

Responses of Secondary Sufferers

The family members, friends or co-workers of a person experiencing a trauma, in many ways, experience feelings similar to those of the primary sufferer. They not only want to give support and help the sufferer deal with her/his feelings, they also need to deal with their own feelings regarding the incident and the impact on their relationship with the sufferer.

Significant others may feel responsible for taking care of the sufferer or helping the sufferer make decisions. They may want to give her/him support but don't know how to or what to say.

Feelings/Reactions of Significant Others:

- Concern for the sufferer of the critical incident.
- Confusion about how to deal with the situation.
- Difficulty understanding why.
- Helplessness—wishing they could help the sufferer or have prevented the incident, and wanting to “fix” the situation so that life can get back to “normal.”
- Shame regarding the reaction of family members, acquaintances and the community, if the critical incident is criticized. This shame can lead to feeling a need to distance oneself from the sufferer, leaving the sufferer feeling isolated, rejected or blamed for the incident, which can be very damaging.
- Loss of closeness/contact with the sufferer. It may be difficult for friends and family not to take this loss personally.
- Questioning the meaning of life and one's own vulnerability to tragedy.
- Wanting to harm the person responsible. Although a natural reaction, wanting to strike out at the person responsible may create further crisis.
- Frustration with other professional systems.
- General sense of sadness.
- Recalling past personal losses and tragedies.



Suggestions for Coping:

- Simplify. Reduce your “to do” list.
- Get more rest and relaxation.
- “Talk it out” with your friends/family or EAP.
- Know that it is “okay” to be feeling your own pain related to your significant other's loss.
- Recognize your significant other's world has been turned upside down and they may not be as engaged in your relationship as in the past.
- Avoid excess of food or alcohol.
- Exercise more.