

Coping With Grief after a Sudden Death

A sudden death brings particular feelings and issues. Shock and disbelief are caused by the sudden, surprising 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.

It is not possible to address the many issues exclusive to the different types of sudden death, such as murder, miscarriage or traumatic accident. However, there are some similar issues and specific feelings that all people grieving a sudden death most commonly confront.

- Shock. 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 states of grief are often characterized by disbelief. This can be accompanied by feelings of numbness or a belief that the person is still present.
- When there has been a death without any physical evidence, as in a plane crash, you are left with lingering hope and expectation that there has been a mistake.
- 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. Family members may be involved in things such as identification of the person, issues of accountability including criminal proceedings.

Issues complicate the bereavement process. However necessary, these events take varying amounts of time and can provoke specific reactions ranging from gratitude to anger to frustration.

In the instance of sudden death, the bereaved should seek out agencies, individuals and services related to the type of death. For example, State and County Victim-Witness Assistance Programs can offer help understanding your rights under the law, financial help with funeral expenses, coverage of loss of income, counseling resources and reimbursement for physical and mental health care. 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 death becomes a major focus in the beginning stages. Over time, the bereaved deal with issues and feelings comparable to other death experiences.

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 the loss.
- Talk to professionals, family and friends to help gain perspective about the death and decrease feelings of guilt.
- Become educated about the cause of death.
- Accept rather than deny your feelings, even unpleasant ones such as anger.
- Engage in whatever rituals are necessary to help provide closure.