minutes, several days, or several weeks. During this stage, the bereaved person can experience disbelief or denial and may be unable to act.

The disorganization stage

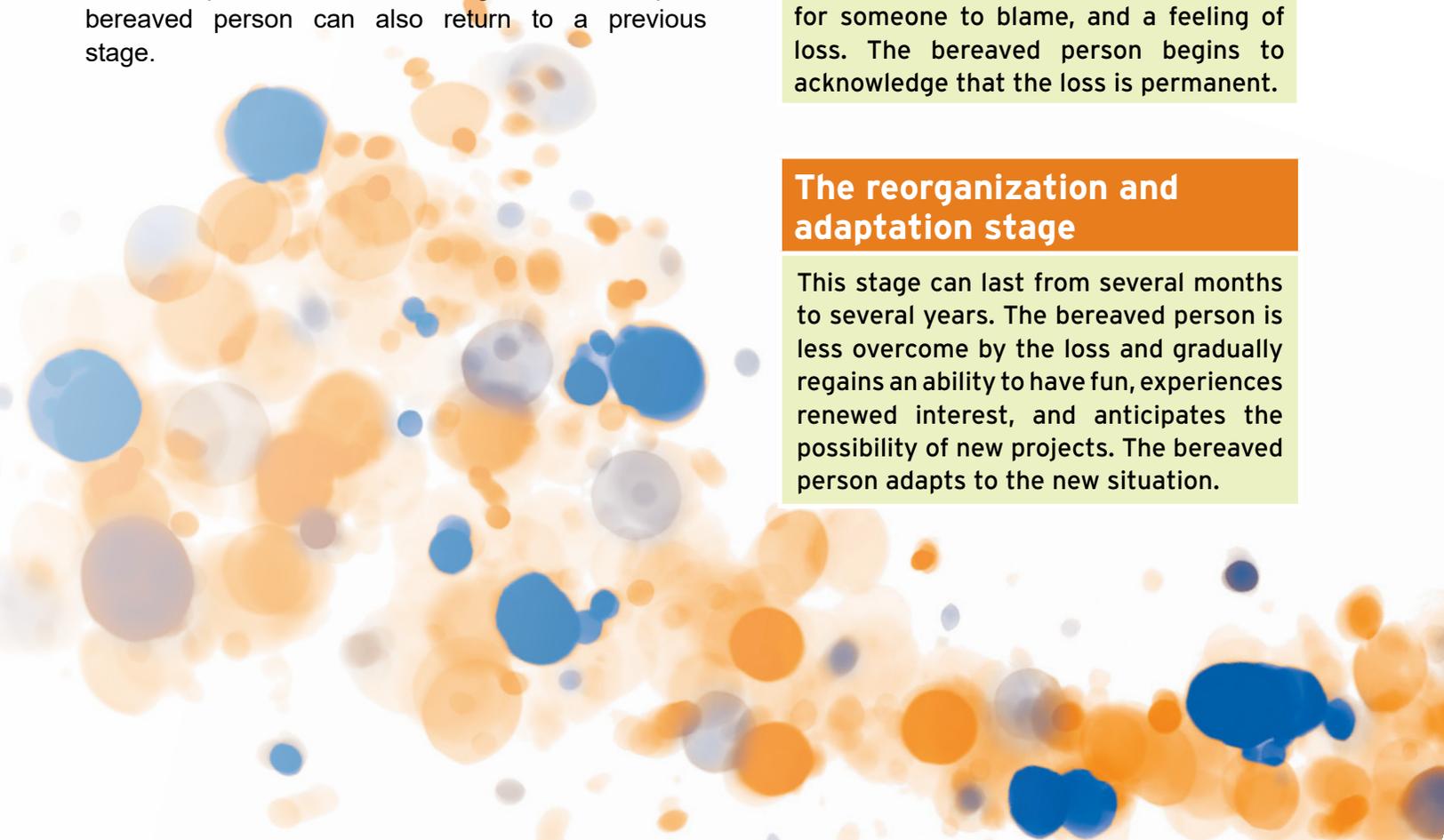
This stage can last several weeks or even several months. The bereaved person can experience deep sadness, anxiety, and powerlessness, and become withdrawn and lose interest in routine activities.

The protest stage

This stage can last several weeks or several months. During this stage, the bereaved person can experience anger, incomprehension, a feeling of injustice, varying degrees of guilt, the search for someone to blame, and a feeling of loss. The bereaved person begins to acknowledge that the loss is permanent.

The reorganization and adaptation stage

This stage can last from several months to several years. The bereaved person is less overcome by the loss and gradually regains an ability to have fun, experiences renewed interest, and anticipates the possibility of new projects. The bereaved person adapts to the new situation.



Certain circumstances can make the grieving process more difficult, for example, when:

- > the individual has been directly exposed to the disaster;
- > several loved ones have died at the same time;
- > the search and investigation processes are lengthy and complex;
- > it is impossible to recover and view the remains;
- > it is difficult to perform the mourning rituals related to one's beliefs;
- > the death was violent;
- > there is uncertainty surrounding the circumstances of the death;
- > other losses such as a job, a dwelling, material goods, or animals have occurred.

Under these circumstances, you must remain vigilant to request assistance if need be.

What are your strengths and resources? What can you do to improve the situation?

You are in the best position to identify your strengths, resources, and needs.

Here are some questions to help you target them.

- > If you have experienced grieving, how did you overcome the loss? What helped you at the time? What can you put into practice in the current situation?
- > What strengths do family and friends recognize that you can rely on in the grieving process?
- > Can you discuss the situation and share your feelings with people around you?
- > Who can provide support such as meals, guidance concerning formalities, and childcare?
- > What mutual aid groups and professional services exist in your community to help you? How can you access such services?

Examples of strengths and resources:

- > your beliefs, values, and convictions;
- > the ability to adapt to trying situations;
- > your presence and access to a supportive social network;
- > personal qualities such as your ability to express your emotions;
- > access to a support group for the bereaved and the availability of professional services if need be.

Some helpful suggestions:

- > Allow yourself to discuss the loss or bereavement with your family or loved ones. It is normal to need to talk about it regularly. Remember that individuals experience bereavement differently and at their own pace.
- > Do not hesitate to express your needs to the people around you, for example, to take care of children, perform household tasks, and assist your in completing certain procedures.
- > Acknowledge and accept that life has changed since the disaster. Try nonetheless to resume a certain daily routine by adopting a healthy lifestyle including good diet, sufficient sleep, or moments of relaxation.
- > If the need arises, contact local authorities and the services available.
- > Avoid excessive isolation and maintain balance between the time that you spend alone and the time that you spend with other people.
- > Rely on mutual aid and solidarity. Bearing in mind your limits, helping other people can contribute to your wellness.
- > Participate in activities with people experiencing a similar situation.
- > Pay attention to your feelings, emotions, and reactions and allow yourself to express them to a support person or through another means such as writing.

- > Respect your pace concerning the grieving process.
- > Prepare a farewell ceremony that is personal.
- > Even though you do not always want to do so, resume your recreational and other activities when you feel ready to. Despite your sorrow, that can help take your mind off things.
- > Remember the means that you have already used in the past to get through a difficult period.
- > Avoid consuming alcohol or drugs to reduce stress. Overconsumption of these products can hamper the acceptance of the loss and create anxiety or depression.
- > Avoid making significant decisions when you are deeply distressed.
- > Rely on your personal strengths. Maintain a positive attitude by telling yourself that you are going to pull through.
- > Avoid excessive exposure to media reporting that can constantly make you relive the event.
- > Remember that suffering less does not mean forgetting. You can feel better while remembering the deceased person. You are not betraying the person by suffering less. Remember the pleasant times spent with the loved one.
- > Monitor signs of fatigue or exhaustion and consult a professional if need be. Participate in activities with people experiencing a similar situation.

When is it necessary to ask for help?

Notwithstanding the means used to overcome the situation, you may need to resort to professional support services. Here are some possible warning signs:

- > You are experiencing significant, persistent disturbances related to appetite and sleep.
- > You have difficulty fulfilling your roles in the family, at work, and during leisure activities.
- > You feel a marked loss of interest in things that previously interested you.
- > You constantly isolate yourself from your loved ones.
- > Your consumption of alcohol, drugs, and medications has increased considerably.
- > You can no longer concentrate or make decisions.
- > You feel intense suffering that persists over time or, to the contrary, you act as though nothing had happened and feel no emotion.
- > The event overcomes you to the extent that you think about suicide or lashing out at another person.

You are not alone in experiencing this situation. Do not hesitate to seek help.

Despite the difficulties experienced in a disaster, it is often possible to derive positive effects from it such as a feeling of solidarity among the members of the community.



To obtain additional information on

- > Info-Social 811
- > Family medicine group (FMG)
- > Suicide Prevention:
1-866-APPELLE (277-3553)
- > Tel-Écoute
1 888 LE DEUIL (533-3845)

Information is also available at the following links:

- > Getting better following a disaster
www.quebec.ca/en/public-safety-emergencies/emergency-situations-disasters-and-natural-hazards/getting-better-following-disaster
- > Fondation Monbourquette
www.fondationmonbourquette.com/
- > Info-trauma
www.info-trauma.org/en/home

Post-traumatic reactions

Certain individuals who have directly faced the death of another person or who have been afraid of dying or injured can experience post-traumatic reactions, which can affect the grieving process.

Frequent reactions in people faced with a disaster

Refer to the fact sheets

- Coping with a potentially traumatic event*
- My child has experienced a potentially traumatic event*
- As a responder, I have experienced a potentially traumatic event*