



Psychological Trauma from Death of a Loved One

This handout contains information pertaining to a type of potentially traumatic event – grieving an unexpected, sudden, and/or traumatic death of a loved one, which can lead to traumatic grief.

What is Traumatic Grief?

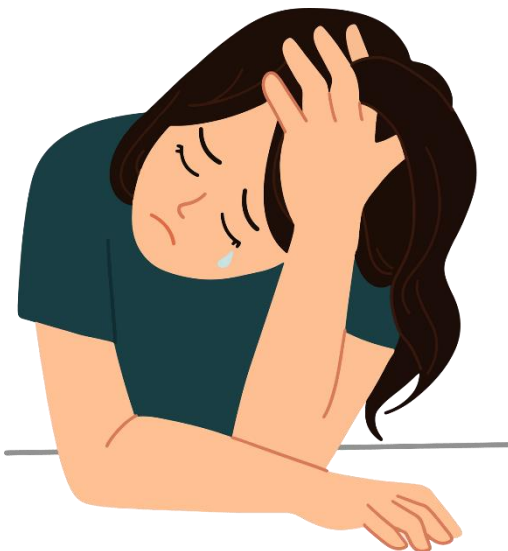
When a loved one passes away, you will likely experience grief in different ways. You may experience a wide range of emotional and behavioural changes, including feelings of sadness, anger, or loneliness, having persistent thoughts of the deceased, experiencing loss of appetite, difficulties sleeping, or socially withdrawing from others. Sometimes, if the nature of death was sudden, unexpected, or traumatic, the grief you experience may be accompanied by traumatic stress symptoms. This is known as traumatic grief.





Some examples of death that may lead to traumatic grief include:

- Pregnancy loss (miscarriage, stillbirth)
- Loss of a newborn or baby diagnosed with medical conditions in utero
- Unexpected medical and/or surgical complication that result in the death of a loved one
- Making a tough medical decision that eventually lead to the loved one's death (e.g. do-not-resuscitate plans, removing life support)
- Suicide
- Witnessing or learning about the violent/sudden death of a loved one
- Drug overdose
- Homicide
- Surviving the same event that took the deceased's life (e.g. accident, natural disaster)





What are some traumatic stress symptoms that may arise?

When you experience traumatic grief, any memories or reminders (even positive ones) can make you feel very distressed. You may start to avoid places, situations, people, thoughts, or conversations that remind you of the person or how the person died. Other symptoms of traumatic grief may also include:

Intrusive, repetitive thoughts or memories of the terrifying details of the death	Excessive guilt or self-blame about how the loved one died
Nightmares or flashbacks of the event that caused the death	Feelings of numbness, detachment, or hopelessness
Excessive focus on reminders of the loved one or the death	Disrupted sense of identity
Hypervigilance, being easily startled or having excessive fears about the safety of your loved ones	Other physical and emotional symptoms such as increased physical aches, irritability, anxiety, difficulties sleeping or concentrating
Intense feelings of bitterness, sorrow, or anger related to the death	





What are some benefits of seeking professional support?

Traumatic grief can make it difficult to think about and recall positive memories of the deceased, grieve the loss of your loved one and cope with changes that result from the death. These reactions may sometimes affect how you function at work or school, and may impact your relationships with your family members and friends. It can feel challenging to manage and may affect your overall quality of life.

A professional trained in grief and trauma work can help you learn to manage traumatic memories, reminders, and responses, by working through changes in your thoughts and beliefs associated with the death. This helps to reduce the effects of traumatic stress symptoms, so that you are better able to mourn and make sense of remaining feelings and thoughts arising from your loss, while gradually reconnecting with others around you.

When and where can you seek professional support from?

Reaching out and receiving support from your family members and friends can help you begin to recover from traumatic grief. Some signs that you may need to seek professional support can include:

- Persistent traumatic stress symptoms listed above for more than **one year** after the death of your loved one
- Difficulties in carrying out your usual routines and tasks at home, work or school, and/or impact on your relationships with families and friends due to the symptoms
- Having thoughts of harming or killing yourself, and/or hurting other people





- Using alcohol, drugs, and/or engaging in risky sexual behaviours to cope
- Repeated observations or concerns expressed by loved ones that you may not be coping well

If you are experiencing ongoing symptoms of traumatic grief, receiving early and appropriate treatment can help you get back to enjoying the things and relationships that are important to you, in addition to improving your overall well-being.

For subsidised treatment options, consider speaking with your polyclinic doctor or general practitioner (GP) for a referral to a psychiatrist and/or psychologist in restructured hospitals. You may also wish to consider seeking out private psychiatrists or psychologists, without needing a referral.

If you are currently seeing a psychiatrist or medical doctor at KKH, they can refer you to the **KKH Psychosocial Trauma Support Service (PTSS)**. PTSS consists of a team of clinical psychologists who specialises in providing psychological trauma assessment and interventions for women and children. These forms of support can help you to better cope with the after-effects of traumatic experiences.

