

trauma and grief are different

when a loss is sudden, through accident, violence, suicide, or an unexpected medical event, two things arrive at once: grief, and trauma. they are not the same, and they do not always heal at the same pace or in the same way. grief is the ache of missing someone. trauma is what the body and mind do when something is too much, too fast, to take in. understanding that you may be carrying both can make the strange, frightening parts feel less like you are losing your mind, and more like a wound doing what wounds do.

this is not weakness. it is how the mind protects itself when something is too much to absorb all at once. and it does ease, with time and with help.

WHAT TRAUMA CAN FEEL LIKE

flashbacks, the moment of finding out, or imagined images of the death, replaying without warning.

shock and unreality, a numb, dreamlike distance that can last far longer than people expect, returning in waves even months on.

a body on high alert, racing heart, jumpiness, trouble sleeping, a sense of danger that will not switch off.

avoidance, steering hard around places, people, or reminders, because they bring the wave back.

none of these mean you are not coping. they are common, understandable responses to something genuinely unbearable.

WHEN THERE ARE POLICE AND COURTS

a sudden or violent death often brings a second, parallel grief, the slow machinery of investigations, inquests, and court processes that can drag on long after the world expects you to have 'moved on'. this is not legal advice, only a gentle companion through it.

expect it to interrupt your grieving. official processes can reopen the wound at unpredictable moments, a phone call, a hearing date, a piece of news. it is normal to feel set back each time. you are not.

you can ask for things to be explained. you are allowed to ask investigators or officials to slow down, to repeat, to clarify. you do not have to understand legal language on the spot, and you can bring someone with you.

lean on someone for the admin. a trusted friend can take notes, sit in on calls, and hold the paperwork, so you are not carrying both the grief and the logistics alone.

the process is not your grief. verdicts, delays, and outcomes belong to a system. they do not measure your love, and closure from a court is not the same as peace in your heart.

GENTLE WAYS THROUGH THE WORST OF IT

ground yourself when the wave hits. the 5-4-3-2-1 exercise, naming five things you see, four you can touch, three you hear, two you smell, one you taste, brings you out of the flashback and back into the present.

speak the person, not the manner of their death. you are allowed to remember them as they were, not only as how they were lost. the person, not the moment.

let anger have a place. anger at a driver, an illness, a system, even at them, can sit beside love. it does not make you cruel, and it does not need to be resolved tidily.

reach for trauma-trained help. if the images, the unreality, or the jumpiness do not ease, this is trauma, and there are people trained to help with exactly this. reaching for that help is a strength, not a failure.

let every feeling have room. grief, terror, numbness, fury, and even moments of ordinary calm can all share a single day. you are carrying something immense, and you are carrying it as well as anyone could.

IF YOU ARE STRUGGLING

if you are in crisis, or finding it hard to stay safe, please reach out now. you do not have to hold this alone, and help is there.

SADAG (South African Depression and Anxiety Group): 0800 567 567

Lifeline South Africa: 0861 322 322

SADAG operates a 24-hour helpline; if you are in immediate danger, please contact your local emergency services.

we will not pretend this is light. we will sit with you in it.