

Coping With Grief after a Sudden Death

While you can never feel completely prepared for a death, a sudden death can leave a person feeling particularly vulnerable. Here are some of the issues and specific feelings that 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.
- **Disbelief.** This can be accompanied by feelings of numbness or a belief that the person is still present. Because of the sudden nature of the death, you may experience a delayed grief reaction resulting from the difficulty of being able to initially comprehend the events or meaning of the death.
- When there has been a death without any physical evidence, as in a plane crash, you may be left with lingering hope and expectation that there has been a mistake.
- 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.
- There may be 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 and issues of accountability including criminal proceedings.
- ✓ On the more positive side, sudden loss sometimes offers unexpected gifts, opening the way to transforming the tragedy of the loss into a life-altering experience that can deepen and enrich the life of the bereaved.

In some instances of sudden death, the bereaved can benefit from seeking out agencies 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 the death can be a major focus in the beginning stages. You may also benefit from seeking spiritual guidance or counseling, to help you manage and explore the existential elements that may arise.

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.
- Be active in making choices about engaging in activities and rituals.
- ✓ Remember that you are going through a natural response to an unprecedented life event. See if you can find times to open and surrender to the experience, becoming curious and allowing it to change you. You may want to seek help from someone you trust, who sees grief as a journey and not a problem.

Blessings on your journey.

Adapted from Robin F. Goodman, PhD, ATR-BC © 2000 Lifescape