

PATHWAYS CENTER for GRIEF & LOSS

COPING WITH SUDDEN DEATH

If you experience the sudden, unexpected death of someone you knew, cared for, or loved, your reactions may seem intense and overwhelming. Some people feel as though they might “fall apart,” and worry about the possible loss of control of their own reactions. Others may feel numb and barely functioning. You probably have nothing you can compare this experience to, and that can be scary. Part of what is difficult about this death is that you didn’t expect it to happen, and certainly not *this way*. So of course you feel unable to cope.

Know that your reactions are normal; it is the situation that is unusual. Take some time to look honestly at what you need, and how to meet those needs. Despite others who want to support and be around you, you may need some time alone. Know that you will experience a wide variety of reactions, even throughout the course of one day. This affects you in all ways—physically, emotionally, cognitively, socially and spiritually. By looking at *how* you are affected, you will understand how you can cope and survive this difficult time in your life.

- ***Physical*** - The way you learned of the sudden death may affect you physically. Many say they feel as though they have “just undergone surgery without anesthesia.” Most people have trouble sleeping and may sleep for only two to three hours at a time. Initially, nightmares or bad dreams are common. Many feel exhausted. In the best way it can, your body is telling you that you have been significantly affected.
- ***Emotional*** - The emotional aspect of your reactions is often what you - and others - are aware of. This isn’t just your tears, it may be your *inability* to cry. Other strong feelings you may experience include: fear, vulnerability, guilt, or rage. Finding outlets for intense emotions is important. Decide whom you feel safest with to “let loose” and express all that you are feeling. Remind yourself that you cannot control everything and that often; your expectations for you or others may be unrealistic.
- ***Cognitive*** - Perhaps you keep thinking, “It can’t be true, how can this have happened?” It is natural to replay details over and again in your mind. You are trying to understand something that doesn’t make sense. Know that you may:
 - Have difficulty concentrating
 - Be forgetful
 - Worry you are “going crazy”
 - Have many questions
 - Revisit what you could or should have said or done differently

As you realize that perhaps the worst that could ever happen *has* happened, you may also wonder what else could happen. Remind yourself how unique and unusual this situation is; give yourself a dose of reality or ask for reassurance from someone you trust. Eventually your questions will change from “Why and how did this happen?” to “How will I cope?” It’s important to ask those questions, and you may have to for a longtime.

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- ***Social*** – When a death occurs suddenly, it seems as though the world has gone on but your life has come to a halt. You may sense others feel uncomfortable around you or even avoid contact with you. Conversations can be awkward and brief. Some people, out of their own need or discomfort, end up telling *you* about something similar that happened to them - even though you're the one who's hurting! Others may imply you need to "get out around others and keep busy" or "move on." Do what *you* feel you need to do. Don't base your plans or decisions on others' opinions. Base your decisions on what seems right for you at this time.
- ***Spiritual*** –Particularly after a sudden, unexpected death, even very "religious" people reassess what they believe and why. What has happened may contradict what you thought you knew about what is fair and just in the world. Many find their faith deepened, but this only happened *after* a period of intense questioning. Eventually, you may realize that you are able to go on despite not having all the answers.

For people grieving a sudden, unexpected death, it can take longer to grieve and mourn than it will for someone grieving an expected death. After a sudden death some say what helps most are finding ways in which to honor and remember them. In time, as you adjust to the changes brought about by the loss, your attention will turn to what you want to remember. Your hurt will lessen as you discover and begin to focus on what is healing for you.

Meeting with others who have had similar experiences can be helpful as you realize that many of the reactions, questions, and feelings you have are not unique. You can learn what worked for others and find affirmation and encouragement. Although grief is an individual experience, those who have been there are often the best teachers for those living through the experience. Call a Pathways Center for Grief & Loss counselor to learn more about the support available to you.