



How We Support One Another in Tragedy: Five Principles

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There is a great deal of work now to prepare mental health workers to support the millions impacted directly, indirectly and collectively by the atrocities of October 7 and their wake. This work is of the utmost importance, a way for us to actualize our humanity. **But we can all – each and every one of us – contribute to the collective grieving, healing and recovery of our community.** I want to share some core principles to help us all – family members, friends, neighbors, and community members – to support one another in these saddest and darkest of days. Above all, we must first remember that we innately have, within each of us, all that is needed to support one another, as well as all that is needed to heal and recover.

Here are 5 principles that can help us, to support one another in tragedy, to heal and to recover:

1. BE PRESENT. Be present with everyone around you who is grieving, afraid, confused, enraged, or whatever they may be feeling. There are at least two forms of presence that we may choose. **One form of presence** simply refers to being physically present, accessible, and available. **A second form of presence** refers to trying, with intention, to bring our attention and awareness to our interactions, in the present moment. To not only be physically present (which is oftentimes enough) but to also be as emotionally present, accessible, and available as you can, in that moment. It is also important for us to remember that in moments of such tragedy, presence often feels painful and overwhelming. So, we need to modulate our presence, like turning the dial on the stereo up or down, to a level that feels safe, that we can tolerate and sustain.

2. AFFIRM AND NORMALIZE. It is important to affirm, validate, and normalize that whatever someone feels – no matter how painful and difficult or frightening – it's normal. In response to such tragedy, feelings and thoughts may include sadness and pain, grief, fear and anxiety, guilt and shame, anger and rage, or blunted numbness and even apathy and indifference. We may also feel out of control, unstable, or even frightened by our own responses. These reactions are all completely normal and valid human responses. It's how the body and brain process experiences, particularly such painful trauma and loss. All these responses simply mean that you are human, alive, and healthy. It's what and how your human mind and body should feel after an *inhuman* experience.

3. CONNECT WITH COMPASSION. At the heart of connecting with others, and particularly connecting to help us heal, is willingness to empathically share the pain we encounter in the people we seek to support. When we connect with others with empathy, at a time when they (and we) are suffering, our compassion emerges naturally. Compassion is meeting the suffering – present in all of us – with love and kindness. This idea is crucially important because the simple giving and receiving compassion is healing, it may be the most potent and powerful *human medicine* that we can access. Fortunately, we all have this innate capacity. We are wired to connect and care, and to respond to suffering with compassion through connection.

4. CREATE PURPOSE THROUGH ACTION. There are many ways that we can support one another to take action. Action is a powerful and accessible way to find purpose and make meaning, even in tragedy – especially in tragedy. **One form of action** involves connecting with your personal values that are important to you in order to act in ways that bring a sense of purpose and meaning. For example, volunteering and giving to others in need, or seeking out friends and family with whom to talk or connect. **A second form of action** is, more simply, taking action for the purpose of being an active agent in our lives, to feel a sense of doing and being. For example, this type of behavioral action might involve initiating a routine – such as eating breakfast, taking a walk, brushing your teeth, or taking a shower. Taking actions, small or big, momentary or sustained, is a way to be, even in the darkest of times. Over time, finding and making purpose and meaning is an important element of recovery and healing.

5. BE WILLING TO RECEIVE. An essential part of supporting others is *also* cultivating our own willingness to receive support from others. Let others be present with us, share our pain, and connect with us. It is exceedingly difficult to sustain being present, affirming-validating-normalizing, connecting through compassion, and helping others to create purpose and meaning through action, when we are not willing to receive support, compassion, and care. Much like giving, we are innately wired to receive care and compassion through connection. But we must choose to be willing to receive, so that we can continue to give and heal.