

Chris Yaw is an accidental killer – and there are lots of people living with this secret shame. He tells Kasia Delgado how he copes, and whether it's ever possible to recover from ending someone's life

When you wake up one morning and accidentally kill someone, what do you do next? Chris Yaw, who now runs a support group for other people who have done the same (Photo: Supplied)

By [Kasia Delgado](#), iPaper

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The day Chris Yaw accidentally killed a man will forever haunt him.

It was November 2014, and Yaw, a 61-year-old vicar, was living in his old home in Detroit with his wife and children. One morning, Yaw came outside and saw that Kenny, his friend and gardener, had been trapped by the garage doors, which were made of thick oak, weighing several hundred kilograms. “Kenny had been pinned between these doors, and literally crushed,” remembers Yaw. “I’ll never forget taking his body out of the door. Absolutely horrifying. And it was my fault.”

Some time before Kenny died, the man who installed Yaw’s garage doors had told him that he should install a sensor, to stop someone mistakenly getting caught in them. The cost would be \$6k (£4.7k), because there’d have to be some complicated digging into the ground. “I felt like that was a lot,” says Yaw, “and I decided not to do it. I thought ‘it’s not a big deal’ and I signed a document saying that I know that it’s a hazard and that I’m willing to take the risk. I did this, of course, never ever thinking anything would happen. Well, lo and behold – it happened.” Kenny had been going into the garage to fetch a rake to clear leaves when he was killed.

When you wake up one morning and accidentally kill someone, what do you do next? “I went to the funeral,” says Yaw. “We were friends with Kenny and his family, but the relationship didn’t continue after that. I don’t blame them if they never want to speak to me again. We paid a healthy payout to the family through insurance. A lot of bad stuff happened after that in terms of my and my wife’s

mental health, and it was just the most horrendous time of my life. My marriage broke down, and we divorced. I kept thinking that all I'd needed to do was pay some money [to get the sensor] and I'd have saved this man's life."

As he was working out how to live with himself, Yaw read in the *New Yorker* magazine an article about [social psychologist Maryann Gray](#), who, one summer afternoon in 1977 at the age of 22, accidentally hit and killed an eight-year-old boy named Brian with her car. The little boy had run out into the road, and she had not managed to move the car away in time. She recalls crouching behind a bush, terrified and hiding. "I remember thinking, *What's that noise?*, and then realising it was me, screaming". Gray was not arrested or charged as there was no evidence that she had been negligent.

In 2003, 26 years after Gray accidentally killed Brian, seven miles away from where she was living in California, an 86-year-old man driving a Buick sedan mistakenly pressed his foot on the accelerator and ploughed into a farmer's market – 10 people died and 63 were injured. Later, the man would be convicted of vehicular manslaughter and sentenced to five years' probation.

Gray watched how the public responded to the incident not only with anger towards the driver, but by calling him a murderer. "To me, it was so obvious that he didn't do it on purpose, and I thought the response was so cruel," she said, and wrote a brief account of her own accidental incident, showing compassion for this accidental killer, and sent it to a radio station. The producer then asked her to read it on air during rush hour.

Instead of the hate mail she'd been warned about, she got dozens of emails from people who had caused accidental deaths, and were relieved to hear someone express such a taboo publicly. Moved by the response, she started a website called Accidental Impacts with reading recommendations (academic books about trauma, some guides to living a meaningful life in the wake of trauma), and short essays on the topic that she'd written.

Yaw contacted Gray and they began a correspondence about unintentional harm. He began writing for her, and together they turned the modest forum into a not-for-profit called The Hyacinth Fellowship, the main purpose of which is to run a monthly support group for those who have unintentionally killed or seriously injured other people. There's a UK branch, and scores of people from the UK join the US support groups via video link.

“I am truly, truly sorry for what I did,” says Chris Yaw. “I’d do it differently if I had the chance. But it happened.” (Photo: FrankyDeMeyer/Getty)

Lois Brown, from Liverpool, is one of them. She lost control of the wheel of her car while driving abroad. She and her passenger survived, but the infant in their car died. “While I was not prosecuted for the accident,” [writes Brown](#), “I nonetheless received a life sentence: the overwhelming grief of having been responsible for the death of a child. Dogging me ever since is the constant sense that I don’t deserve life’s simple pleasures and mercies.

“These anguishes have, in turn, been amplified by the isolation of not knowing others who have experienced similar ordeals. This isn’t because these accidents are rare; it is because that which tortures us is unspeakable. It is taboo for the ‘perpetrator’ to acknowledge their continued pain, because to do so may be construed as imposing on the grief of innocent survivors.” Brown pleads for empathy, and runs an accidental killers support group.

Gray, the woman who first brought this issue into the open, died in April 2023 at the age of 68. As a result of the death she caused, her marriage, like Yaw’s, also broke down, and she never had children. She chose a specific way to cope. “I think the way we get over trauma is by reaching out and contributing and helping,” Gray said [in an interview with the BBC](#) in 2018. “I don’t think I’ll ever be at peace with the fact that I killed a child ... but I can say that doesn’t have to define who I am today. Who I am today is a person who is trying to help other people, to learn, to reach out, to be a good friend, to be a loving family member.”

Yaw also realised he had two options: He could crawl into a hole and never emerge, believing that he deserved nothing good ever again. Or he could try to live as best he could, and do some good. “When you go through the trauma of having turned yourself into a killer,” he says, “somebody you certainly never intended to be, what is life about after that?”

“Hiding away with this guilt costs you more than if you’d come out earlier and you’d talked about it. We have people at almost every meeting who say: ‘I killed somebody 30 years ago and this is the first time I’m talking about it’. We tell people to also get professional support, but we act as peer support.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in 2015, the most recent year for which data are available, there were nearly 147,000 unintentional-injury deaths in the United States. About a quarter were caused by motor-vehicle accidents; the total also includes falls, firearm mishaps, accidental

poisoning, and all the other alarmingly varied ways a healthy person's life might end. Gray also did a lot of research into this and according to her data, somebody accidentally kills somebody every 18 minutes in the US. It is clear, from the many messages Yaw gets from people in the UK that this is not a US-specific occurrence. "There are a lot of people who go through what we've gone through," says Yaw.

Yaw, who has remarried and had a child with his second wife, is open with his family about what happened – his children from his first marriage were too young to understand the incident when it happened. "With all of our children, we are strong proponents of talking about mental health, issues of depression, anxiety, guilt, remorse." His faith has helped him in having a spiritual strength to draw on, "a time-tested help in matters of trauma".

But Yaw is very clear that he is not a victim. "In the support group, we don't call ourselves victims. There's somebody whose death we were responsible for, and we have to carry that forever, but it's not anywhere near what a victim's family carry. Many of the people who accidentally harm have done so by driving drunk or have done so by being negligent like me, and so I don't want anybody's sympathy. Any sympathy anyone has should go to Kenny and Kenny's family. I just made a stupid decision and tried to do something on the cheap – fatally, so."

Of course, the type of incident and the circumstances around it, mean that some cases are more high profile than others. Yaw hasn't been trolled on social media and had hate mail, but he regularly visits his friend Wendy, who is serving 10 years in prison for drink-driving in the middle of the day and rear-ending, and killing, a very popular school football coach. Before she went to prison, he visited her in her home and saw a huge stack of letters in the hallway. "She said, 'ah yes that's 519 letters of upset about what I've done, it's been 519 days since I killed him, and I read one letter every day'."

The feeling of penance, of relentless self-flagellation, is, of course, a default feeling among most accidental killers. [The Hyacinth Fellowship](#) is based around the idea that you have to take responsibility for what you've done, to change any risky behaviours that made this happen. Yet the idea is that there is scope for healing, too.

"I still feel pain, I feel sheer embarrassment too," says Yaw. "How could I make that decision as a homeowner to save a few extra dollars, when a safety measure would have made all the difference? That's what comes back to my mind frequently. When I see someone of Kenny's age and think that he would have just

been retiring now, looking forward to spending time with his grandkids...what are Christmases like for his kids?

“I am embarrassed, ashamed and saddened that because of me, their world is in a different constellation to what they would have wanted. Whenever I see leaves in Autumn, I think of Kenny. I’m right back there, on that day.”

Gray believed that accidental killers deserve compassion, and the chance to contribute to society. It’s not about rebalancing the scales, or making up for anything, because how can anyone make up for ending a human life? Yet, it’s more about understanding the nuance, that those who have done bad, can also go on to do good. “I am truly, truly sorry for what I did,” says Yaw, “I’d do it differently if I had the chance. But it happened. I can’t bring him back from the dead, but I can try to build a more compassionate world, to show people like me, that their life can still have meaning.”