

When Tragedy Strikes

Finding Security In A Vulnerable World

by Tim Jackson

Are you near a TV?" was the question my wife blurted out when I picked up the phone. "No," I responded, somewhat surprised that I didn't get the usual upbeat greeting from her. I was working at my desk as I would be on any normal Tuesday morning. "Get to one!" she insisted. "Two planes have just hit the World Trade Center towers in New York. They think it might be terrorists!"

Moments later I was huddled around a small TV monitor in a cramped video editing suite with a few co-workers. We stared in stunned silence as the images of United Flight 175 and American Flight 11 slashing into the two towers were replayed again and again. As we tried to absorb the enormity of what was happening, the south tower collapsed in a cloud of smoke and rubble. A short time later the north tower collapsed into itself. One moment they were there. Then they were gone, taking with them an unknown number of lives. For the rest of that day and many more to follow, I was glued to every newscast to learn as much as I could of the fate of those caught in what certainly has become one of the most surreal events I have

ever seen. The horrific images I witnessed are forever etched in my memory.

The world changed that day for all of us. And not just for those in the US. Terrorists served notice on 9/11 that there is no place on earth that is truly safe. If the last remaining superpower in the world could be hit with such a devastating blow, we're all vulnerable. As one noted bereavement specialist remarked: "Whether or not we suffered a personal or peripheral loss, we have all lost something very valuable. We have lost our illusion of safety."¹

When tragedy strikes, safety evaporates. Security is undermined. Uncertainty abounds. Fear invades. Human frailty is exposed. Faced with our own mortality, our vulnerability becomes an impenetrable fog that engulfs the human

heart. But tragedy is not exclusively the result of terrorism. It can strike unannounced from just about any direction.

Individual losses of all kinds can change the lives of those who are directly affected. But some events by their unexpected and horrific nature inflict trauma on whole communities.

While I was writing this booklet, I got a phone call telling me that the hometown in which I had been raised had been shaken with tragic news. The body of a 26-year-old niece of a family friend was found by fishermen in a local lake. She'd been strangled.

Tragedy strikes the deepest when it hits where we least expect it, ripping apart our sense of security and shaking us with feelings of loss and vulnerability.

What are we to think

and feel when our own lives are touched by events of cataclysmic proportions? Will we lose all hope? Or will we experience, as others have, that there are ways to survive and even grow in the face of natural disasters, catastrophic accidents, and violence?

Natural disasters are sudden, destructive events resulting in widespread and catastrophic loss of life and property. Events like:

- tornadoes ripping through towns in the US heartland
- mudslides entombing a whole village in Costa Rica
- an avalanche burying a town in the Swiss Alps
- torrential flooding in Cambodia
- typhoons in Malaysia
- wildfires in the Canadian Rockies
- hurricanes in the Caribbean
- volcanic eruptions

in the Philippines

- earthquakes in Turkey, India, and Iran

Catastrophic

accidents are unexpected and unintended events resulting in injury, loss, and damage. They are often caused by negligence or mechanical failures.

- automobile accidents
- plane crashes
- work-related accidents
- home fires
- drownings

Violent tragedies are the result of intentional violence that targets an individual or group, such as:

- assaults
- arson
- kidnappings
- murders
- terrorist attacks
- hostage situations
- wars
- genocide
- torture

In spite of all our efforts to make the world a safer

place for ourselves and our children, it is marked by violence, disasters, and catastrophes. In 2003 there were 380 recorded natural and man-made catastrophes worldwide that claimed the lives of 60,000 people. Sigma, a Swiss firm that researches natural and man-made disasters, published figures documenting 2003 as the seventh highest loss of life in over 30 years. The December 2003 earthquake in the Iranian city of Bam, in which 41,000 people were killed, was the most devastating—the fourth largest since 1970.

A flurry of questions assaults us in the wake of such devastation: What do we have left when so much has been lost? How do we handle such tragedy? How can we survive? How do we feel? How are we *supposed* to feel? Will we ever feel safe again? Will things ever

be normal again? How can we help each other through tragic events?

Many of us question how we would handle facing our vulnerability in the middle of a disaster. That's part of the attraction to films like *Titanic*.

Titanic remains the largest-grossing movie of all time, partly because it's a tragic love story set during a well-known disaster at sea that had both international significance and individual impact. That's true of all tragic events. We see them as huge events, bigger than life. But cataclysmic earth-shaking events are made up of many smaller, but no less significant, stories of real people discovering in the midst of uncertainty what matters most for those who remain.

Tragedy has a way of bringing out the worst and the best in us. The same events that bring looters into

a devastated neighborhood become the occasion for others to reach out to help one another as they never have before. How we respond tells a lot about ourselves.

Some Common Characteristics Of Tragic Events

When we think of a tragedy, we don't think of someone who has lived a full life and dies in his mid-nineties with family and friends surrounding his deathbed. That's a painful loss to be sure, but we wouldn't describe it as tragic. It was expected. The outcome was predictable.

But the loss of life or property resulting from a horrific accident, an act of violence, or a natural disaster is what we usually think of as a tragedy. It was sudden and unexpected. Life was going along so

well, normal by the standards of most, and then it was abruptly interrupted and forever changed without warning.

Like a bomb blast in a busy shopping mall or an earthquake that rumbles wildly, the devastation from a disastrous event spreads out for miles in every direction.

Joanne Jozefowski has identified some common characteristics of catastrophic events that are more likely to precipitate traumatic grief reactions.² As you review this list, think back over how many of these characteristics were present in events that you've directly or indirectly experienced.

They Are Unexpected. They strike out of the blue, unleashing their fury without warning. We feel stunned and shocked, blindsided by a sucker-punch that leaves us dazed and disoriented. We

feel overwhelmed and woefully unprepared.

They Are Uncontrollable. The event not only takes us by surprise, but it is beyond our ability to prevent, change, or manage. We feel powerless to stop it once it starts and vulnerable because we know we couldn't have prevented it from happening.

They Are Unimaginable. The devastating fallout from a tragic event is beyond our comprehension. We simply don't have a normal category for processing what we've experienced. We see it with our eyes, but we just can't believe it's really happening. It's this surreal quality of a tragedy that leaves us stunned by what we previously would have called "unthinkable."

Many people have described watching the events of 9/11 unfold on

live TV as a surreal experience. The images seemed more like those from an action film than the real-life horrors of crashing planes and collapsing buildings. Thousands of people just like us got up to go to work that morning and never came home.

They Are Unprecedented. Nothing like this has ever happened to us personally before. We often don't know what to do or how to respond because we've never faced anything quite like this. Without something to compare it to, we often feel lost, struggling for direction.

They Leave Us Uncertain And Vulnerable. In the aftermath of a tragedy, life's fragility is glaringly apparent. No one fully understands the extensive and long-term impact a tragedy will have on us, our family, our livelihood,

or our future. We feel torn between hope and fear, despair and disbelief. We don't want to give up hoping, and yet we're afraid to allow ourselves to dream or long for anything or anyone ever again.

One of the long-term effects of surviving a tragic event is the lingering feeling of our own vulnerability.

For the first 18 days of October 2002, nothing was certain as a pair of snipers terrorized the area surrounding Washington, DC. Their deadly shooting spree left 10 people dead, 3 critically wounded, and millions traumatized. The randomness of the victims (without regard for age, race, or sex), the ordinariness of the locations (malls, gas stations, parking lots, schools), and the devastating lethal outcome had everyone looking over their shoulder, not

knowing who would be next.

I had a sense of what those in the community were feeling when I heard that one of the female victims had been gunned down outside of the exact store where my sister-in-law had been shopping just a few hours earlier.

In a world of pronounced danger and uncertainty, one thing is certain—*we're all at risk*. All the gun legislation, homeland security, and hi-tech surveillance equipment cannot guarantee absolute security against terrorist attacks. Effective geological research cannot prevent a devastating earthquake. Doppler radar and satellite imaging cannot hold back surging floodwaters, still a hurricane, or stop a deadly tornado. The issue isn't our ability to research and predict potential disasters; it's our inability to prevent and protect ourselves and loved ones from them.

How Do We Experience Our Vulnerability When Tragedy Strikes?

I didn't lose anyone in my family on 9/11, yet I felt stunned and vulnerable. But Lisa Beamer did lose someone. Her husband Todd was one of the passengers on the ill-fated United Flight 93. Lisa describes her initial feelings after she heard the news over the TV that Todd's plane had gone down in a Pennsylvania field.

I made my way to my bedroom and sat down on the edge of the bed, staring out the window in a near-catatonic state. I didn't move; I didn't speak. It was as though time had come to an abrupt halt, and I no longer existed. In a desperate, futile attempt

to make sense of it all, my heart and mind had temporarily shut down. I was numb. I could see and hear, yet I simply continued to stare straight ahead.³

What Lisa experienced is normal. For someone who has been blindsided with the fateful news of a tragic loss or who has survived going through a disaster, confusion and disorientation are normal.

Some of the most common feelings that assault us in the aftermath of a tragedy are:

Shock. The initial high voltage jolt of a catastrophe sends our whole system into a natural and necessary self-protection mode. Shock is a form of emotional numbness that sets in immediately after we witness, survive, or receive the news of a tragic event. It's the emotional circuit breaker that trips to protect

us from a massive overload that could result in total shutdown and the inability to function.

Shock is experienced as going through the motions but not feeling fully present in the moment. Some people describe it as an out-of-body kind of experience, observing themselves without being able to respond. Others describe it as being in slow motion. They hear and see others around them, feel the urgency of the moment, but everything has drastically slowed down. Sounds are muted and may seem distant. Every movement feels agonizingly slow and labored.

Shock is the body's first line of defense against the overwhelming chaos of a tragedy. It's a short-term emotional disconnect, allowing us time to slowly absorb what has happened. But it can't prevent the hurt forever. The pain returns.

Pain. In spite of all our best efforts to prepare for it, nothing can shield us from the searing pain that rips through us after a tragedy, especially if we've lost someone close to us. A jagged hole has been torn in our hearts.

The anguish, this hemorrhage of the soul, seems unbearable and inescapable because of the unexpected and permanent loss of people and things we had come to know, love, and depend on. This agony is a cruel irony because there is a direct correlation between the depth of our anguish and the depth of our attachment to what we've lost. If we love deeply, we'll hurt deeply when we lose those we love. C. M. Parkes writes, "The pain of grief is just as much a part of life as the joy of love; it is, perhaps, the price we pay for love, the cost of commitment."⁴

We writhe in pain when

someone precious to us has been snatched from us. And then fear sets in—the fear of living in a world of risk, danger, and uncertainty.

Fear. Fear and panic descend on those who are desperately struggling to find solid footing after being rocked by a disaster. In this stage of vulnerability, people grapple with thoughts like:

- *Am I going to make it through this?*
- *What am I going to do without him or her?*
- *Will I ever be able to work again?*
- *What am I going to tell my friends and family about this?*
- *How can I go on living without my best friend to share it with me?*
- *Will my life ever be normal again?*
- *Will I ever laugh again?*
- *Will I ever be able to forget what I've seen?*

Whenever we go through a tragic disaster that wipes

out life as we know it, the fear of not surviving becomes a primary preoccupation. Living without the security of precious loved ones and familiar surroundings seems not only impossible but unthinkable. And the dread that it could happen again—another fire, flood, tornado, earthquake, assault, attack, or accident—fuels our fears.

The unfairness of the whole situation leads us to anger.

Anger. “This can’t be happening to me! It isn’t fair! What did I do to deserve this?” are normal responses from people struggling to find meaning in the turmoil of a disaster.

Remember, anger over a tragic loss is to be expected. Plans and dreams have been shattered. The landscape of the future has been forever altered. What was once normal, expected, and often taken for granted is gone, wiped out in a

few brief moments.

Normal is no longer *normal*. Everything has changed. And we don't like the changes. We want life back the way it was. And because we can't have it back, we get mad.

While all struggle and loss provoke anger at some level, tragedy intensifies the anger of those who survive. Whenever someone can be identified as the cause of the tragedy, the anger becomes much more complex. The demand for justice and revenge against those responsible for our pain and fear increases the normal level of anger that accompanies a painful loss.

Abandonment. Those left to pick up the pieces of their lives after a disaster often feel abandoned and alone. Their loved ones, their home, their town, their place of employment, their life as they knew it may have been wiped out. Now

they feel the burden of going it alone.

For those who experience a disaster firsthand and live to tell about it, there is also a separateness that feels strange and unwanted. They may be the object of media attention they feel is undeserved. They're uncomfortable with the "hero" label. All they did was survive, while others who experienced the same disaster died.

Some of the anger in the initial stages of traumatic grief can also be attributed to a feeling of abandonment. This is especially true in the case of loved ones who left critical details undone before their deaths. Financial quagmires, insufficient insurance, no will, or no sound estate planning often add to the bereaved one's feelings of abandonment.

One widow's outcry was, "He's gone and has left me to sort through the mess. He

got off easy. Now I'm stuck dealing with it all alone."

Isolation. When hit by a tragedy, we often feel alone and isolated by a silence that grips our hearts. We don't feel like talking because we think: *"No one could possibly understand what I'm going through. How could they? They haven't walked in my shoes. They haven't seen what I've seen. They don't have a clue what I'm feeling. No one can fully understand my pain, loneliness, and fear!"*

People often withdraw from friends and family who could be a valuable source of comfort in those crucial first stages of sorting through the rubble of a disaster. But often the sheer magnitude of the shock, pain, fear, and anger so overwhelms the survivor that a self-imposed form of exile somehow seems best.

Being Overwhelmed. A catastrophe hammers us

with a barrage of feelings that just don't seem to quit. Like being in the ring with a heavyweight fighter who relentlessly pummels his opponent with his left jabs and sets him up for the crushing blow of his right hook, tragedy has a way of knocking us off balance and then slamming us to the mat. We're left reeling from the blows, emotionally battered and stunned.

An Inability To Focus. The cumulative effect of emotional overload is an inability to focus on basic necessities. Survivors, rescue workers, and those grieving the loss sometimes forget to eat, sleep, change their clothes, comb their hair, or take care of the basic needs of daily living. Normal functioning is labored at best and often feels impossible and futile. "Why bother? Everything is ruined anyway."

Tragedy: What It Takes From Us

Tragedies provoke a profound sense of disruption. All that we once thought safe, secure, and stable seems gone. Things we'd hoped for, dreamed about, and counted on have evaporated before our eyes. The course of life that we had charted for ourselves has been abruptly and radically diverted into harm's way. It's not merely a feeling that the wheels have fallen off but that they have been torn out from under us and we are plummeting over a cliff.

We experience our vulnerability most acutely through the series of losses that follow in the wake of a tragedy.

Loss Of Safety. The world isn't a safe place. Most of us know that, but few of us live as if it's true. Instead, we tend to cultivate a level

of self-delusion, convincing ourselves that we're really safe from harm. Tragedy exposes the undeniable reality of just how vulnerable we really are.

Herman Melville wrote about this lack of safety in his classic, *Moby Dick*: "All men live enveloped in whale-lines. All are born with halters round their necks; but it is only when caught in the swift, sudden turn of death, that mortals realize the silent, subtle, everpresent perils of life."⁵

While sorrow, suffering, struggle, loss, and grief should be expected in a flawed and fallen world, most of us work exceptionally hard to avoid risk and ensure personal comfort. The gale-force winds of tragedy shred the gossamer veil of safety we've erected to deal with the daily anxieties of life.

Melville's words echo Jesus' warning to His

closest followers. He didn't want them to be lulled into believing that living in this world would bring safety or security. On their last evening together, while assuring His disciples that He would not leave them alone, He said, "In this world you will have trouble" (Jn. 16:33).

The word Jesus used for "trouble" has to do with the pressure we feel in the midst of affliction, oppression, and intense distress. The apostle John would later use this same word to describe the worst time of "tribulation" that mankind will ever face (Rev. 7:14). It's a form of trouble that isn't merely annoying or distracting; it discourages, derails, and disables us when we get hit with it. Jesus knew that we would face many threats to our safety and security that would cause us to buckle under the pressure.

Tragedy exposes just

how unsafe we really are, and it reminds us that we're not in control.

Loss Of Control.

Tragedy can shatter the illusion of being in control in this dangerous world. If there's one thing the events of September 11, 2001, have taught the world, it's that no one is ever really in control. Not only is this true of catastrophic events with widespread global impact, but it's also true of the millions of less publicized individual tragedies that occur every day.

The ominous power of a natural disaster—a typhoon, tornado, hurricane, flood, or earthquake—like few other events in our lives, forces us to face the unavoidable and stark reality that we have little if any control over the things and people that matter the most to us. No matter how deeply we love our family or friends, our love will not

protect them from harm, pain, or death. The control we believed we once had quickly evaporates under the scorching heat of tragic circumstances. When we finally surrender to the truth that life is dangerous, death is sure, vulnerability is inescapable, and there is little we can do to make much of a difference, we find ourselves desperately needing answers for our lost confidence.

Loss Of Confidence.

Philip Yancey writes, “Doubt follows pain quickly and surely, like a reflex action.”⁶ Tragic disasters can dismantle our confidence that we can adequately deal with anything life throws at us. Although we may have confidently managed our lives in the past, tragedy forces us to question our ability to handle much of anything.

Victims of disasters, assaults, wars, or accidents

are haunted by doubts and “what ifs.” The details leading up to, during, and after a tragic event seem to replay endlessly: “What if I hadn’t gone to work that day? What if I had? What if I had left early? What if I had gone in late?” A survivor relentlessly sorts through scenarios, hoping to find some overlooked shred of evidence that could have been used to avert the disaster. But when none is found, confidence disappears along with a loss of perspective.

Loss Of Perspective.

People with little or no faith often find themselves faced with spiritual choices they had not considered before. At first, when things are clearly out of control and overwhelming, they tend to instinctively pray for help and intervention to a God they may not know. Then, after some distance from the shock of it all, they

begin just as predictably to blame God, or at least question His presence or absence in the tragedy.

Yancey writes, “Suffering calls our most basic beliefs about God into question.”⁷ That’s true for people of faith as well as those with only a casual acquaintance with God. Followers of Christ are invited by Him to believe that God is good and delights in giving good gifts to His children (Mt. 7:11; Lk. 11:13).

The undermining impact of a disaster, however, is that it can push us headlong into doubts about God and His goodness that we thought we’d settled long ago.

When we’re squeezed by the vice-grip of tragedy, a core question erupts. Larry Crabb asks, “How do we trust a sometimes disappointing, seemingly fickle God who fails to do for us what good friends, if they could, would do?”⁸ After all, we assume, He’s God, He’s

in charge, yet somehow He failed us.

The Bible tells about people of deep faith who battled with doubts about God after suffering tragic losses:

- Job demanded an audience with God to argue over the loss of his fortune, family, and health (Job 13:3–14:1).
- Asaph expressed his bitterness to God over His apparent indifference toward the prosperity of the wicked when compared to the suffering of the faithful (Ps. 73).
- Jeremiah voiced his complaint that his suffering was a direct result of God’s deception (Jer. 20:7-18).
- John the Baptist expressed uncertainty about Jesus’ identity as Messiah when under the duress of unjust imprisonment (Mt. 11:2).

- Even Jesus, when facing the darkest hour of His suffering, asked to be released from it (Mt. 26:39,42). And He felt abandoned by His Father when He took on the sins of the world (Mt. 27:46).

When confidence is lost and perspective is skewed by tragic events, despair sets in and steals hope.

Loss Of Hope.

Tragedy hammers hope the hardest. And hope is what keeps us alive. Despair can set in when dreams are shattered (Prov. 13:12). The agony that life will never be the same again compels us to ask the question: “Why bother going on when what I deeply want is gone? When my spouse, my children, my health, my career, my home, my life are all gone, what’s left to live for?”

Viktor Frankl, a survivor of the Nazi horrors of WWII, wrote: “Despair is suffering without meaning.”⁹ When

we’re overwhelmed by tragedy—our confidence shattered, our security threatened, and our perspective distorted—it’s often impossible to see any meaning or positive outcome from our pain.

Initially, that’s understandable. But facing life and facing loss isn’t an event, it’s a journey of the wounded to live again. Scarred, but still standing.

Tragedy: What It Leaves Behind

Tragedies not only take from us, they also leave us with scars we never wanted in the first place—like survivor guilt, traumatic grief, and acute and post-traumatic stress disorders. Let’s look at how each of these scars affect survivors of tragedies.

Survivor Guilt. For those who live through a

horrific disaster in which others around them are seriously injured or killed, they and their families often find it hard to celebrate their survival while others are grieving their losses.

Frequently, survivors are haunted by a gnawing sense of guilt about being alive. Instead of being grateful, they feel extremely ambivalent. “How dare I celebrate when others are grieving?” “Why did I live when so many around me died?” “Why didn’t I do more to save the others?” This is especially true when their survival seems to have had more to do with coincidence than some conscious choice on their part.

Some have even gone so far as to adopt the irrational belief that somehow their survival was at the expense of others who were lost. Men can especially feel “cowardly” if in their attempts to save their

own lives, they believe they may have harmed others.

This false guilt fuels an unhealthy sense of shame, inadequacy, and self-contempt that shatters a survivor’s self-confidence.

For those who survive a tragedy, the joy of being alive can seem inconsistent with the sadness over those who died. Gratefulness for life can breed guilt. “How can I be happy when others died and their families are sad?” This dissonance complicates the rebuilding process for survivors, their families, and friends. And it often leads to traumatic grief.

Traumatic Grief. All tragedies imply loss. Losses of any kind provoke grief. Grief is the painful process of adjusting to life without the things and the people that we cherish in it (see *How Can I Live With My Loss?* CB921). But the shock wave of an unexpected and tragic loss catapults those

left behind into an intensified level of grief known as traumatic grief.

Joanne Jozefowski writes, “Traumatic grief is a direct response to disastrous events that threaten our own safety, security, and beliefs around which we structure and order our lives.”¹⁰

Those who lose a loved one, a home, or a community through traumatic circumstances are more likely to need professional help in dealing with their grief. The more violent, horrific, and unexpected the loss, the more complicated and prolonged the grief.

People who grieve well don't hurt less. Instead, they use their pain productively as an opportunity to *grow* through it rather than just *go* through it. And that process requires time.

Grief is not an event; it's a journey. Life will never be the same again, but it can

be good again. Our journey through grief sometimes reveals things we never would have seen without it.

Jesus told a story about two houses built on different foundations (Mt. 7:24-27). Both houses were hit with the same torrential rainstorm that produced flash flooding and gale-force winds. One crumbled, but the other didn't. The one built on a foundation of solid rock endured the storm while the one built on sand was destroyed.

Tragedy has a way of exposing our foundations. No matter what the cause, how we weather the storms of life will ultimately depend on the foundation on which we've built our lives.

The Bible provides two foundational truths we can rely on while walking the path of traumatic grief:

- Tragic struggles and losses, no matter what the source, are often

opportunities for growth (Rom. 5:3-5).

- Even in the middle of tragic struggles, God is present and able to do something good for us, no matter how much our circumstances may seem to indicate otherwise (Jer. 29:11; Rom. 8:28).

Some of the choices we make in the process of working through our grief can slowly bring meaning and hope back into our lives. No one chooses grief, but everyone eventually chooses how to respond to it.

For some, tragic events lead to complications that require special help. That's when the resources and training of professional counselors can be helpful.

Acute Stress Disorder (ASD). Within a month of being exposed to a traumatic, life-threatening event that provoked feelings of intense fear, helplessness, or horror, some people

experience difficulty adjusting to normal life. This readjustment period may last from 2 days to a month.

Some indicators that professional help may be needed to work through the aftermath of a trauma are:

- numbness, detachment, or absence of normal emotions
- reduction in awareness of one's surroundings, like "being in a daze"
- loss of interest in or participation in significant activities
- estrangement or detachment from others
- inability to recall important aspects of the trauma
- persistent reliving of the trauma through recurrent images, thoughts, dreams, illusions, or flashbacks
- avoidance of any potential reminder of the trauma
- anxiety or increased

arousal indicated by difficulty sleeping, irritability, poor concentration, hypervigilance, exaggerated startle response, or motor restlessness.

Unfortunately, the media blitz covering tragic events amplifies our exposure to trauma well beyond the scope of those directly involved in them. Adults and children alike can be indirectly traumatized by the horrific images of violence, disaster, and accidents instantaneously broadcast into our homes 24/7 via the electronic media. This can result in symptoms of acute stress.

These symptoms impair our ability to function normally, causing significant distress in our relationships.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). According to the

National Center for PTSD, approximately 17 million people living in North America are exposed to trauma and disaster annually. Of those, about 25-30 percent develop chronic PTSD or other psychiatric disorders.¹¹

Most of us are aware of PTSD from the struggles American vets brought back from the horrors of the Vietnam War. PTSD is a prolonged adverse reaction to acute stress brought on by exposure to extremely traumatic events involving actual or threatened death, serious injury, torture, or confinement. The same basic symptoms for ASD apply to the diagnosis for PTSD.

In short, PTSD is ASD on steroids. It is a more protracted and intensified form of acute stress, lasting longer than a month, and if chronic, can plague a survivor for years. The

onset of this disorder can be delayed for up to 6 months after the trauma—until something triggers the disturbing memories of the event.

PTSD causes significant disturbance, distress, or impairment in all areas of the survivor's life—socially, occupationally, relationally, and spiritually.

When distressful reactions begin to infiltrate and inhibit our daily functioning at home, school, or work, we need to take steps to seek help. That's when professional counselors trained in grief therapy and trauma for ASD or PTSD can help survivors and their families. A process of telling their story, appropriate grief, anxiety reduction, stress management, and ongoing support helps them live productive and healthy lives in spite of the painful memories of past traumas.

Tragedy: What It Can Teach Us

Most of us would prefer to avoid a tragedy. That's normal. But terrorism management specialists argue that a confrontation with tragedy and death has “the potential to be a liberating and growth-enhancing experience.”¹²

Their conclusions agree with those of the ancient writer of Ecclesiastes. He recognized the value in facing tragedy and death:

It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart (Eccl. 7:2).

Tragedy, especially one through which we face our own mortality, often forces us to challenge untested beliefs about our purpose and significance in the world.

Like no other event in life, it demands that we reevaluate how and why we live the way we do. Like it or not, deeply held convictions are most often strongly forged in the furnace of trauma and overwhelming adversity.

Learning through trauma is especially arduous because it demands much more than seeing reality clearly. It demands admitting and accepting reality at its ugliest. And it's often in the midst of that ugliness that we learn the most crucial lessons that form the foundations for the rest of our lives.

What Matters Most.

Like sailors using the North Star to navigate and align their ship in the right direction, traumatic crises often force us to check our alignment to what matters most. We can be so easily distracted by the cares and concerns of daily living that we lose the larger

perspective on what gives us meaning and purpose in this dangerous world.

In the final analysis, it all boils down to what we believe provides eternal meaning and significance in life. According to the Bible, it comes from our relationship with God and our relationship with others through Christ.

Knowing And Loving God. Jesus distilled all the writings of the Old Testament down to two fundamental commands that help us maintain a godly perspective on life, even when tragedy strikes. The first is found in Matthew 22:37-38.

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment.

Loving God is the fundamental relationship around which all others

must align. This is not optional. It is essential. If any other relationship, no matter how important it is, assumes God's primary position of being our North Star, every other relationship will be doomed to failure. We can make it our goal to trust and to please Him (2 Cor. 5:9,15). Otherwise, nothing else really matters.

Once our relationship with God is set in place, we are free to reorient the remainder of our relationships around Him.

Loving Others. Jesus completed His thought in verses 39-40:

The second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." All of the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.

Who is most precious to us? Our spouse? Our children? Our parents? Our friends? All other relationships are most fully enhanced by our love for

God that overflows into our love for others. In fact, genuine love for others is our deepest expression of obedient love for God (Rom. 12:9; 1 Pet. 4:8-11; 1 Jn. 3:11-18).

What Doesn't Matter Much At All.

Tragedy teaches us to trivialize the trivial. In spite of what popular culture tells us, what *doesn't* matter much at all in the final analysis is our agenda and our stuff.

Our Agenda. What do we cherish the most? Often, what gets exposed in times of tragic loss is the fact that we are devoted to running our lives according to our agenda rather than God's. We often pray for Him to cooperate with our plans to fulfill our dreams rather than humbly submitting our hearts to follow His call.

When tragedy unexpectedly interrupts,

our agenda is clearly seen for what it really is—our foolish plans.

Our Stuff. What we also discover, much to our chagrin, is how much time and energy we waste majoring on the minors and minoring on the majors. Our priorities are often out of whack. We may pay lip service to the importance of loving God and loving others, yet we invest most of our time, talents, and resources building our net worth, planning our next vacation, and saving for retirement. While these are good things, our passion to see people grow in Christ gets lost in the scramble to get ahead.

Painful clarity comes in times of tragic upheaval. In the good times when we are satisfied with how well things are going, we tend to forget the Lord, just as Israel would do after entering the Promised Land

(Dt. 6:10-12). God desires our heartfelt devotion in times of triumph as well as tragedy. Unfortunately, He often needs to use tragic events to get our attention.

If we allow God to teach us through our tragedies, then He can equip us to live more confidently in a dangerous world.

Living Confidently In A Dangerous World

In his book *The Survivor Personality*, Al Siebert writes, “People seldom tap into their deepest strengths and abilities until forced to do so by a major adversity.”¹³

Writing almost 70 years earlier, Virginia Woolf would have agreed: “Life . . . is arduous, difficult, a perpetual struggle. It calls for gigantic courage and strength. More than

anything, perhaps, creatures of illusion as we are, it calls for confidence in oneself. Without self-confidence we are as babes in the cradle.”¹⁴

These sobering words of vulnerability are laced with encouragement. They aren't sappy sentiment but reflect a firm grip on reality entwined with hope, like Jesus' final words to His disciples on their last night together. Before He prayed for them and then went to the cross, Jesus taught them:

I have told you these things, so that in Me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world (Jn. 16:33).

These words were both a sober warning and an encouragement to the disciples who would soon be facing extreme persecution, adversity, and trauma. Although

they had no clue what the next few hours, days, or years would hold for some of them, Jesus was preparing them for what was ahead. He knew His death would dismantle them. He knew they would be oppressed, afflicted, distressed, and pressured from all sides. Trouble would be the norm for them. But He didn't leave them there alone.

He offered them hope. What He shared with them was to bring them peace in the midst of their run through the troubling gauntlet of life. Paul, a later disciple, would describe this peace as transcending all understanding while guarding their hearts and minds in Christ (Phil. 4:7).

Peace in the midst of tumultuous trouble was Jesus' encouragement—a new kind of normal. Courage to remain faithful was His command. And a Comforter

to be their constant inner source of strength was His provision (Jn. 16:7-14).

And then, after He had taught them, Jesus led the way through the gauntlet of agony, grief, and sacrificial suffering ahead of them and us. He paved the way for us to overcome in a dangerous world filled with tragedy and trouble.

Run The Gauntlet Well. Athletes who excel in any sport have to face injury and pain. The same is true of those who have run through the gauntlet of life. Tragedies leave us scarred. No one gets through unscathed. We all live with scars of the traumatic battles we've endured. And though we may walk with a limp as evidence that we've paid the price and run the race, we can walk with confidence because our hope in God has been strengthened

through adversity.

Survivors who have grown through tragedy are more humble and hopeful because of what they have endured. And they can truly sing with the psalmist:

God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress (Ps. 46:1-2,7).

Remember, we can use the painful resistance of tragedy to strengthen our faith for the path ahead.

Focus On What You Still Have. People who mature through tragedy have learned and now believe that trauma, disaster, and even death will never have the final word. They still do grieve over what they've lost, but their grieving, as well as their living, is entwined with hope (1 Th. 4:13) because they focus on

what they still have and can never lose.

These hopeful survivors not only honor those they have lost, but they live to love and enjoy those they still have. With Christ as our hope in times of tragedy, all is never lost.

We do have a tendency, however, to lose focus whenever we encounter trouble. The writer of Hebrews reminds us that when adversity distracts us from our focus on Christ, we will grow weary and lose heart (12:2-3).

This pattern of losing focus is especially prevalent after a catastrophic disaster. We must be careful not to lose our focus on Christ. When we keep our eyes on Him, we will be able to sing with the psalmist in Psalm 119:71, "It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn Your decrees."

While much in life can hurt us deeply, no tragedy,

not even death, can steal our hope in Christ or separate us from His love (Rom. 8:35-39).

Honor Those You've Lost. Many people honor their loved ones by using their memory as a springboard to do something positive that gives encouragement to those still living.

In memory of her husband Todd, Lisa Beamer started a foundation to help kids who lost parents in the attacks of 9/11. She also wrote a book about her journey through traumatic grief. She accepts invitations to share her story and to encourage others in their tragedy. It wasn't a platform she wanted, but it is a platform she's been willing to use to redeem a tragic loss that at one point seemed unredeemable.

Connect With Other Survivors. One of the most successful ways that

survivors of trauma are helped is to be connected with others who share similar experiences.

Survivors need to talk. They need to tell their stories. They need to know that someone listening truly understands their invisible wounds—the horror, terror, isolation, guilt, loneliness, rage, and grief that they bear.

They also need to listen. They need to hear other survivors talk about their struggles to make sense out of a senseless event. They need hope to be able to live well in spite of their scars.

How To Help

People experience trauma in varying degrees. There are the primary survivors who have lived through the epicenter of the trauma. There are the families of survivors. There are the grieving families of victims who died. There are

the families who survived but lost everything. There are the safety and rescue workers and the debriefers who are also traumatized by what they see and have to deal with at a disaster site. There are those in the media who cover the stories, and those who are indirectly traumatized when they hear those stories recounted.

Recognize that you are not called to help everyone, but you may be able to help someone. While some help does require specialized training, a willingness to be used of God to “carry each other’s burdens” (Gal. 6:2) is what’s needed.

Consider the following ways that you may be able to help those who are going through a tragedy:

Give Them Time. Do not require anything from a survivor or family member of a survivor, especially in the initial stages of dealing with a trauma. Give them the

time and the space to grieve. Allow them to process their hurt while you try to see, hear, and feel their pain with them. Without any kind of judgment on your part, let them know that it is okay to feel whatever they are feeling. This is crucial to their journey through the traumatic valley of pain.

Philip Yancey described one survivor's comments: "I needed time to digest what was happening in my life and to absorb the changes Perhaps the greatest way to give suffering people time is being patient with them—giving them room to doubt, cry, question, and work out strong and often extreme emotions."¹⁵

Don't Try To Fix It.

Nothing you do can fix the problem. You can't change history, raise the dead, or restore what's been lost.

Just sitting with those who are in pain can be

encouraging to them. Not having anything to say is okay. Nothing will eliminate the pain, but a touch or a hug reassures them of your presence and gives them a taste of the presence of the God of hope in you (Col. 1:27). Never underestimate the power of your presence.

Weep With Them.

One of the most precious gifts we can offer to people who have tragically lost loved ones is the gift of our tears. We need to listen to them share their pain, to share their tears, to grieve with them over what they have lost, and to rejoice with them over what they still have (Rom. 12:15).

Meet Immediate Needs. People in the initial stages of trauma are so distraught by the pain that they often forget to take care of themselves—to eat, to change their clothes, to take a shower, or even to sleep. Decisions that

previously would have been almost second nature are now totally forgotten.

Assisting those in grief with funeral arrangements, sorting through paperwork, collecting DNA samples to identify a loved one, choosing clothes for the funeral, transportation of family members, ironing a shirt or dress for the funeral, and many other immediate needs can help keep them from feeling so alone during those painful tasks.

Pray With Them And For Them. In some of the stages of trauma, people often find they just can't pray. Interceding on behalf of those who are traumatized, grieving, and brokenhearted is a privilege we dare not overlook. And imagine the encouragement we bring to those who feel too exhausted to pray when they hear us bring their name to the throne of God.

Our Ultimate Refuge & Hope

Where do we find unshakable confidence to go on when tragedy strikes? King David, a man familiar with tragedy throughout his life, wrote:

*Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from Him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; He is my fortress, **I will not be shaken.** My salvation and my honor depend on God; He is my mighty rock, my refuge. Trust in Him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to Him, for God is our refuge (Ps. 62:5-8).*

David's exhortation 1,000 years before Christ is still true today.

The only refuge for the battered and brokenhearted is a relationship with the God who has shown how

deeply He loves and cares for us (Rom. 5:8).

Jesus invites us to a life of confidence and hope, even when faced with loss:

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in Me (Jn. 14:1).

Trusting in Jesus means depending on Him for what can never be lost (Jn. 1:12; 3:16; 10:10). His life, death, and resurrection assure those who trust Him that they will receive His grace, mercy, peace, forgiveness, eternal life, and unfailing love (Rom. 8:31-39).

No matter what we may lose in this life, Jesus' assurance of His abiding presence now and His promise of an eternal home with Him in heaven can become our unshakable fortress of hope and peace in times of trouble.

Endnotes

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