

Healing in Grief

A Guide for
Everytown for Gun Safety's
Peer Support Groups

everytownsupportfund.org

“Grief is like a long valley, a winding valley where any bend may reveal a totally new landscape. As I’ve already noted, not every bend does. Sometimes a surprise is the opposite one; you are presented with **exactly the same sort of country you thought you had left behind** miles ago. This is when you wonder whether the valley isn’t a circular trench. But it isn’t. There are partial recurrences, but the sequence doesn’t repeat.”

C. S. Lewis

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Healing in Grief

Many survivors of gun violence, including those who have had loved ones taken by gun homicide or suicide, or those who are wounded, witness gun violence, or endure abuse with a gun, suffer from feelings of loss and grief. Survivors experiencing grief may have different needs, but we know there is limited immediate support for survivors and that their grief can be isolating and lead to despair. We also understand that many people live far from family members or communities that may otherwise support them.

Through sharing experiences, empathy, and healthy coping strategies, peer support groups can be a space where survivors of gun violence can process grief and heal. By introducing people to others who are going through a similar experience, support groups offer a way to normalize the grief experience. Groups provide survivors opportunities to learn new ways of problem-solving or coping strategies by hearing about and discussing these with a peer facilitator, and from listening to the experiences of other members. They also offer the chance for participants to help others, which can be emotionally beneficial.

The Everytown Survivor Network offers virtual grief support groups at various times throughout the year, bringing survivors together. This notebook is a collection of exercises for home that accompany the support group's grief curriculum. These exercises can be used to supplement the group experience, or be used on their own. Because grief can change over time, the exercises can also be used repeatedly and independently of the others.

Wherever you are in your grief and healing process, we hope you find this workbook helpful to you.

Taking Care of You

Grief is heavy and takes a lot out of us; self-care might be the first thing that gets lost in the shuffle. Adopting a strategy for maintaining self-care is a first line of defense to support your emotional, mental, and physical well-being throughout this discovery process.

Self-care practices are the things we do for ourselves to maintain and improve our emotional, mental, and physical well-being. We've all heard about how to live a happy and healthy life; eat right, exercise, and get plenty of rest. This is easier said than done, especially after you've experienced the trauma of gun violence. But there are methods you can put into place that may ease the pain and help you as you heal.

Use the space below to build your self-care plan.

Exercise 1

1. Identify your current self-care activities. Take five minutes to write down all the things you do to take care of yourself. Include things like I walk for 30 minutes every day, I eat at least one healthy meal a day, I talk to my best friend every week, etc. Some things we do to soothe ourselves are not really healthy or helpful. Write those things down too.

After you have brainstormed for five minutes, categorize these activities into “helpful” activities or “not helpful” activities.

3: Finalize the list of things you want to put into practice. Now that you have a list of things you do for self-care, along with things you want to try, take a careful look and scratch through those things that are no longer serving you, are not healthy, or you are not likely to do. The activities that remain can now become part of your plan. In the space below, write down all of the activities that remain on your list.

4: Think about what challenges or barriers you face in putting your list into practice. There are things that might get in the way of you creating a self-care plan. They can include things like time, money, motivation, support, or you — yes, *you* can get in your own way. In the space below, write a list of challenges or barriers you may encounter in putting these activities into practice.

5: Create your final plan. Now you are ready to write down your final plan. It is helpful to write down your goals, what you want to do to reach those goals, and when you will do those activities. For example:

Goal: Maintain a good relationship with my best friend.

Self-care Activity: Call my best friend regularly.

When: Every Saturday.

In the space below, write one goal down for each area of your life: physical, emotional, mental, social, and spiritual. Add a category of your own, if you'd like.

Goal: _____

Self-care Activity: _____

When: _____

Goal: _____

Self-care Activity: _____

When: _____

Goal: _____

Self-care Activity: _____

When: _____

Goal: _____

Self-care Activity: _____

When: _____

Goal: _____

Self-care Activity: _____

When: _____

Self-care plans are not written in stone and can be changed whenever you find methods are not serving you. Sometimes, particularly during periods of intense stress or grief, all of the things you want to do can feel overwhelming. If that becomes the case, simply commit to what you *can* do — even if it's one thing — for you. This plan is not a pass/fail test, but rather a reminder designed to help you prioritize your own needs.

Understanding Trauma and Grief

The idea of traumatic stress began to appear in the field of mental health in the past fifty years. Trauma survivors have documented their paths to healing, which has helped our current understanding of trauma along with research and input from mental health professionals. We know that trauma:

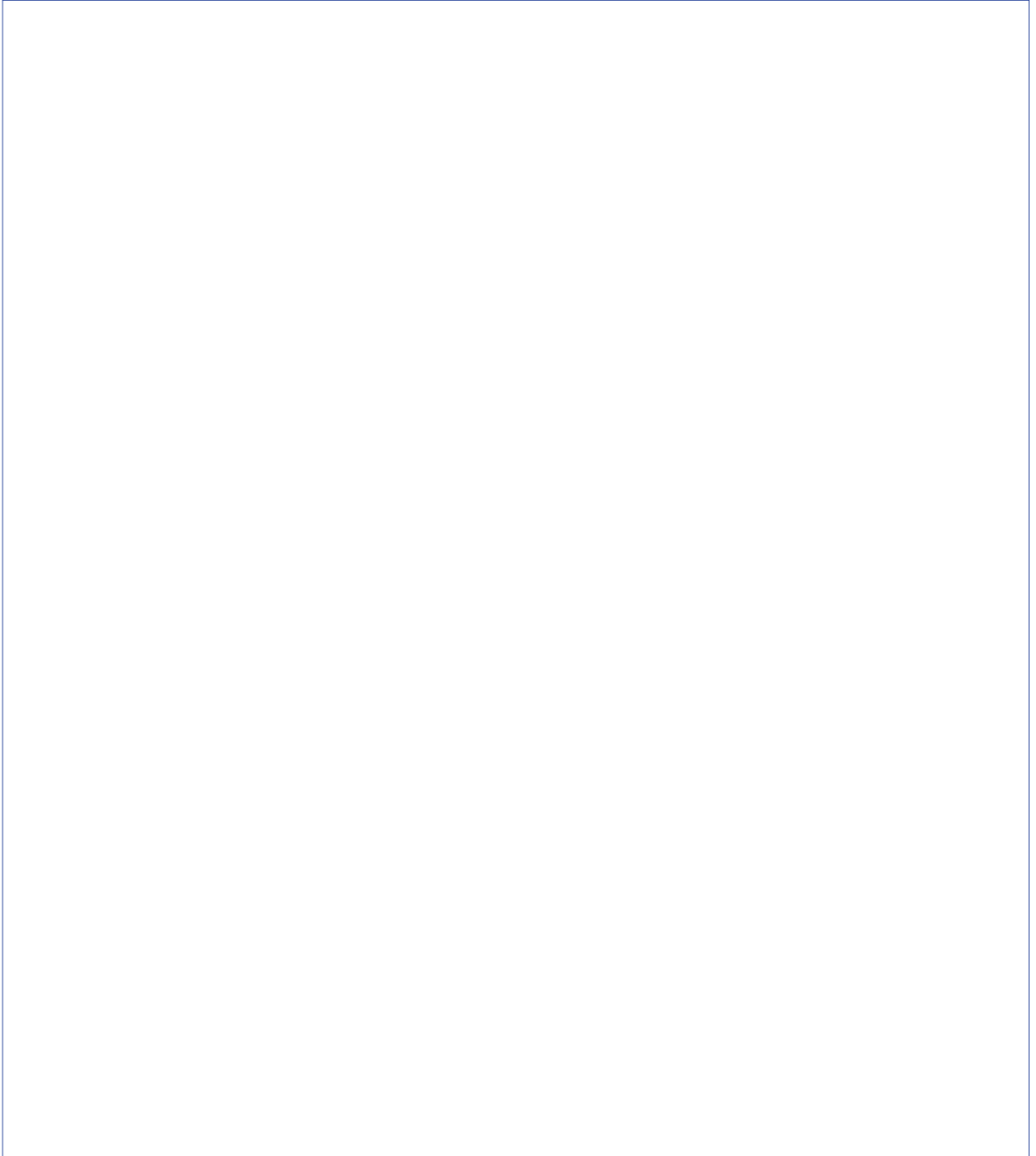
- Is a widespread public health problem;
- Is a result of violence, abuse, neglect, loss, disaster, war & other emotionally harmful experiences;
- Knows no boundaries with regards to age, gender, socioeconomic status (SES), race, ethnicity, location, or sexual orientation; and
- Is almost a universal experience of people with mental health and/or substance use disorders.

Trauma is defined differently by various professions and individuals, but generally refers to an event or series of events that have the potential to have long-lasting impact.

Grief is a word we use to describe the emotional, mental, physical, social, and spiritual reactions to any significant loss. Everyone grieves in their own way, though there are aspects of our grief that connect us to others. While grief is most often something we think of when we talk about the death of someone we love, grief may happen after any significant loss we experience, such as the loss of feelings of personal safety or a sense of self.

Exercise 2

On this page, **paste a picture of a loved one or a picture of yourself before your experience with gun violence.** You might want to make a photocopy of your photo and save the original in a safe place.



Manifestations of Grief

Grief appears in our lives in many ways and tends to ebb and flow. Some survivors describe it as feeling like being on a rollercoaster ride, or floating on (or under) waves of an ocean. When we are grieving, we experience that grief with our emotions, thoughts, behaviors, and bodies.

Emotions/Feelings

- Numbness/shock
- Sadness
- Anger
- Fear
- Depression/Anxiety
- Yearning

Behaviors

- Eating too much or too little
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Withdrawal
- Avoidance
- Trying to stay busy, distracted
- Being aggressive

Thoughts

- Confusion
- Disbelief
- Racing thoughts
- Unwanted thoughts
- Visual memories

Physical

- Headaches
- Stomachaches
- Hollowness in the pit of the stomach
- Racing heart
- Fatigue

Exercise 3

From the lists above, circle those you've experienced. If there are others not mentioned, write those down in the space below:

After a traumatic event and during a grieving process, it can be difficult to make sense of it all, and we can feel overwhelmed as a result. Connecting the way we feel about, think about, behave towards, and physically experience grief can help us to sort it all out and give us a chance to regain feelings of control.

In the space below, write about things that seem to push your emotional hot buttons. What are those experiences? Where do you feel those things in your body? What feelings come about? What thoughts? What needs are you sensing from connecting the emotions, thoughts, and physical sensations you are experiencing? Safety, love, comfort, validation?

Guilt, Regret, and Shame

While emotions, thoughts, behaviors, and physical symptoms are all manifestations of grief, guilt represents self-blame and is a very powerful response that can become consuming and may complicate your grieving process. Much of guilt is irrational and can be overcome by “testing reality.”

As someone who is grieving, you may feel guilty about being alive when your loved one, friend, or neighbor is dead or wounded, or about how others' lives have been impacted by your experience. Guilt often comes about due to something that happened during the time of death or shooting that the survivor feels they could have somehow prevented.

Guilt may also relate to unfinished business. Things left unsaid, a longing to have done things differently, and other potential regrets can all contribute to feeling guilty.

What feelings of guilt have you experienced? Are these feelings rational or irrational? In other words, is there anything you could have done to prevent what happened, or is that something you wish you could have done?

A helpful exercise might be to take your exploration of guilt step-by-step.

Exercise 4

1. Identify exactly what you feel guilty about. Do you feel as though you could have done something that would have prevented the gun violence from happening?

2. Is that feeling rational, or irrational? Is there truly anything you could have done differently, or are feeling you SHOULD have done something differently, when realistically that was not possible.

3. If you feel comfortable, talk with a confidant about your feelings of guilt. Be selective about who you choose. A supportive, objective voice can be helpful to sort out what might be rational and what might not be.

4. If there is something you could have done differently, begin to explore ways to forgive yourself. We tend to be very hard on ourselves. Show yourself the same grace and compassion you would for someone you love.

5. Imagine talking to your loved one or your prior self about your guilt. Imagine what your loved one might say to you, or what you would say to yourself. Chances are, you would receive love and forgiveness.

Notes: _____

Grief and Adjustment

When we experience a traumatic loss, we often focus on the tangible — the person, the house, the job, the relationship, etc. That is a huge part of grief but there are other parts of grief we are less aware of. Those are the secondary losses that happen over time like dominoes falling, creating far more to cope with than the primary loss alone.

Our identities can be a part of the collateral damage. Our identity is created from the roles, relationships, and responsibilities we have in our life, and much more. The way we think of ourselves, how we define ourselves, and the story we tell ourselves about who we are all come together to create our identity. Yet we don't always have a conscious awareness of our identity, let alone the identity changes that occur after experiencing trauma.

Exercise 5

Consider writing a letter to your loved one or to yourself that talks about how your life has changed since your experience with gun violence, including changes in your role(s) and your identity. Tell them, or yourself, what you miss the most or how they have helped you through the grieving process. Add anything else you would like to tell them. You may have distinct feelings of anger around all that has been lost or changed since your experience, and sometimes anger can lead to feelings of guilt. Feelings are not always rational — they simply are. Connecting with them, exploring them, and letting them go can be a powerful tool towards healing.

Dear _____,

Meaning Making

In his book, “Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief,” David Kessler, a grief expert who needed to find meaning following the sudden death of his 21-year-old son, writes “meaning comes through finding a way to sustain your love for the person after their death while you’re moving forward with your life. Loss is simply what happens to you in life. Meaning is what you make happen.”

When thinking about the ways you can engage in activities that create meaning for you, what would you like to try over the next week to help in that process? Write a poem, draw a picture, create a memorial, reconnect with an old friend to tell them how you are doing — what would you like to do? Set your intention to get started on that activity.

Exercise 6

Use the space below to write your poem or draw your picture, or use the space to describe what activity brings you meaning.

The Role of Spirituality

The beliefs we hold about the world help us to maintain a sense of balance and predictability. When something traumatic takes someone or something from us, it can shake our foundation. We may no longer see people, places, and things in the way we did before. This earth-shattering change can leave us out of balance and questioning who we are and, fundamentally, what is the meaning of life?

You may consider yourself religious, a person of faith, a spiritual person and/or a humanist. Regardless of your point of view, the significant losses that follow an act of gun violence may leave you questioning. Some survivors say their faith has been strengthened. Others do not have a good experience with their faith leaders or faith communities in their grief, adding another loss to the already mounting list.

The path back to a belief about the world that brings you calm and comfort may be as rocky and long as your grief process. But there are things you can do to rediscover what it is for you:

- If prayer serves or sustains you, set aside time for it;
- Read spiritual texts that you find comforting, attend services, and share your circumstances with a religious leader who can help place the death in the context of your faith;
- Gardening or communing with nature, which offers ample opportunity to observe the rhythms of life and death in the natural world, is also soothing to some people;
- So, too, is meditation or yoga;
- Specific rituals and rites — whether sitting shiva, setting up an altar inside your home, or gathering at the cemetery once a year — can draw people together and encourage them to share their grief.

If and when you feel comfortable with any of the activities above, commit to one. You might even want to consider one of these to add to your self-care plan.

Staying the Course

When making your way through this workbook, at some point you may have realized your grief work has just begun. As C. S. Lewis wrote, grief is a lifelong exploration with many bends. There will be times in your life when you won't feel much like addressing your grief at all. Get to know yourself by getting in tune with what feels emotionally safe to you. There is a natural process of doing grief work and giving your heart and mind a break. You may find putting this workbook in a drawer is helpful, only to pick it up later with a fresh perspective at a later time.

As your life continues, you will experience more, explore more about yourself, and your loved one and older self will continue to live with you. Their presence in your life will take on new meaning as you heal and grow.

Exercise 6

Take a moment to reflect on where you are, and where you'd like to go next. Would you like to do more self-reflection, see a grief counselor, join a grief group, read a book on grief, buy a journal to do a deeper dive? Or would like to take a break for a while? Your grief journey is your own.

Resources

Sign up for the Everytown Survivor Network for more information about our grief and trauma support groups available to survivors over the age of 18 as well as other resources available year-round at everytown.org/survivors.

The Everytown Survivor Network also offers individual peer support and mentorship through its SurvivorsConnect program. Through this program, survivors are matched with volunteer SurvivorsConnect Leaders, all of whom have experienced gun violence in their own lives and have been trained to provide this type of support. If you would like to connect with a SurvivorsConnect Leader, please follow this link: secure.everyaction.com/oj2FmbDzfkmpGkrlqqZwZA2

Additional resources can be found on Moments That Survive site, located here:

momentsthatsurvive.org/resources



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