

What is traumatic loss?

There's variation in how traumatic loss is defined in the research, but for our purposes, I think this definition from [Wortman & Latack \(2015\)](#) does the trick:

"A death is considered traumatic if it occurs without warning; if it is untimely; if it involves violence; if there is damage to the loved one's body; if it was caused by a perpetrator with the intent to harm; if the survivor regards the death as preventable; if the survivor believes that the loved one suffered; or if the survivor regards the death, or manner of death, as unfair and unjust."

That's a pretty broad definition, and we should also add circumstances in which the survivor witnessed the death, when their own life was threatened, and when the mourner experiences multiple deaths.

In addition to the nature of the death, other trauma risk factors include:

- Having to make medical decisions about life support, organ donation, etc
- Uncertainty about whether the person has died (ex. they are missing; information about their condition has not been disclosed)
- Media attention
- Limited opportunities for social support
- Being blamed for the death
- Prolonged court proceedings
- Having a prior history trauma

What is the impact of experiencing a traumatic loss?

Generally speaking, it has been shown that traumatic death, especially violent deaths, lead to increased distress. For example, [a 2003 study](#) looking at the bereavement trajectories of 173 parents who experienced the death of a child by accident, suicide, homicide, or undetermined causes found that five years after the violent death 27.5% of mothers and 12.5% of fathers met the diagnosis for PTSD. These rates were significantly higher than those in the general population.

When someone experiences a traumatic death, their challenges become two-fold. One, they must cope with the trauma and two, they have to cope with their grief. The experiences of trauma and grief are two different things unto themselves, yet after a traumatic death, they get thrown into one big emotional blender. Things get tangled, thoughts and emotions get fused, and people sometimes find themselves utterly stuck. Understandably, it is not uncommon for people who've experienced a traumatic death to experience significantly more intense, pervasive, and prolonged symptoms.