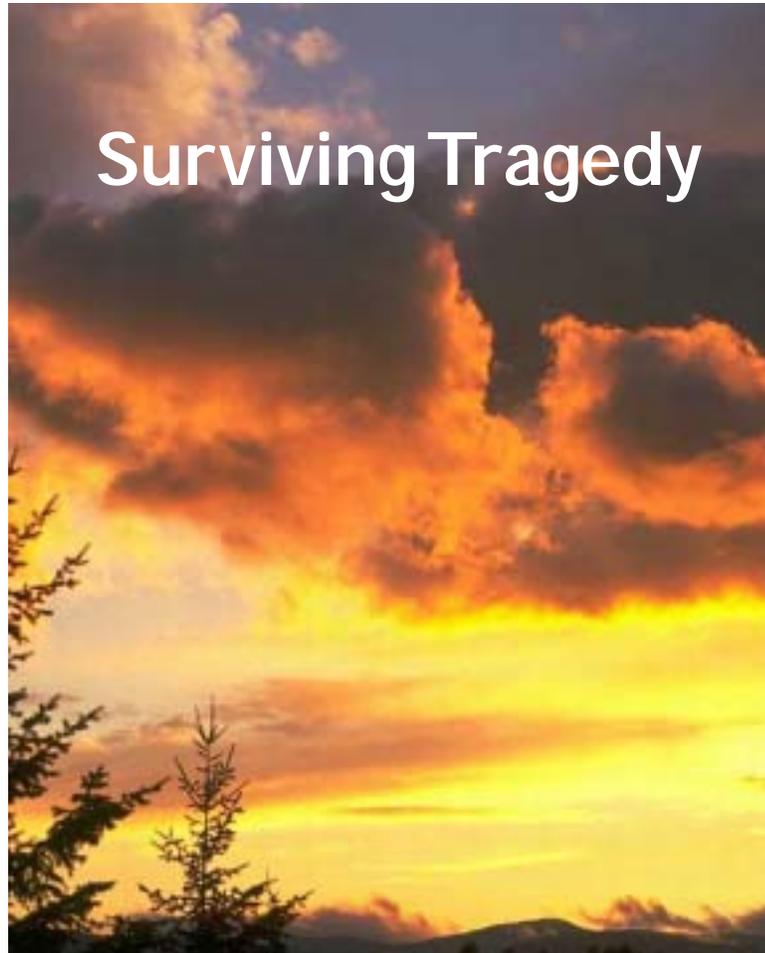


the personal nature  
of **AGRICULTURE**



Surviving Tragedy

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OF WYOMING

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# UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING

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Losing a limb, death, divorce, or losing the farm or ranch shapes the lives of ranchers and farmers in long and lasting ways. Much of the study of people's adaptation to traumatic events focuses on pain and suffering. But in the aftermath of adversity, people often show tenacity and resilience, eventually exhibiting personal growth. Major life crises can be catalysts for personal growth and coping.<sup>1</sup> Why do life crises lead to greater self-reliance, confidence, and effective coping in some people and yet shatter the lives of others?

### **The nature of tragedies**

Whether called tragedy, trauma, or crisis, these types of occurrences place individuals at risk for significant psychological upheaval. The word "trauma" indicates a shocking event. When events occur *suddenly and unexpectedly*, they are more likely to create trauma. Even though events that happen gradually and are not expected to be highly stressful can be; it is harder to adapt under difficult circumstances when there is insufficient time to prepare psychologically.<sup>2</sup>

A *perceived lack of control* over an event also causes trauma.<sup>3</sup> Many of the tragedies we face are not under our control. The impossibility of controlling events, such as the death of a loved one, a natural disaster, or a car wreck, leads to a feeling of powerlessness and challenges us psychologically.

Events that are *out of the ordinary* are more difficult to cope with.<sup>4</sup> These events occur suddenly and, again, leave people sensing a lack of control. But trauma also occurs because previous experiences in handling stress may not work with unfamiliar events.

Another characteristic of traumatic events is the *degree to which they create long-lasting problems*.<sup>5</sup> Many of the minor problems of agriculture are reversible. If you lose an animal, it can be replaced. If you argue with your spouse, you can make up. But if you lose an arm in a power take-off, the results may be irreversible. Life circumstances that cause long-term impacts will lead to greater psychological distress.

Finally, a quality that often increases the likelihood of an event becoming traumatic is *blame*. People who blame others for their conditions are more likely to experience psychological distress because blaming others can be a sign of feeling helpless over a circumstance.<sup>6</sup>

### **Effects of tragedy on the individual**

Not everyone will experience trauma following a tragedy; however, many people experience certain standard responses.

**Effects on thinking.** When the tragedy is sudden, initial reactions of shock, disbelief, and numbness are common. For many, thoughts of the tragic event consume their thinking. It is common for visions of the tragedy to constantly “pop into the mind” of the survivor.

Another effect on thinking can be a loss of self-confidence. Being exposed to negative events can decrease one’s self-confidence; especially in the first days following the tragedy.

Perhaps the most significant way in which thoughts are affected is in the struggle to understand why the tragedy occurred.<sup>7</sup> The survivor may ask, “Why did

this happen?” or “What is the purpose of this tragedy in my life?” Resilient survivors answer these questions in ways that produce positive meaning.<sup>8</sup>

**Effects on emotions.** For persons exposed to a tragic event, fear and anxiety are the major emotional responses. Tornado survivors may become overly anxious whenever the sky becomes cloudy. Depression is also a common response, especially if the tragedy involves a loss. Guilt is another common response. “Survivor guilt” is a response of people who have survived a catastrophe that others have not.<sup>9</sup>

Anger is a common emotion for those experiencing a tragedy and it can be directed toward those believed to have caused the tragedy. For example, a rancher who is foreclosed may return to a lending institution with violent intent.

**Effects on behavior.** When individuals face difficult situations, increase in drug use may occur. People may use or misuse prescription drugs (to combat depression for example) or increase alcohol consumption as a coping strategy. Although increased drug use is not necessarily negative (as in prescriptive medication), it has an impact on behavior.

Many times, individuals facing tragedies withdraw from others. They also may be hard to be around, which exacerbates the withdrawal.

Some people respond to tragic events with aggressive behavior. Adding alcohol or other drugs to the mix can lead to violence, abuse, or other destructive behavior. Increase in verbal and physical violence is





sometimes a reaction to a tragic event.

Victims of tragedies may report physical ailments such as stomach problems and headaches, trouble breathing, increased nervousness, fatigue, and other ailments.<sup>10</sup>

**Effects on worldview.** People live life with basic assumptions. These assumptions provide the means of making sense of the world and providing the confidence to undertake life's challenges. These assumptions also provide a sense of safety, security, and protection. Traumatic events shatter these assumptions.

Nothing seems to be as the survivor had thought; the inner world is in turmoil. Suddenly the self- and worldviews that were taken for granted are unreliable. No longer can it be assumed that the world is a good place. What happens next may not make sense. The very nature of the world and self has changed.<sup>11</sup>

### Traits of survivors

For many individuals, the ability to cope successfully with tragedies is developed early in life. Emmy Werner and Ruth Smith studied high-risk youth over a 40-year period and found three clusters of protective factors that differentiated resilient youth from youth who developed severe problems in adolescence and adulthood. According to Werner and Smith, resilient youth have:

1) Average intelligence and an enthusiastic and easy-going temperament that leads to positive interactions with family and strangers

2) Ties of affection with others, such as grandparents, caregivers, and siblings, that encourage trust, autonomy, and initiative

3) Support systems (church, youth groups, school) that encourage competence and provide positive recognition<sup>12</sup>

Researchers also have identified other traits in resilient children that include having a strong sense of personal control and taking responsibility for one's own actions. Resilient children are reflective rather than impulsive. They show creative thinking, are emotionally under control, and feel good about themselves.<sup>13</sup>

Likewise, adults who must cope with adversity and tragedy benefit from the use of the following characteristics:

**Internal locus of control.** People with an internal locus of control see themselves as affecting the outcome of events rather than attributing the outcome to others, chance, or fate. They minimize self-blame.

**Self-confidence.** Survivors with self-confidence are willing to tackle greater challenges and exert greater effort than those with limited self-confidence.

**Optimism.** Maintaining hope and expecting that good will come out of the tragedy is characteristic of optimists. Optimistic people use strategies that are active and problem-focused.

**Hardiness.** Hardiness consists of tendencies toward commitment, control, and challenge. Hardy personalities are actively involved in overcoming the tragedy, believing they can influence the





outcome, and expect that the tragedy will result in personal growth.<sup>14</sup>

**Search for positive meaning.** Survivors make the effort to understand the tragedy with positive meaning—why did it happen? What impact has it had on my life? What does my life mean now?<sup>15</sup> They retreat to a neutral-zone for time to reflect and heal.<sup>16</sup>

**Flexibility.** Survivors are able to adapt and use a variety of responses in dealing with the changing, chaotic, and unpredictable nature of tragedies.<sup>17</sup>

Employing these characteristics promotes a willingness to overcome and learn from a tragedy, while accepting what cannot be changed and having the tenacity to work toward changes that are possible.

### From surviving to thriving

*My husband's death taught me that I had strengths I was unaware of. With widowhood came the surfacing of an inner self I had never explored before. I've done more with my life than I otherwise might have, because change and growth were thrust upon me. I've learned, though it took a few years, that pain is a natural part of living. When I let go of my demands for how I thought my world should be, I found one of the greatest gifts of all. I found myself.<sup>18</sup>*

People who face tragedies with the spirit of a survivor often report posttraumatic growth in changes in relationships with others, changes in the sense of self, and changes in their philosophy of life.<sup>19</sup>

### Change in relationships

A tragedy, such as the death of a loved one, can destroy a relationship. But many survivors report that interpersonal relations improve. In the aftermath of a tragic event, many people feel an increased sense of vulnerability. This vulnerability leads the survivor to reach to others for support. Successful survivors do not attempt to “go it alone.” They become **connected** to family, friends, other survivors, and support networks. They put more effort into these connections.

Because they are aware of their own vulnerability, survivors also demonstrate greater **compassion** for others. Out of this compassion and connectedness in the aftermath of trauma, survivors often show an urgency to **help others**. Surviving trauma gifts the survivor with knowledge and the need to share this knowledge with others facing similar circumstances.

### Change in sense of self

One of the most profound changes in posttraumatic growth is moving from a sense of “victim” to a “survivor.” Survivors find inner strength, which leads to greater self-reliance. They begin to believe, “If I survived this, I can handle anything.”<sup>20</sup>

Yet with this sense of reliance comes the realization of mortality and fragility of life. This sense of mortality that exists alongside positive views of self may prompt positive changes in interpersonal relationships, appreciation for life, and personal growth.<sup>21</sup> Yet survivors also realize that in order to experience personal growth, they must experience





the pain of the tragedy. This experience may take weeks, months, or even years—it should not be rushed.

### **Philosophy of life**

Many individuals who have experienced and survived tragedy realize that life is precious and that they have been given a second

chance. They realize it is important to take time to build relationships, appreciate each day, and take life easier.

Spiritual development is also common in survivors of tragedy. Some people use their spiritual belief to understand the tragic event, while others experience a return to their spirituality. Still others express a religious conversion. Religious coping is strongly related to posttraumatic growth.<sup>22</sup>

### **In summary**

Not everyone who experiences tragedy grows from it, and the level of growth varies. Major crises can have negative consequences for some people that will last a lifetime.

The coping task for survivors of traumatic life events is to rebuild basic assumptions in the aftermath of tragedy. This rebuilding involves efforts to reestablish a coherent set of assumptions following the shattering of the victim's old assumptive world. This may take weeks, months, or even years. In the end, their inner world is different from those who have not experienced a tragic event. They recognize their vulnerability and are less "Pollyannaish" in their perceptions of the world and themselves; yet their self- and worldviews are often very positive.<sup>23</sup>

Many survivors develop the attitude, "What doesn't kill us makes us stronger," and they move from surviving to thriving.

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