



Association for Workplace Tragedy Family Support

How to support someone after a tragedy

Survey report

Ever since we sat together around the fire for safety and community, humans have needed each other. Research tells us human connection is so built in that it affects our immune system, our mental health and even our longevity. (<http://ccare.stanford.edu/uncategorized/connectedness-health-the-science-of-social-connection-infographic/>)

When a tragedy occurs, we need other people more than ever – sometimes for practical, physical help and almost always for emotional support. But a recent survey by Threads of Life demonstrates that many of those affected by a work-related tragedy don't have the human support that would help them heal, or don't have it at key points in their journey.

Our survey and report seek to capture what an individual experiences following a workplace fatality, life-altering injury or occupational disease, how much difference it makes to have the support of others in both the short term and long term, and how others can support an individual or family in the aftermath of tragedy. We looked primarily at the types of grassroots support offered by family, friends and community, as opposed to formal support provided through agencies like government and compensation boards, although many survey participants commented on formal supports as well.

Our survey is a small sample size, but represents family members from across Canada and with a variety of experiences with different types of workplace tragedies. While the survey is not scientific, it provides good anecdotal evidence of the needs after a tragedy, and guidance about how others can best provide support.

1. Significant gaps in support exist for most families

Looking back from a perspective of years after the tragedy, most families can report that they had some support at some point during their journey – but in most cases it was not enough.

"I felt others were avoiding and minimizing my grief," one person wrote. "I was pregnant and family just wanted me to get over it and think about my baby. Very few people in my workplace spoke about the tragedy. There was an inquest into my father's workplace death and no one to talk with about my grief at the time."

A spouse of an injured worker described the time after the injury as "an all-out run from the time of the accident for the first almost five years as the caregiver. I still have to deal with this almost six years later, not as fast a pace though. And I will continue for the rest of our lives...running to provide essentially 24-hour care being a nurse and try to get everything done including chores. And try to get some sleep as often as I could. I unfortunately put my own care and pain aside to care for my husband."

“Once the funeral was over, everyone carried on with their lives,” one person commented, “I was left picking up the pieces and navigating all that comes with a workplace fatality.”

Often, respondents stated that family and friends rallied around in the days and weeks immediately after a tragedy, but as the weeks and months stretched on, the support waned or disappeared entirely.

“I think after six months I got the feeling that this is it, you’re on your own, deal with it,” one injured worker said, and another simply commented “Very lonely”.

For others, depending on their relationship to the worker, friends and family didn’t recognize that they needed support, or the individual didn’t seek or accept support, feeling they should be strong for others.

“I never felt supported because I was hurting too badly to feel the support I was receiving. I didn’t ask for help from my family because they were also hurting and I didn’t want to burden them with my pain,” one said.

“I reached out to a few close friends but felt I had to handle it and be strong for my family, especially my mom,” another commented. “I became very sick trying to be there for everyone while still working and grieving.”

A positive finding of the survey is that half of all respondents say they have a good support network today, many years after the tragedy.

“While some of those closest to me, for reasons of their own, could not be there for me, I had extended family and a few friends who have tremendously supported me,” one mother said. “I still have a few who always make sure that on [my son’s] anniversary and his birthday, I am kept busy and don’t have to be alone.”

To continue to heal and find a new normal for their lives, it’s important that those coping with workplace tragedy feel supported not just in the period immediately after the tragedy, but in the weeks, months and years that follow.

2. The impacts of lack of support can be devastating

The nature of a work-related tragedy can be very isolating. Few others in one’s family or community may have had to navigate sudden trauma or illness, especially one that brings with it the complex world of investigations, compensation claims and inquests. The impact can be compounded if the individual or family feel a lack of support from both their own network and the institutions involved in their loss.

“There was no crisis intervention support, no family support group at the time of [my son’s] death,” another mom wrote. “As a single mom, when my son was killed, I felt very much alone and uncertain of all the legalities of death and confronted with many decisions that had to be made at a time when decision making was very difficult for me. While I felt like so much of me had died with my son, it was so hard to keep motivated as I had lost purpose.”

A worker coping with occupational disease said “I was feeling very low about myself. I felt useless and thought I was a burden to my family.”

“Family relationships are complex and we didn't talk about the conflicting emotions,” another respondent said. “I felt abandoned and I felt I had to be strong.”

“I had people in the grocery store turn around in the aisle so they wouldn't have to talk to me,” a grieving spouse wrote. “... I'd like others to realize that while their life goes on as normal, NOTHING is ever the same for the family left behind. The death affects all aspects of their lives going forward.”

Such responses can delay or impair an individual's ability to grieve their past life, whether their loss is a death, loss of health, or loss of the life they expected to lead, due to injury. Conversely, strong personal support helps with healing and growth:

“Just someone being there listening was how I was able to get through a lot of it,” one respondent commented, and another wrote:

“I moved back home and I live with my mom and my daughter. My mom has been huge in not only showing and also in talking to me about grief and loss. So from day one it was a safe place to express how I was feeling and thinking. I also have a wonderful family and good friends who have continued to let me talk about my process as I move forward.”

3. Individuals may not ask for help or support

It's common to tell individuals coping with a tragedy “let me know if I can help”. But our survey respondents emphasized that they may not feel comfortable asking for support, or may not even realize what support they need.

One comment is representative: “I never reached out and still don't. It's very hard for me to ask for help as I have always been extremely independent.”

“People would say let me know what you need,” an injured worker stated. “... problem was I had no idea what my needs were at that time nor did I know to ask, and had no idea what to ask for.”

4. There are many forms of helpful support following a tragedy

The types of support needed will vary as time passes following the tragedy, and depending on the nature of the tragedy and the situation of the individual. Families were appreciative when others demonstrated thoughtful consideration of what might be needed or helpful. Often this is practical, physical assistance (help with laundry, meals etc.) when the tragedy is new, and more emotional support (phone calls, going out for a coffee, hugs) as time passes. For families who are providing care for an injured or ill member or coping with tragedy while caring for young children, the need for practical support continues. *See the appendix for a complete list of our respondents' recommendations for how to provide support.*

Practical tasks listed by survey respondents included everything from mowing the lawn and preparing meals to driving children to their activities.

“Concrete things,” one person commented, “like ‘I’m bringing you supper on Tuesday at 6:00pm and will stay with you for the evening. We can do whatever needs doing then.’ Or ‘I’m coming over and we can go through the sympathy cards. I can write thank you cards for you.’”

Emotional support translates into taking time, listening, and keeping in touch.

“My closest friends ... knew me better so they would show up and say we’re going for a coffee, I’m not taking no for an answer,” a family member wrote. “They may also show up with a coffee and say let’s go get some air and take a walk. I truly appreciated their forwardness as that’s what I need, given I never ask for help. They often called me knowing I would not call them.”

“Come by to visit,” another said simply. “Offer an ear or shoulder to lean on - stay connected.”

There were some exceptions, but many respondents to the survey were pleased when friends, neighbours and family just took the initiative to help, rather than asking what they could do or saying “let me know” how to help.

“Just help, don't ask what I need help with as I can't think right now,” one commented. “Just pick something and say I am doing/getting/bringing this.”

Most people who have experienced a tragedy understand that those around them feel uncomfortable and may not know how to act. But there are a few actions and comments our survey respondents identified as detrimental to their healing. As professor and empathy researcher Brene Brown points out and our family members reiterate, any statement beginning with “at least” will probably not be helpful. Our survey respondents also listed giving advice, telling them to ‘get over it’, and trying to rush them through their healing, as things that were not at all helpful after the tragedy.

5. Conclusion

Every person’s journey following a workplace tragedy is different, just as the individuals and the families are unique. Their specific needs will vary and their timelines and route towards healing will be different. But there are commonalities in the types of support others can offer that will be welcome and helpful no matter the situation. Whether that support is in practical, physical tasks or more intangible emotional care, at its root it reinforces that the person experiencing the tragedy is not alone – they are still part of the community, the family. Most of our survey respondents, looking back over years or decades, speak of their gratitude for the support they found both from their closest family and friends, and in unexpected places – work colleagues, new friends, or extended family for example. Many also found community and support through Threads of Life, forging relationships with others experiencing tragedy, which assure them they are not alone.

The best and most effective support, our survey confirmed, emerges out of empathy. As one respondent wrote, “I truly believe that empathy plays a huge role. We don’t always have to be able to relate, but we can sit with someone who is grieving and just listen. We need a lot of grace, patience and love towards ourselves and others.”

Appendix: How to provide support

Question: List three things a friend could do to offer their support and/or help after a tragedy

- Just show up, make a meal, do some laundry, don't wait to be asked Drop off a gift card for take out or meal delivery... drop off coffee ...
- It is important to keep in touch but there were too many emails or text messages to try and respond. I found some days were hard to keep up with daily tasks and still [find that] at times.
- Just stop by or call
- Help with care and day to day chores, give me time for naps, and cooking meals was a huge support. I know this is a fourth but a big hug when I needed it.
- Reach out just to talk or listen. Be understanding. Try to understand or research what a person is going through.
- 1. Give grieving family members a break from each other. (My daughter and I were at different levels of grief) this complicated our healing process. 2. Ask-what can I do for you "today" or "right now". Often what I needed changed quickly and others felt I wasn't moving on. There were many unknowns that caused daily changes. 3. PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE offer support/fun times for the kids. There is a saying, "you are only as happy as your saddest child." Our kids are asked to make adult decisions-when we as adults can't make these decisions. "
- come by to visit - offer an ear or shoulder to lean on - stay connected
- Keep in touch
- Letting me talk, cry, vent without judgement or advice, hugs. Making a homecooked meal or baked goods, any meals. Visit ,go for a walk or drive.
- invite for coffee, listen, go for a walk together
- Offer to carpool my children to sports when needed
- Go for a walk
- Listen
- keep in touch, spend time together and I'm lucky to have a friend who is really understanding
- Touch base, mow the yard, water plants, walk pets, help with cleaning the home, pick up groceries, ask if any medications need to be picked up. If there are siblings; talk to them, give them flowers, or engage the brothers and sisters. My heart goes out to younger people as they are often neglected, I was so heartbroken that it was hard to also help my children that were at home, they also felt so alone, they need more attention and not gifts. Gifts feel too much, they said why are people giving us gifts; they would have liked people's time and acknowledgement. Their friends do not know how to act, and their entire world has changed. Even more support if they are away at school. My other daughter felt so alone at university. Also do something in honor of the person who died. We loved those gestures. Acts of kindness.
- Keep in touch
- Help with tasks like grocery etc
- Just visit every now and again
- 1. Take a few minutes just to call for a chat. 2. Go for a walk or a drive and maybe stop for coffee. 3. Pick up essentials when I just never had the energy or drive to take care of necessities.

- 1) be there at the other end of the phone line when needed 2) just listen to your story as many times as you need to tell it. 3) just acknowledge the pain even though they may not understand it.
- Just someone being there listening was how I was able to get through a lot of it. If it's helping with tasks that that person isn't used to doing, show them how, teach them. I for one was happy and still am when I'm shown something new. If you have children, having someone around with children that have experienced the same thing would help them.
- Concrete things - "I'm bringing you supper on Tuesday at 6:00pm and will stay with you for the evening. We can do whatever needs doing then." "I'm coming over and we can go through the sympathy cards. I can write thank you cards for you." "Do you need any groceries? I'm going to the store anyway and would be happy to pick stuff up for you."
- Call ,come visit, just listen and let you vent if needed
- Offer to go out for supper or drinks; invite me over to their place for coffee; sending daily check in texts
- Three things that a friend could do is to just help, don't ask what I need help with as I can't think right now. Just pick something and say I am doing/getting/brining this. ALSO for the friends to understand that if I say NO that it most likely means not at this moment BUT please keep reaching out. Also don't try to make the situation 'better' or to 'fix' my grief. Just listen or just talk and I will listen.
- Make opportunities for a talk, like a walk, drinks, a call. It's hard to plan when it will come out (at least for me), so making more frequent attempts to be there is good.
- Recognize that grief is different; my brother and I had grown apart and some of my grieving was anger, guilt, frustration. It wasn't just sadness. But it was all loss.
- 1) Keep in touch in an ongoing manner almost like nothing happened. I think people hide away during these times as they don't really know what to do so they simply stay away and hope it will pass which it obviously does not. Lots of people show up at the beginning but few hang in on an ongoing basis to help especially during the first few months. 2) Simple time together with others to walk & talk. 3) Anything that will help to bring some normalcy back to life so going to a sporting event, movie etc but with a friend or relative where there can be some discussion about the tragedy or not depending on the situation and the desire of the individual."
- Personal visits, daily chores especially food
- For us people sent already made meals, platters, etc. I had never heard of this before but wow how helpful, given none of us were hungry and up to making anything but this way there was something already made and out so easier for us to grab a quick bite that we may not have done otherwise. I actually do this all the time now for people. We had breakfast, lunch and dinner delivered. People had connected with each other to ensure all meals were covered across a day. Also some sent a house cleaner or did it themselves, did our laundry, took care of our young children -- anything to allow us time to grieve. People drove us to our apts for planning the funeral, did our groceries. I certainly learnt alot and now I use a lot of these when I hear of a death in someone's family.
- 1. Assistance with going through the paperwork - I found that extremely overwhelming. 2. Meal prep. 3. Offering a listening ear.
- Drop off food, text, call, listen

- 1) Be present. That doesn't mean you have to be physically there 24/7, but it is important to know that they are only one phone call away. 2) Listen. You don't always have to have advice to give, nor is that always what someone is looking for. Sometimes people just need to be heard. It's very easy to get lost in your grief. Being able to verbalize your thoughts/feelings is an important step towards healing. 3) Remind them that though it may not seem like it, tomorrow will come. Plan for a walk in the park. Slowly the little things will help to remind your friend that they can overcome this while still keeping their family member close to their heart.
- 1. Stay with the person for at least a day. 2. Verbally acknowledge how awful the tragedy is and hold the person. The sobbing will end sooner if you comfort the person. 3. Set a regular meeting with the person, once a week go for a walk."
- Call , come over to visit and just listen
- Go for a walk, talk and listen to the stories of your love ones no matter how many times you tell the same story.
- 1. Be there, a shoulder to cry on. 2. Help with day to day tasks - cut the grass, look after your children, prepare food, etc. 3. Talk about your loved one with you. Don't be afraid to say their name. Families long to hear stories!
- Check in daily, go for walks, listen and ask questions.
- Definitely come for a visit, go for a walk in nature, take you out for a meal. When [my husband] passed away, Covid cut out the visits, except for a few immediate family, but others phoned and had long conversations to compensate somewhat.