

Coping With Grief after a Sudden Loss

A sudden death brings particular feelings and issues. Shock and disbelief are caused by the unexpected and devastating nature of the experience. While you can never feel completely prepared for a death, a sudden death leaves a person feeling particularly vulnerable.

There are some similar issues and specific feelings that people grieving a sudden death most commonly confront.

- The most overwhelming and common reaction to a sudden death is shock and uncertainty. This results in feeling disconnected to your feelings or to other people; it can seem as if you are living in a dream.
- The initial news and stages of grief are often characterized by disbelief. This can be accompanied by feelings of numbness or a belief that the person is still present.
- The unexpected nature of the death can leave you with an “absent grief”, as if the event has not occurred or the significance has not registered or yet been acknowledged.
- Not only are you subject to the usual grief feelings, you have also been deprived of the opportunity to prepare for the death. You were not able to gradually understand, cope or adjust to the possibility of the death or say goodbye in a personally satisfying way.
- It is common to be distressed by feelings of unfinished business and missed opportunities, and regrets for things not done or said to the person who has died.
- The survivors may encounter tremendous feelings of guilt, believing and wishing there was something they could have done to prevent the death.
- It is common for survivors to blame themselves or to search for answers and meaning by seeking the cause of death in something or someone.
- Strong feelings of helplessness may be manifested in displays of anger, agitation or immobilization.
- Because of the sudden nature of the death, you may experience an unexpected sequence of feelings. Specifically, you may have a delayed grief reaction resulting from the difficulty of being able to initially comprehend the events or meaning of the death.
- There are medical and/or legal actions that may occur surrounding a sudden death and may vary depending on where the death took place.

With respect to your emotional needs immediately following a sudden death, you may need help that is similar to crisis intervention in order to get through the shock and disbelief of the event. Coming to terms with, and understanding, the reality of the death becomes a major focus in the beginning stages.

Over time, the bereaved deal with issues and feelings comparable to other death experiences. If engaging in activities related to the deceased or disturbing thoughts about the manner of the death occur, speaking with a professional can be helpful.

Coping Tips

- Consider sharing your thoughts and feelings with others who have experienced a similar loss.
- Pay close attention to, and get help for, any changes in physical and emotional health as they may be related to loss.
- Accept rather deny your feelings, even unpleasant ones such as anger.
- Be active in making choices about in engaging in activities and rituals.
- Talk to professionals, family and friends to help gain perspective about death and decrease feelings of guilt.

Credit for this resource goes to the University of Rochester's University Counseling Center, from whom it was adopted with minor edits.