

Looking after yourself during the recovery journey from traumatic grief

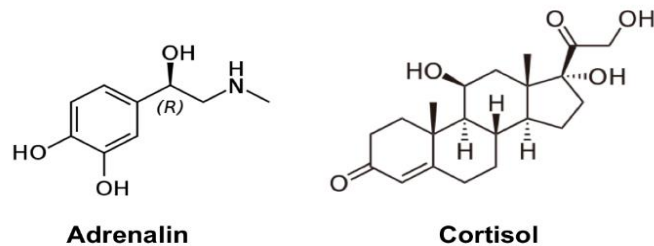


Support After Suicide
www.supportaftersuicide.org.au

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In the beginning, trauma and grief spread across the whole of our lives, bringing changes unlike anything else. We slowly need to rebuild our lives; our ability to work, to love and to be ourselves. The trauma and grief never go away, but in time they occupy less of the space in our lives so we can have goals and interests and desires for the future.

As part of our journey toward a new life, for the years that it takes, there are two fundamental stress reactions that we need to understand to know how to take care of ourselves. The essence of any stress reaction is that we go into a state (mental and physical) where we give out more energy than we can take in so we have to exploit our bodies to supply it. These stress reactions meet this need in different ways.



Emergency response – adrenalin

The first response is triggered when the tragic event occurs. Sometimes people refer to the 'fight, flight or freeze response'. It is the survival response; the emergency response; the adrenalin response. It floods us with energy and focus. We become focussed and narrowed onto the problem. Usually, there is a certain amount of numbness about our emotions and reactions. We go into pure action mode.

This reaction is designed for when we have a massive problem and must go out into the world, resist and encounter it, change things and do something. We react this way at the time we find out about the tragedy and while we are dealing with the difficult, painful procedures and their repercussions.

We don't have any choice, we just fly into this state in response to the experience or the news. In this state we draw on deep reserves of energy that we have stored, and it floods our system. It can be seen in people's faces – their expressions are set, focussed and full of energy.

Endurance response – cortisol

Underneath the emergency response another reaction develops that more slowly mobilises our body for the long-term. This is the persisting, chronic, ongoing stress response. When the crisis subsides there is a long, hard road of grief and traumatic

difficulties; to survive this our body changes gear; we go into a state where we just endure. This is characteristic of a situation where there is nothing we can do about it; we just have to survive it and endure it. We can't change the circumstances, there is no point in being in action mode, we cannot change it. This is most characteristic of the grief reaction.

We have to get up in the morning, even if we don't feel like it; we have to go to work; there's no meaning in it, but we have to keep going. Cortisol is the key substance operating in this reaction. Cortisol does not use up our reserves of energy, because we wouldn't last long enough, we would burn out and break down. Cortisol draws energy out of the tissues of our own body to supply our needs and we can do that for a long time – we can deplete our bodies, but it is at a cost. You can see people in that state, keeping on, plodding through life; they are in zombie mode, no focus, just enduring. By drawing energy out of our own bodies we set up a deficit in our energy systems. We are not just using available reserves, we are mining the substance of our bodies to burn for energy.

The advantage is that we can keep on enduring. People might sometimes say to you, "I don't know how you do it. I could never do it." Whereas, you actually don't have any choice. People who say that have no idea what they are saying because if they were suddenly in the situation, their chemicals would activate stress reactions and they would be in it too.

The cortisol state takes energy from your tissues but you are not in the high energy of the adrenalin response; you are conserving the output to the bare minimum. The cortisol response will shut down all but the bare minimum required; it will conserve energy by disregarding everything that is unnecessary, and keep focussing on those minimum obligations. People's lives become narrowed and shut down. The typical reaction is you feel too tired and too focussed to do anything that is outside the immediate problem. If you are not careful, you establish a lifestyle where you only live the problem because you don't have the energy to do anything else.

The endurance reaction can continue for a long time to a greater or lesser degree – as long as the trauma or grief processes are disruptive and stressful. In the old days doctors would talk about illnesses attributed to grief. In the 19th century there were stories of people who would take to their beds because somebody died and they would never get up again. Now we are beyond that, but we need to understand that these stress reactions place potentially damaging demands on our bodies.

How to respond to the stress states

These two reactions are survival-oriented, they keep us going through the process, but they also have their creative counterparts. It is important to understand them in order to survive the process, minimise the potential for damage and hold on to what isn't undermined. We can use these creative reactions to re-engage with what holds meaning, or perhaps make new meanings and find different directions. Often the old lifestyle doesn't work anymore and we have to do something else. But we have to have the energy to go beyond just living the tragedy.



The counterbalance for the emergency response and the adrenalin system, is the creative re-energising of enjoyment and interest. Although this state is not possible in the midst of dealing with the tragedy, there is a biological need for enjoyment and interest. It is only when we have a sense of enjoyment and having something to look forward to that we properly rebuild the energy reserves we used during the acute stress period. We will need to draw on these from time to time as we go through the ups and downs, as these reactions come and go. When there is an anniversary, you are back in adrenalin mode, and you feel the intensity of it all.

We need to make the change from, "I feel unhappy and guilty and I shouldn't do anything to enjoy myself" or "What am I doing having fun and laughing?" People often feel this is disloyal to their lost loved one. But it depends on the meaning we give to our reactions. It is essential we come back to the little private space within ourselves where we can say: "No matter what has happened, I do have a right to take care of myself, to rebuild a future, because I am still here and have to go on."

When it is possible, as time passes, it is important to find and do things you can look forward to with a bit of interest and excitement – whether it be an afternoon by the beach, going to a movie, or a trip away. People often say taking a trip to get away from their life and the situation is a valuable relief enabling them to gain a new perspective. Health studies have found that people who go to movies, performances, concerts and so on have better health than those who don't. It doesn't seem to be related to the quality of the movies, but seems to be the ability to be taken away from your own life for a while. To have a little relief from ourselves is far more valuable than just the time involved. If we can't do it now, we need to be working towards it because we biologically need it. Otherwise we are continuing to build the energy deficit with no relief and this leads to poor health and inability to manage painful emotions.

The creative counterpart of the endurance state and cortisol response is rest, peace, sleep, eating well, relaxing. It is the feeling: "Go away and leave me alone, I just want to sit in the sun, have peace and quiet and rest." Someone who was very exhausted went to Bali and stayed in her hotel room and just slept and read books; it was the only way she could get away from the demands of her life and rest – she was not interested in sightseeing or activities but in time to herself. This was very effective in restoring her cortisol energy balance.

These two creative responses involve on the one hand, excitement, interest and being taken out of yourself and on the other, calming, resting, nourishing, feeding. We need the confidence to say we biologically need both. It is only in the first state that we rebuild reserves and only in the second state that we replenish and repair our tissues.

The important thing to remember with stress is that when we become too physically depleted, we can't manage emotion. Emotions generate and require large amounts of physical energy. When they become unmanageable they swing to extremes, grief, despair, anger and so on. We need physical energy to manage them. When we get too deeply immersed in emotion we can't see beyond it, that "This too will pass." We have to be able to feel: "I just have to hang on through and I will be able to get back to a life

that does have meaning and value even if I can't feel it now." Physical energy supports the emotional energy to do this and without it we become overwhelmed and sink into despair. The crucial thing is to make a commitment to take care of ourselves. Physical care is the basis for emotional care.

Resilience

Resilience has become a jargon word. It is a very important idea that supports our understanding of survival and recovery, but we must be careful not to use it to shut down the pain. The moment we try to do that in ourselves, or listen to others telling us to be more resilient, it makes the journey harder. We can manage the pain of grief and the journey to rebuild life if we respect the pain we have and do what we need to care for ourselves. If we suppress, deny or detach from the pain, we disconnect from the essence of ourselves, because that is where the pain is located – in our love of those we have lost. If we feel inadequate, ashamed, weak or a failure because we suffer sadness and pain more or longer than we think we should, we add emotional conflicts and self-criticism that complicate and obscure the task. The journey is more manageable if we accept our pain and keep working with it.

Research has examined the characteristics of resilient people who suffered all sorts of adversities but were functioning well. Some of the qualities these people showed are essential to resilience.

- The first of these qualities is a moral compass. This means the person has some unchanging values, a basis to say what is right or wrong. It is not only a moral compass, but a compass of values, of what is important in life, or who is important, what is the long-term goal for the future, what kind of a life they want to look back on. Resilient people usually have a strong compass, so whatever situation they are in, they can get their compass out and know which way is consistent with the meaning of their life. A value compass helps us make important decisions about life, which probably means our loved ones who have suicided have lost their compass; they have got into a dark hole and couldn't find a way out.
- A second quality of resilient people is they have a strong sense of their own value. They might have low self-esteem, inferiority complexes, yet still have a strong sense of their own value. They make decisions that reflect the sense that they are entitled to look after themselves and to keep themselves safe.
- The third quality is that they make sure they connect with and identify with constructive people in their environment – and they use them. They keep connected with groups – not necessarily large groups – but they look around for congenial, constructive people, and put energy into cultivating relationships. Then they don't hesitate to ask them for assistance. They have confidence to reach out and ask for help, engage with people and help them in return. Perhaps this is why it has been shown that doing even a little bit of volunteering has great health benefits. Giving something to others in some way is beneficial.
- The other quality is hope, optimism and positive sentiments. When you talk to people who have got through tragedy and built a new life, you are more able to see

that it may be possible to get through it too. I may not be exactly optimistic, but perhaps have reason to hope that in time I will come through the other side. This helps us in the dark moments, so that we can say, "This too shall pass" and be patient.

- Other important qualities of resilient people are initiative and control. Resilient people make sure they keep active, doing things and take control of whatever they can of their own affairs as much as possible.
- The last resilience quality for the journey that grief and trauma involve, is to hold onto the sense of time. The time is much longer than we want; it is years. But the important thing is not the length of time. If we care for ourselves so that we can make the journey, we will inevitably come to the point where we have a life that has rebuilt some creative meaning.

Meaning comes about when we connect things up with something larger than ourselves, this gives our lives and activities a value and purpose beyond ourselves. We need to maintain our energy so we can make these connections. We can then bring to others what we have learned or perhaps it is just the fact that we survived that is important, because that is what seems so doubtful in those dark moments when it is hard to see the way ahead.

This is an edited excerpt from a Community Talk given by Dr Rob Gordon to Support After Suicide participants on 8 June 2016.

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