

Coping With Having Witnessed a Traumatic Event or Suicide

FAQs About Witnessing a Traumatic Event or Suicide

Frequently Asked Questions

Exposure to a traumatic event can have a strong impact on an individual's well-being, and the road to recovery can involve many intense, complicated feelings and emotions. It's a process that takes time, and you may not be totally back on track after a day, a week, or a month. Understanding how people typically react to trauma can be helpful in the recovery process.

What might I experience after a traumatic event?

A traumatic event can affect people emotionally, physically, and mentally. These experiences are considered "normal reactions to abnormal events," and will usually decrease with time. Below are some common feelings you may experience:

- Continued thoughts and images of the event
- Wanting to stay away from the scene of the event and/or fear of returning to work
- Difficulty concentrating, or feeling "dazed" or confused
- Difficulty handling tasks or making decisions
- Increased agitation, restlessness, or frequent sitting and staring into space
- Feelings of guilt or wishing you could have done something differently
- Wanting to separate yourself from family members, co-workers, and friends
- Nightmares or trouble sleeping
- Headaches or other physical reactions such as stomachaches or feeling tired all the time
- A desire to use alcohol or drugs to numb your feelings

What can I do to feel better after a traumatic event?

If you have seen or been touched by a traumatic event, the following actions may help you deal with what you're feeling:

- **Talk to someone; stay connected.** Use your support system. Talk to friends, your spouse, family members, or a counselor—people who are likely to be supportive and understanding. Talking about the event seems to help many people, even though you may feel uncomfortable discussing it. Staying connected with others during this stressful period is one of the best things you can do to help you feel better sooner.
- **Exercise and relax.** Physical exercise can be physically grounding, mentally distracting, and helpful in reducing the tension related to the traumatic event. Relaxation methods (meditating, praying, practicing breathing exercises, spending time in nature, listening to quiet music, etc.) can also be helpful.
- **Keep active and retain your everyday routines when possible.** Try to keep to your normal schedule of working, eating, sleeping, bathing, exercising, etc.
- **Eat well and try to get a good night's sleep.** These may not be easy to do, but it's important to stay focused on your health during times of intense stress.
- **Avoid using alcohol or drugs to change your mood.** Using alcohol or drugs can delay your healing process by affecting your judgment and behavior in ways that can interfere with your ability to cope with the traumatic event in a safe and healthy way.

If concentration problems, nightmares or flashbacks, sleeping problems, feelings of depression, shock and numbness, confusion, guilt, or anger do not begin to subside over two weeks, or if these feelings seem unbearable, **it is important to seek professional support, including medical care**, to assist with coping and recovery.

If you or someone you know is going through a difficult time or struggling to cope with a traumatic event, **support is here for you** 24 hours a day. Members of the NFL family—current and former players, coaches, team and league staff, and their family members—can call the independent, confidential NFL Life Line at **(800) 506-0078**, or go to www.NFLLifeLine.org to chat online or take a self-check quiz. Members of the NFL family can also access counseling and mental health support through the NFL Player Engagement Transition Assistance Program by calling Cigna at **(866) 421-8628**.

Dealing With Suicide

The suicide of a friend, family member, co-worker, or fellow player can be an especially traumatic event. After a suicide, it is common to experience very complex thoughts and feelings related to the deceased and the many factors related to his or her suicide.

What will I feel while coping with suicide?

In the wake of a suicide, it is normal to feel a range of complicated emotions. Professional support can help you deal with these difficult reactions, especially if they persist over time or feel unbearable. Common reactions to suicide include:

- **Shock** – This is usually the first reaction to a suicide and can be accompanied by a feeling of physical and emotional “numbness,” which is the mind’s way of protecting you from feelings that are too overwhelming to process all at once. This numbness allows you to deal with your pain more gradually.

- **Confusion** – Many who die by suicide do not leave behind an explanation for their actions, and it is natural for you to have questions. Even when a suicide note is present, it may be difficult to accept that you may never know all of the reasons why someone took his or her own life.
- **Guilt** – You may have repetitive thoughts of “what if/if only” scenarios following a suicide. “What if I had done [this]?” “If only I hadn’t said [that]?” “Why didn’t I notice the warning signs?” In time, many people bereaved by suicide learn that they did not have control over the person’s choices and behaviors, no matter how much they wished they could have prevented this tragedy from occurring.
- **Anger** – Reaction to suicide is further complicated by the fact that it’s common to feel intense anger at the person for taking his or her own life. You may also feel anger toward doctors, therapists, family members, or yourself. Understand that these feelings can be a normal part of the grieving process. Over time, these feelings usually diminish, as those losing someone to suicide often learn that blaming behaviors prolong the experience of the painful loss in all who are affected, and can interfere with more comforting connections with others that can promote healing.
- **Despair and Depression** – Feelings of sadness and despair following a catastrophic loss can affect your sleep, appetite, concentration, and hope for the future. These feelings may hamper your day-to-day functioning for a while, but use of your social supports and keeping a regular routine may help lessen the intensity of these feelings over time.
- **Nightmares and Flashbacks** – If you have witnessed or been exposed in some way to a suicide or its aftermath, you may relive the memories of the distressing event. These memories can come in the form of nightmares or sudden flashbacks sparked by reminders of the people,

places, or things associated with the suicide. In these cases, you might feel as if you are re-experiencing the event. The frequency, intensity, and length of these experiences diminish over a few weeks for most people.

- **Relief** – In many cases, a suicide occurs after years of coping with emotional pain and suffering. A feeling of relief on behalf of the bereaved is very normal in these situations. You may feel relieved that the individual's suffering is over or that you no longer have to worry about the person's well-being.
- **Stigma and Shame** – Societal, religious, and personal beliefs can all contribute to your reactions, including feeling uncomfortable about acknowledging or talking about the cause of death. While these reactions are common, they can delay or complicate your long-term recovery as you cope with this traumatic loss.

How can I cope with the suicide of a member of the NFL family?

Following the death of an NFL family member by suicide, other family members can be a natural support system for each other, a critical piece of the long-term healing process. While in mourning, consider these points to help deal with your loss:

- Know that while many of you may have similar reactions, the range and intensity of reactions can vary. It is important to make room for each person's different ways of reacting and coping with the event.
- Try to be both patient with and supportive of one another, and recognize that suicide may add more layers to the grieving process and can intensify all of the normal grief reactions.
- Remember the life of the NFL family member who

died rather than dwelling on the circumstances of his or her death.

- Remind each other that you can best honor the person's life by the way you carry on with your own.
- Although people will heal in their own ways, recognize when a friend, loved one, staff member, or teammate might need professional help. Pay attention to whether their grief is severely affecting their relationships, work performance, or other aspects of their life after two weeks, or if they say their pain is unbearable. If you notice these issues, offer to assist them in getting professional help or let someone else know of your concerns about them.

How can I help someone who is grieving a loss by suicide?

It can be difficult to know how to help someone who is mourning a loss by suicide. One of the best ways to help someone coping with a suicide is to simply pay attention to the grieving person and acknowledge the pain that he or she is feeling. Other ways to help include:

- Letting the person know you are available to listen and provide support. This is especially important after the first few weeks, when things "get back to normal" for everyone except the bereaved. If you don't know what you can do, just ask.
- Avoiding unconditional support without making judgmental statements about what could or should have been done differently. Listening without judgment is the best resource you can offer; a nonjudgmental listener can help the individual process and move past his or her feelings of guilt.



Independent Confidential Support for the entire NFL Family

- Being patient, compassionate, and understanding. Accept that people who are grieving a loss by suicide will be struggling with intense emotions that can be different from reactions to other types of death. The stigma, guilt, and blame that survivors can feel often isolate them from others and cause them to be uncomfortable discussing their loss.
- Avoiding cliches that provide a simple explanation for their loss. It is not your responsibility to answer questions such as why a person died by suicide or whether there is anything more that the grieving individuals could have done. Although these intensely painful and complicated questions may never find a satisfactory answer for those grieving a suicide loss, over time these questions often become less intense and preoccupying.

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