

Survivors Might Benefit By Sticking Together

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Marsha Kight lost her 23-year-old-daughter, Frankie Merrell, on April 19, 1995, in the Oklahoma City bombing. Six months later, she founded Families and Survivors United, a support group for those who lost loved ones on that day.

Kight, who now works for the National Organization for Victim Assistance ([NOVA](#)) in Washington D.C., says she felt compelled to create the Oklahoma City support group.

"I had to have a reason to go on," she says. "I had to get out of myself."

As the country comes to grips with the terrorist attacks in New York City and the nation's capital, relatives and friends of the dead or missing are coming to grips with their unspeakable loss.

Kight says that in the days, weeks and months following the disaster, the road will be tough for these individuals. She offers no road map — no one has — on how to navigate the life-changing range of emotions: numbness, grief, anger, and depression, among them.

"Grief is very individual," she says, "and people move through the grieving process differently. There is no right or wrong way."

But to help ease the despair of those now left behind, Kight offers this message: Band together. You don't have to start a survivors' group, she says, but banding together certainly helps.

"One of the worst things that people go through is the helplessness and hopelessness," Kight says. "And one of the best things that we can do is try to empower each other; to take control back of our lives in some way; to have a reason to get up and get out of bed."

For those who need that kind of support, there are many self-help and support groups around the country to aid those who have experienced the loss of loved ones from sudden violence. Some of these groups are born from specific disasters.

For example, Eleanor Seaman of Clifton Park, N.Y. lost her niece, Michele Becker, in the TWA Flight 800 explosion over Long Island Sound on July 17, 1996. Seaman and her husband, John, are secretary-treasurer and chairman of the board, respectively, of The Families of TWA Flight 800 Inc., a support group they helped establish after the disaster. Michelle's mother (Seaman's sister), Aurelie Becker, of St. Petersburg, Fla., is the group's president.

Eleanor Seaman encourages participation in a support group as a healthy alternative to some of the other means of coping to which survivors often resort. "There are times when the pressure becomes too great and people turn to drink or drugs," Eleanor Seaman says. "The support of the group was the medication I needed to get better," she says.

Five years later, all but three of the families of the 230 killed in the mid-air explosion remain members of the organization Seaman says. Scattered around the world, many gather in Suffolk County, N.Y., each year for support and camaraderie. They are a year away from seeing the construction of a permanent memorial garden near where the plane debris went down.

Michel Breistroff, a young hockey player from France, also was killed on TWA Flight 800. By the following fall, his fiancée, Heidi Snow, had formed the Aircraft Casualty Emotional Support Services. The goal of the endeavor, according to Snow's [ACCESS Web site](#), is to help relatives and survivors of airplane disasters through their grief "with the support of peers who have traveled a similar journey."

Kight had a similar goal when she organized Families and Survivors United. "Within that community of bombing survivors, and those who lost love ones, we spoke the same language," she says. "It seemed no one else could understand. Sometimes we felt crazy. We realized after talking to each other we were having the same kind reactions."

Kight's helping herself by helping others didn't happen right away. For months her emotional pain was nearly all consuming. Her feelings evolved from numbness to despair and, finally, to depression. Loud noises, such as a slamming door or thunder, "would make a lot of us feel a sense of alarm," she says. And as the months passed, the suffering continued. "Holidays, birthdays were very sad. There was a sense of isolation, of feeling alone."

Slowly, however, the sharp-edged grief becomes dulled, Kight says. Slowly, healing begins -- but never closure, Kight says.

"There has always been this word floating around about closure," she says. "It's a trite and flip term -- very hurtful. How do you put closure on the loss of a loved one?"

What you do instead, she says, is take each day one at a time. Let the tears flow. Let surviving family and friends know how much you love them. Reach out to the families and friends of other victims. Share your grief and hold each other tight, and seek professional counseling, if necessary.

You must fight the impulse to pull away or bottle up your feelings, she advises.

Says Seaman: "Letting those emotions out helps promote the healing process."

