



Coping with Grief and Trauma Following October 7 and Recent Events in Israel, Gaza and the United States

As a therapist in Denver, I have heard from Jewish clients about a range of difficult feelings and experiences since October 7, 2023. One client felt physically unsafe due to the rise in antisemitism and withdrew from her usual December holiday charity activities. **Her middle-school-aged son was afraid to have a menorah in their window at home and wanted to draw the blinds shut during Hanukkah.**

While exploring prayer as a possible source of hope and support, one client told me she felt frightened by the increase in police presence at her temple, and attendance did not feel safe for her. Many clients felt fear, anger and sadness as bomb threats and swatting incidents occurred at their places of worship.

Another client mentioned feeling like her friends were attacking her at social activities and gatherings with some fiercely intense opinions when they lacked a full understanding of the history and complexity of the situation. She felt a strong sense of responsibility to try to share another perspective, but the environment felt so hostile, it did not seem possible. She was dreading Thanksgiving with friends, feeling these types of verbal onslaughts seemed next to impossible to avoid, derail or shut down. In fact, several clients reported feeling as though they were forced into discussions about or exposure to the conflict when they did not want to be. In one case a client who asked to change the subject was told,

Fine, if human rights aren't important to you, then I guess we can stop talking about it.





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Conversations with close friends and family members triggered emotional and physical stress for many clients. The discussions felt overwhelming, unproductive and unsupportive. Some clients were left feeling devastated, hurt, isolated, misunderstood and angry. They experienced intrusive thoughts, increased heart rate, sweating and high anxiety in response to conversations, reading or watching news and seeing posts online. Others felt hopeless, grief stricken, numb and shut down. Still others suffered from a combination of all of these symptoms.

Many clients reported feeling as though Jewish pain was not acknowledged. Clients felt abandoned, scapegoated, misrepresented, unvalued and targeted. Some clients felt they were being asked to defend political ideals and decisions they don't agree with. Others felt as though the United States was the most unsafe it has ever been for Jews.

There is no one Jewish experience or perspective. Clients expressed a huge range of feelings, reactions, opinions and political beliefs. This has been an unbelievable time in our world. My heart goes out to all living beings struggling with the terror and violence they have lived, witnessed or been exposed to. In addition, I empathize with all those who have endured hateful and painful experiences as they try to cope with these events. Though sadly there is no easy fix for our pain, this article offers strategies for coping with grief and trauma arising from the recent violence in the Middle East and the reverberating antisemitism that has followed.

Grief



Some of us lost loved ones on October 7 or in the days, weeks, months following. We have witnessed the loss of life, freedom, dignity and physical safety of Israeli citizens who were taken hostage and the deaths of thousands of Palestinians, including civilians and children. **We may feel the loss of our sense of security and safety in the Middle East and here in the United States, the loss of faith in others, the loss of hope, and the list goes on.**

Our grief can feel totally overwhelming. It can come on suddenly and intensely, making it a challenge to function and take on daily tasks. At times we may feel as though we are doing OK, and at others we may feel completely overcome. **Grief also tends to stay with us longer than we might think it "should."**

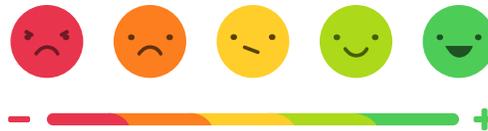


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The practice of making a space for grief is one where we make a special time and space to feel, process and experience whatever we need to. If waves of grief come up for us while we are at work or parenting or trying to get through our day, and we don't have the capacity for them in the moment, we can save space for those feelings and revisit them at a specified time.

We can do this once per day, once per week – whatever feels like the best fit to us. Set aside a small amount of time; five to 10 minutes usually suffice. During this time, a ritual such as lighting a candle, creating a mandala or incorporating one of the four elements (earth, air, fire, water) can be helpful in expressing, releasing and transforming what we are feeling. For example, we might drop pebbles or bread crumbs in a river like during Tashlich or write things down on paper and then burn them in the fireplace. We might take comfort in burying things in the earth or throwing seeds into the wind. These types of physical acts allow us to release our feelings in a healthy way.

Healthy Outlet for Difficult Feelings



When we hold all of our feelings inside, we cannot process them the same way we do when we physically allow them out of our body. Imagine a volcano. When the pressure inside builds too much, an explosion or implosion occurs, leaving a wave of destruction in its path. Alternatively, if we allow a couple of constant streams of lava to gently and regularly flow, we avoid an explosion and allow the heat and pressure to escape in a manageable and less destructive way.

Containment

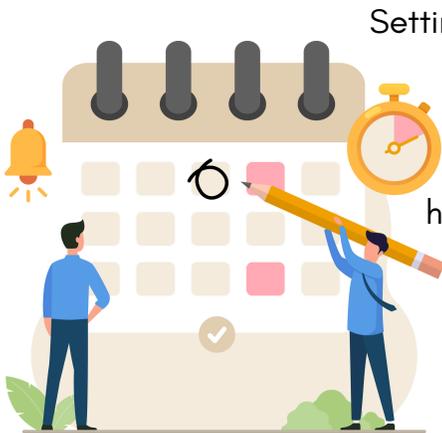
Intentionally making a space for grief as a way to cope with our difficult feelings can make our life more manageable and help us feel a little less overwhelmed. We can function when we need to and know we are able to address our significant and valid feelings at a set time and place.





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Clarity



Setting aside time for processing our feelings can help us gain insight and avoid feeling stuck. This is not an easy or perfect process. It can be difficult and incomplete, but it often moves us in the right direction, helping us to regain some control over our experience and slowly heal. Sometimes we fear that if we open ourselves up to our grief, we might never stop crying, or we might be totally taken over by our anguish. Often, though, facing these difficult feelings, particularly during intentional and short spaces of time, is the way to move through them. If you are experiencing deep grief, a therapist or grief counselor can help support you through the grieving process.

Coping with Trauma

Trauma by definition is intolerable and overwhelming. It is not just painful; research shows it actually changes the way our brains function. Our day-to-day experience can feel frightening and hostile, and we can be triggered easily by daily events. Trauma affects our behavior, mood, identity and relationships, and we may experience a variety of symptoms, including hypervigilance, dissociation and prolonged states of physical stress. Trauma occurs on an individual, interpersonal and societal level. For many of us, recent events have been traumatic on multiple levels.

Individual Trauma

Specific to the current situation, individual trauma may be experienced by those fighting on the front lines, taken hostage, receiving direct threats to their safety or experiencing the loss of one or more loved ones.





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Secondary Trauma

“Secondary trauma” refers to symptoms we experience when we see others in pain. Witnessing violence, physical harm and emotional distress of others or reading/listening to personal accounts of rape, murder, terror and graphic injuries can lead to secondary trauma.

According to **Dr. Jeff Temple**, constant exposure to news, social media and personal accounts of terror and violence can increase the risk of developing secondary trauma.

Members of marginalized groups are more likely to experience secondary trauma, as there is an increased likelihood that they are exposed to traumatic events happening to people who they may identify with or see similarities with.

Collective Trauma or Intergenerational Trauma

The term “collective trauma” describes how a large-scale event such as genocide, war or pandemic affects an entire population. In his fascinating article “**Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning**,” Gilad Hirschberger illustrates how the collective memories, narratives and struggles to make sense of horrific events lead to beliefs that inform the worldview and identity of current and future generations.





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Victimized Groups

When a group of people have been collectively victimized through oppression or genocide, their basic sense of safety and community can be shaken to the core. They develop an awareness and fear that instead of being part of a community where others stand with them, they may at any moment become revictimized, treated as outsiders, scapegoats and targets.

Members of the community may feel a heightened sense of threat, which Hirschberger describes as adaptive and integral to making meaning in their lives. They may derive a sense of group pride and strength from stories of courage and survival and a sense of cohesion and belonging within their community. They may fight for other groups they see as being targeted in a similar way, or they may take on a more defensive stance like “it’s kill or be killed,” so we need to protect our own. Group victimization is likely to affect each member’s experience of safety and belonging as well as beliefs about themselves and others within their society in a variety of ways. Victimized groups bring their past trauma to current events in the form of collective memory, group narrative and identity.

Oppressive Groups

Groups that have oppressed, killed or enslaved others may minimize, deny or rewrite history as a way of coping with the atrocities committed by their own people. Just as individuals sometimes project their shame onto others, certain group narratives may lead to a lack of accountability and shift of focus. Alternatively, group members may take responsibility for the actions of their people, strive to be fair and kind, attempt to make reparations and fight for the rights of future generations of victimized groups. The course individuals take is shaped by the memories of previous generations, the stories they are told and the meaning they make of those events. Like those from victimized groups, this shapes group members’ identity and worldview; they bring their past trauma to current events.





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The Gray Zone

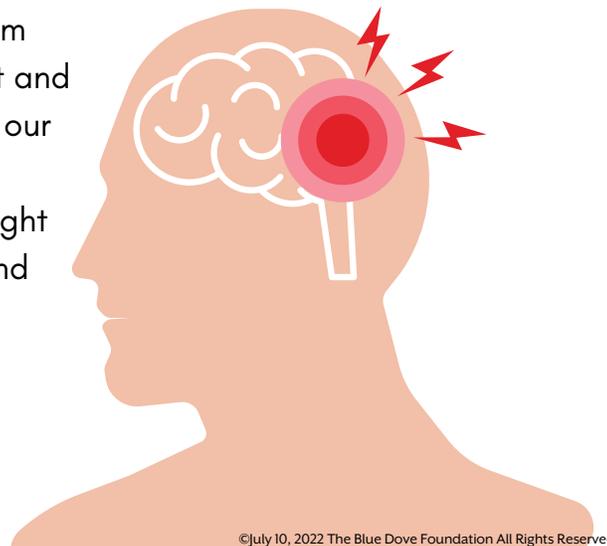
The gray zone as described by Hirschberger involves two communities where there are no clear victims or perpetrators. Both groups are guilty of cruelty and aggression, and both have been victimized by the other. According to Hirschberger, members of gray zone groups may be “motivated to defensively represent their history in a manner that highlights their sacrifice and downplays their crimes.” Competitive victimhood with other marginalized groups may also occur in grayzone situations. A group member may feel as though the suffering of their group is overshadowed by the suffering of another group, and they may feel as though they are not receiving an appropriate amount of acknowledgment and attention for their group’s victimization.

When we acknowledge the complicated nature of how stories, histories and beliefs are passed down in light of trauma, we can see how intergenerational trauma develops. The meaning an individual makes of the history of their people affects their sense of identity and worldview, particularly in regard to their sense of belonging and purpose. Facing their collective trauma and the effects it has had on their psyche is an important part of healing.

Hypervigilance

In his book **“The Body Keeps the Score,”** Bessel Van Der Kolk describes in detail how the brain’s alarm system recalibrates itself following trauma.

It is no longer effective at filtering what is dangerous from what is not. The result is that we are always on high alert and constantly assessing danger. Physically, we might notice our hearts pounding, our palms sweating and our muscles tensing, as our body continuously prepares for fight or flight from danger. This is exhausting and anxiety producing and can interfere with our daily activities. We may become frequently agitated, emotional and distrustful of others. We may struggle to sleep, feel calm or fully relax.





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Dissociation

Trauma also compromises the area of the brain that communicates the physical embodiment of feeling alive (Van Der Kolk). This can leave us feeling disconnected from ourselves, our bodies and our world. When we dissociate, we struggle to stay present and connected to others. Our thoughts, feelings, memories and sense of identity are disrupted. This can lead to a feeling of profound isolation. Numbing out with substances, emotional eating, binge watching or doom scrolling can be ways of dissociating. In the face of stress, we might space out or have trouble speaking, and/or we might emotionally shut down.

When trying to relay events, some clients who experience dissociation struggle to remember what happened as if they weren't really there. I've heard descriptions like "I get this sense of airheadedness," "I can't speak" or "I feel like I am outside of my body." Many describe a sense of paralysis or numbness as though they are frozen, unable to feel anything or like they are going through the motions of life but not living it.

Why Talking About Our Trauma Isn't Enough

Trauma is a complex phenomenon that affects our brain and body. Different parts of the brain perform different functions. The part responsible for our survival is in the back of our brain, whereas the logic and verbal reasoning part is in the front. When we focus on survival, we are not able to access our language and reason. If the filter on our alarm system has become overactive, we may feel we're in a survival state nearly all the time. Therefore, we need to work with the part of the brain that is attempting to keep us safe from threat, constantly scanning for danger and still feeling helpless in order to fully heal.

Imagine you are being chased by a bear and someone asks you "what is $2 + 2$?" Under normal circumstances, you could say "4" and explain the reasons behind your answer. But when fighting for your life, all you can really focus on is BEAR!!! It is not until the bear is gone that you can begin to sort through how terrifying that experience was and slowly make the journey back to where you can reason and speak. In the future, remembering the bear or the sight of fur might signal to your brain's alarm system that your life is in danger, causing you to experience a fight, flight or freeze response and leaving you unable to access language and logic.



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Working With Our Bodies

When we feel threatened, we may go into a state of “fight or flight,” where our bodies are speeding up in anticipation of fighting or fleeing. This can include rapid and shallow breathing, heart racing, panic, hypervigilance and intrusive thoughts.

Conversely, we may go into a state of “freeze,” where our bodies are shutting down. We might experience numbness, difficulty thinking or low energy. Many clients report a combination of these experiences. When it is not possible to fight or flee, our bodies can collapse into freeze.

Window of Tolerance

The window of tolerance is the space where we are able to process intense emotional stress and anxiety in a healthy way (Seigal). When stressors appear, we feel capable of handling them effectively. We have the ability to self-soothe and self-regulate in response to the demands of our daily lives.

Imagine you are floating down a wide, slow-flowing river. A large rock appears in your path, and you are able to navigate around it easily. When you are within your window of tolerance, it is smooth sailing.

Trauma makes it harder for us to stay within our window. Our bodies are constantly working to keep us safe and signaling to us that danger is present. We are quick to panic or shut down. Small stressors cannot be navigated easily but instead may plunge us into hypervigilant or dissociated states. Recognizing our window of tolerance and learning how to widen it and how to get back to it when we are moving outside of it can be an important part of coping with trauma.





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Some of these strategies include:

- Mindfulness practices, such as grounding, yoga and meditation.
- Emotional regulation techniques, such as using a healthy outlet to express difficult feelings.
- Self-care strategies, such as seeking out positivity through loving relationships, sunshine, exercise and emotional self-care .
- Learning how to slow your body down when it is going into “fight or flight” and how to wake your body up when it is going into “freeze” and shutting down.

When we begin to leave our window of tolerance, we experience emotional dysregulation, which means we are struggling to manage our emotions and behaviors and becoming anxious and more easily overwhelmed by stressors. If we are not able to change course, we enter into fight, flight or freeze.

Here is a helpful and detailed resource on how to gain insight into your window of tolerance and how to work with specific symptoms of emotional dysregulation, fight, flight or freeze response.





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How Support Can Mitigate the Effects of Trauma

Having the support of someone who is empathic when we are processing trauma can prevent us from getting stuck and allow us to heal through it.

Dr. Diane Poole Heller, trauma educator, uses the metaphor of a donut, where the empty hole in the center is the traumatic event and the “yummy part” is the support. Support can mitigate the effects of trauma and keep us from getting stuck. Sadly, many of us were not only traumatized by the events in Gaza; we experienced a lack of support. Hateful acts and speech, the tragic events on college campuses, the rise in antisemitism, the lack of support from loved ones or groups we felt we belonged to all worsened our healing. So, in addition to the trauma of the terror and violence, many of us were deeply hurt by the judgments and actions we saw, read about, heard about and experienced. This feeling of helplessness in the face of threat, followed by a lack of support, leads to a high possibility of getting stuck in trauma. An awareness of our experience and a supportive environment can help us heal and move forward.

How Do I Find Support?

Having a support system is so important and thankfully, there are a number of wonderful opportunities and useful techniques to find support.

Social Media

It can be challenging to find supportive environments for talking through these issues, as there are many viewpoints and a high potential for intense, emotionally charged responses. People who are reacting from a place of trauma may be posting extreme, projecting, blaming, scary, unreasonable and even hateful and violent content. They may be desperately attempting to discharge their pain and overwhelming feelings, but they’re creating a painful and toxic environment for others in the process.





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Social media also makes dehumanization easier. Posting an opinion is different from standing face to face with a human being. It may be easier for people to get caught up in ideological or political arguments and lose sight of what it is to be human and have human experiences and feelings. Moral self-righteousness can also be an issue here. In her book **“Atlas of the Heart,”** Brené Brown, shame researcher and social worker, describes self-righteousness as the conviction that one’s beliefs and behaviors are the most correct. She goes on to say that this leads to inflexibility, intolerance to ambiguity and less consideration of others’ opinions. Self-righteousness is a sense of moral superiority and trying to convince ourselves and others that we’re doing the right thing. It often shows up as performative moral outrage on social media.

Avoiding or greatly limiting social media can be an impactful act of self-compassion and empowerment. Remember that trauma is feeling helpless in the face of threat. Acts of empowerment and feeling as though we have some agency in life can counteract that helplessness. When we are exposed to images, words and posts that we do not choose and do not have control over, it is likely to tap into our experience of trauma. If we are in our trauma or triggered by something we read or see, we are likely to have intense and sometimes even debilitating emotional and physical responses.

Connecting with friends and loved ones through text chains, email, phone, in-person gatherings or other alternatives to social media may be a helpful step in healing.



By Ruth Weinberg, LPC

This resource is designed to educate individuals, but not replace treatment. If you are struggling, please contact a medical professional.

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Connecting With Others Despite Differing Viewpoints

Notably, all clients who shared about the conflict told me their opinions and feelings regarding the events differ from people who are very close to them. This can feel painful, frustrating and isolating; can add to our feelings of helplessness; and can lead to avoiding loved ones and social gatherings.

When possible, consider drawing a loving boundary. Explain that exposure to discussions about this topic is painful for you, and while you do not wish to talk about it, you would still like to talk with them and connect with them about other things. Though painful feelings may linger, this can be helpful in maintaining support and protecting yourself from harmful interactions. If loved ones are not willing or able to respect these boundaries, the strategy may need to change. For example, you may need to excuse yourself from conversations and become skilled at changing the subject.

If you don't have anyone you feel you can talk to or process these feelings with safely, consider a healthy outlet like journaling or creative expression like painting to help express your thoughts, feelings and experiences without risk of judgment from others. Prayer and ritual are other good sources to consider in whatever way feels like a safe, good fit. For example, private prayer in the home, virtually attending services or creating a personal healing ritual to help express and release intense emotions can be helpful. Some sample prayers are available here:

- [**Mi Sheberach for Grief**](#)
- [**Mi Sheberach for Loneliness**](#)
- [**Mi Sheberach for Mental Health**](#)



Working with a therapist can be another great source of nonjudgmental support. Together, you can create a healing plan that works best for your needs, and you can have a space to express any and all feelings. In addition, you can process trauma and heal.





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Group Activities

According to Van Der Kolk, when we experience trauma, we feel out of sync with others. By engaging in activities involving our mind, body and imagination where we are part of a group with one common goal, such as yoga, martial arts and acting classes, we can begin to establish a feeling of being in sync with others.

Avoiding Triggering Activities

In my discussions with clients about news and social media, many expressed feeling a responsibility to stay informed and in some cases to raise awareness and educate others. The idea of spending less time watching or reading about the conflict elicited feelings of guilt and a concern that it was a privileged stance to be able to take a break when those in Israel and Gaza cannot take a break.

We may feel a sense of responsibility to stay current and follow updates frequently and consistently; however, we need to protect ourselves and have space to heal. Constantly looking at the news can be likened to eating a nonstop diet of twinkies. Too much is unhealthy and potentially toxic. Protect yourself and take the time you need to get back on your feet. Constantly looking at the news can retraumatize you and does nothing to benefit those on the front lines. If you take care of your own needs, you will be much more able to be an ally to those who are suffering. Brené Brown believes five minutes of news per day is a healthy amount.

Taking Action

When you feel ready, taking action can be empowering and impactful. It can help you feel connected to your community and fellow human beings. It can also counteract feelings of helplessness. If getting involved and helping people feels important to you, consider ways that are manageable and appropriate for wherever you are in your journey. You might not be feeling like you're in a good place to take action. It is important to honor that. Volunteering locally, providing technical assistance or donating might feel manageable, whereas raising awareness about recent antisemitic events by speaking with people or writing about it may be too triggering.



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Gratitude

I want to extend my deepest, most heartfelt thanks to my clients for trusting me with their stories and feelings and giving me permission to share their experiences.

Support

If you are experiencing difficulty, trauma or grief as a result of the events in Israel/Gaza and worldwide, please know you are not alone. Here are some additional resources for support:

- [Wellness Resources for the Situation in Israel](#)
- [Antisemitism's Impact on Mental Health](#)
- [Mental Health Support](#)

