

Coping with Grief and Loss After a Traumatic Event: Dealing with Shock and Disbelief

Support for University and College Students

Grief and loss are difficult for anyone to navigate, and they can feel especially overwhelming when triggered by a sudden or traumatic event—such as the unexpected death of a classmate, a serious accident, campus violence, or a natural disaster. In moments like these, your sense of safety, identity, and control may feel shaken.

Shock and Disbelief: A Natural Response to Trauma

Grief looks different for everyone. There's no "right" way to respond, and there's no set timeline for how long it should last. Still, certain emotional reactions are common, especially in the immediate aftermath of a traumatic loss.

Shock and disbelief are often the first reactions. These feelings help protect you from the full emotional weight of what has happened. You may feel numb or emotionally detached, or you may find yourself thinking, *"This can't be real,"* or *"There must be some mistake."*

These thoughts are natural, and they may continue for days, weeks, or even longer, especially if the loss was sudden or if there was no opportunity to say goodbye.

Why Grief Feels Different for Students

As a student, you may be away from home, separated from your usual support system, or dealing with academic pressures that make it harder to focus on your own well-being. You might be unsure how to ask for help, or you may feel pressure to "stay strong" for others.

In a university or college setting, traumatic loss can ripple through the entire campus community. You are not alone in what you're feeling.

What You Can Do: Healthy Ways to Cope

Here are some supportive steps you can take as you begin to process what has happened:

- **Reach out for support.** Talk to friends, roommates, professors, or trusted mentors about what you're feeling. You don't have to go through this alone.
- **Use campus resources.** Most universities offer free or low-cost counseling through student health or wellness centers. Look into campus crisis response teams, peer support programs, or student affairs offices for additional help.
- **Take time away if you need it.** If you're struggling to keep up with schoolwork, talk to your professors or academic advisor. They may be able to offer flexibility or guide you toward academic accommodations.
- **Join a support group.** Sharing with others who've experienced loss can be incredibly healing. Many campuses and communities host grief support groups, both in person and online.
- **Accept that denial is part of the process.** You may not feel ready to face everything all at once. That's okay. Denial can be a temporary way your mind protects itself while you begin to heal.
- **Take care of your body.** It may feel unimportant, but getting enough sleep, eating well, and moving your body—even just a short walk—can help you feel more grounded and better able to cope.

If you find that you're still struggling to acknowledge or process your loss over time, or if your feelings of sadness, fear, or numbness interferes with daily life, it may help to talk to a licensed counselor or mental health professional.

At TELUS Health Student Support, we're always here to help.



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