

The PEMSS Model of Grief

(the following comes from Chesapeake Life Center© *Traumatic Loss in the Community Handouts—2021*)

Grief encompasses all of who we are and manifests in the following ways:

- **Physical:** Bereavement results in physical discomfort. The body may respond with aches and pains, headaches, GI problems, fatigue, insomnia, lack of appetite, lump in throat, tightness in chest, and knot in stomach.

- **Emotional:** Bereavement results in emotional discomfort and a multitude of emotions. These emotions may include shock, sadness, anger, guilt, loneliness, yearning, apathy, relief.

- **Mental:** Bereavement results in cognitive discomfort. Some examples include indecisiveness, memory loss, confusion, lack of concentration, absent mindedness, ruminating.

- **Spiritual:** Bereavement sometimes results in spiritual discomfort. We search for meaning, ask why, question our beliefs, and search for some connection or sign from the deceased.

- **Social:** Bereavement results in social discomfort. Family and friends may withdraw and we may feel isolated. Our support system may change. We can become disappointed that we aren't receiving what we need from others or that people don't understand.

PEMSS and Traumatic Loss

(These are normal stress reactions and responses to a traumatic loss which typically last 30 days or less.)

In addition to the above-mentioned symptoms, there are some which occur more frequently or more intensely when a loss is perceived as traumatic:

- **Physical:** Heightened startle response.
- **Emotional:** Numbness, a feeling that one is unsafe.
- **Mental:** Intrusive thoughts and images of the trauma, a sense that one is re-experiencing the event (whether or not the person was actually present when it occurred), the sense that one does not have control over what happens (since a such terrible thing occurred).
- **Spiritual:** A sense from the survivor that bad things can happen to him/her, and that perhaps he/she deserved the bad thing happening (the loss) for some reason. The sense that life is purposeful, and orderly is challenged with traumatic loss.

- **Social:** A feeling of being isolated from others which is particularly intense because others in one's circle haven't experienced something so traumatic.
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What to think about and do in the days and weeks following a traumatic loss:

- Gather a support system around you, and realize that expressing strong feelings about what happened is normal. Don't try to maintain a mask of "false strength".
- With this on mind, understand you may experience symptoms of grief which are beyond your control. The sooner you can accept this, the sooner you can begin moving towards healing.
- Know that it's ok to ask yourself "why" this happened—this is your mind's way of trying to comprehend something that seems so hard to accept.
- Try to get adequate rest and consider your own health—understand your response to this event will likely affect your focus and concentration when you try to do everyday things.
- Considering the above, try to resume as close to a normal routine as you can following the loss.
- Realize that others who are responding to the same loss are also under stress. Ask others in your community what helps them feel understood and supported.
- Likewise, tell others what helps you feel understood and supported.
- Understand that the experience of recurring thoughts, dreams, or flashbacks about the incident are normal—even if you didn't see what happened directly, you will likely imagine what occurred. Don't try to fight these responses.
- Don't make any big life changes for a while—enough has changed in your life for now.
- Do make as many decisions in your life which give you a sense of control over your life, however small they might seem. Keeping lists with a few prioritized tasks a day is often helpful.
- Avoid numbing yourself with drugs and/or alcohol—you don't need to complicate your response with substance abuse.

- Give yourself permission to grieve and remember your responses are normal and understandable.

More Coping Ideas

- Breathe/learn breathing techniques. Here's one:
 - Breathe in slowly to the count of 4.
 - Pause your in breath for the count of 4.
 - Breathe out slowly to the count of 4.
 - Pause your out breath for the count of 4.
 - Repeat for 4 cycles.
- Vent anger (if you feel it) in helpful ways.
- Write things down/journal—can be just a thought, feeling, what you did today, or something for which you are grateful.
- Pray, meditate.
- Plan one thing to do each day.
- Consider a support group or counseling—it is ok to reach out for guidance.
- If you live alone and like animals, consider getting a pet (if your living situation allows).
- Reach out to someone who needs you, but not someone who will take all of your energy.
- Be careful about what you watch on TV or read (too much “bad news”).
- Walk (or other exercise).
- Talk with a friend.