

Coping With Having Caused Accidental Death or Injury

There are many ways people can be involved in an incident that harms others. Road accidents are a common cause of accidental death or injury, but there are many others. You may, for example, be a manager whose decisions played a role in placing a staff member in harm's way.

No matter how tangential your involvement, these sorts of incidents are very difficult. This tip sheet describes common reactions you may experience after an incident like this, and things that may help.

Common reactions

Causing accidental death and injury creates a “moral injury”. A moral injury occurs when you have participated in something, even accidentally, that breaks your moral code—your sense of what is the “right and good” thing to do. A moral injury often triggers powerful mixture of grief, guilt, shame, and trauma.

Immediately after the incident, you might into shock and feel completely overwhelmed. You may “lose time” and not be able to remember what happened during this period later. Or, you may be able to remember some details of that accident or moment very clearly and unable to remember other details.

In the first few days or weeks after the incident, you may experience some of the following signs of major trauma:

- ✓ Feeling numb, disconnected, and detached from the world around you, or from yourself.
- ✓ Sleep problems—having a hard time falling asleep, staying asleep, or staying awake. You may have nightmares.
- ✓ Flashbacks, thoughts, images, and memories of the incident may dominate your thoughts.
- ✓ A high stress level, which can interfere with daily life and create physical problems such as an upset stomach.
- ✓ Sadness, grief, guilt, and/or shame. This may feel constant or it may come in waves.
- ✓ Fear, including fears you know to be irrational. You may want to avoid certain places, settings, activities, or situations. You may feel jumpy and startle easily. You may be “hyper-vigilant” (for instance, you might need to check and re-check to make sure something or somebody is safe).
- ✓ Memory problems and difficulty concentrating.
- ✓ Irritation—you may feel more impatient, have a “shorter fuse,” be quicker to anger.
- ✓ Difficulty being loving and feeling connected to others.

- ✓ A sense that you can never know happiness again, that you are a “bad” person, and that the world is a “bad” and unsafe place.

Over time and with support, these initial symptoms of trauma often go away. However, people who have caused accidental death or injury often report **ongoing challenges** related to:

- ✓ Feeling like you have no right to be living, and wishing to change places.
- ✓ Wanting to be punished or to suffer yourself, because you feel like this can in some way make up for what has happened.
- ✓ Feeling guilt and shame every time you remember what happened.
- ✓ Feeling like this has touched every part of your life.
- ✓ Wanting to reach out to the victim’s family.
- ✓ Feeling like you don’t deserve to be happy, or that bad things will happen if you relax and feel happy.
- ✓ Feeling like something bad will happen to you or someone you love as a sort of cosmic payback or impending karmic justice.
- ✓ Feeling like this cancels out every good thing you have ever done.
- ✓ Anxiety or avoidance in the face of similar situations. For example, if it was a driving accident you may avoid driving (or avoid driving under similar conditions).

Things that can help

There is no simple path to healing after you have caused accidental death or injury. Many people who have experienced this report facing three challenges:

1. Coping with emotional distress
2. Grappling with a sense of responsibility
3. Finding a way to honor the experience and those who were harmed by seeking hope and growth and becoming better, stronger people.

Here are some things that may help you as you seek to come to terms with what has happened.

1. Know that you are not alone

It is not something that is often talked or written about, but there are many people every year who are involved in accidents and incidents that injure or kill somebody else. You are not the only one who has had this terrible experience. It may help to read about other people’s experiences online, or to talk to other people who have had similar experiences.

2. Find trusted people to talk to

Many people who have caused accidental death or injury find strength and solace from talking to trusted people about what happened and how they feel. These trusted people may be friends and

family members, a counselor, or other people who have also caused accidental death and injury and who understand at a deep and personal level what you are going through.

Speaking with a counselor can be particularly helpful because many people in this situation don't want to discuss the accident with people that they know. They fear that talking about what happened with friends and family will burden them or may damage the relationship.

There is some wisdom in being hesitant to share the story with other people. You yourself need safety and understanding if you do not want to risk being further injured by other people's reactions. This is why speaking to a counseling can be particularly helpful, as they can provide a compassionate, wise, neutral source of support. If you have caused accidental death or injury, it is strongly recommended that you seek out a good counselor. Counseling can help you process the trauma, guilt, and responsibility.

Definitely seek help from a counselor or doctor if you feel suicidal, you worry you cannot control your anger, and/or your distress is interferes significantly with your life for more than one month.

3. Remind yourself that you will not always feel this way

Experiencing intense feelings of distress, guilt, and grief are normal after accidentally causing death or injury. However, you can find a path to peace over time. You will not always feel this bad (and nor do you deserve to, no matter what your role in the accident was).

4. Write a letter to the people affected

Write a letter to the people affected by the incident—both the person who was killed or injured and their loved ones. You may never send this letter but it can be very helpful to write it anyway and tell them what is on your heart. (*Note:* Don't ever send a letter like this immediately after you've written it—always take time to carefully consider whether a letter like this should be sent.)

5. Gently challenge feelings of guilt and shame

After an event like this it is common and normal to feel grief, guilt, and shame. However, over time these thoughts and feelings can take on a life of their own. They can continue to grow and intensify, until you can feel as if they dominate everything. Counseling can help with this, and you can also actively seek out counterbalancing thoughts and truths such as:

- ✓ Accidents happen to everybody
- ✓ I never intended or wanted anybody to get hurt
- ✓ I would change things if I could
- ✓ Sometimes we can never figure out "why" something has happened
- ✓ Feeling constantly guilty and unhappy will not change things

6. Do something that helps you release the burden

Try to find some way of helping yourself release the weight you feel related to what happened. This is probably not something you can do just once, it will likely be something you have to try to do time and time again at different points in years to come. Some things that may help with this include prayer, meditations, affirmations, writing about it, participating in rituals of atonement and reconciliation, and performing acts of service for others.

7. Confront your level of responsibility

Some people who are involved in events that kill or injure others were neither reckless or negligent—they were just in the wrong place at the wrong time, or made a decision that was “correct” according to policy but which had unintended consequences. Others, however, made serious mistakes (such as drunk driving, careless inattention, or providing inappropriate advice or medical treatment). Confronting your level of responsibility for the accident is an important step in transforming trauma to growth. This can be a difficult and complicated process, and speaking to a good counselor can be very helpful.

8. Seek out meaningful rituals of atonement and reconciliation

Over time, consider participating in some sort of ritual related to apology, atonement, and/or reconciliation. Different faith traditions and cultures from around the world have many such rituals and ceremonies. Participating in these sorts of rituals can help.

9. Do something good for others

Doing something good for others will not erase your feelings of sorrow or turn back the clock, but it can help you live more positively and purposefully in the aftermath of a tragedy for which you bear some sense of responsibility or connection. So look for something positive and symbolic to do in remembrance and acknowledgment. Something that benefits other people. People who have caused accidental death or injury have reported that doing things like planting trees, volunteering, and supporting a cause has helped them.

Remember...

There is no getting around it: causing accidental death and injury will change your life. It will always be a part of your story now, and something that you carry with you in some form.

While it may always be a part of your story, however, it does not have to become your entire story. This does not have to crowd out everything else. Remember that there is still room in your life and your story for feeling hopeful, content, and happy. This does not define you completely. There is no easy path to peace. However, as you respond to this event it can even push you towards new resolve, growth, and strength.

For example, many people who have accidentally caused injury or death report becoming more empathic over time. Some extricate themselves from unhappy situations at home or work. Some stop drinking or using drugs. Others dedicate themselves in new ways to service, creativity, or parenting.

You may feel that you don't deserve that, but you will only increase the scope of the tragedy if you become an additional victim of the accident. So, remember, you are not betraying the person who was injured or killed if you ask yourself what you can do to attempt to create something positive out of the tragedy.

KonTerra is available to support. Mental health professionals can help minimize the impact of a stressful event and help promote resilience. Confidential counseling, problem solving, and support is available to help with a wide range of issues or concerns. Contact us to learn more.