



The Elisabeth Severance Prentiss  
Bereavement Center

## Coping with the Trauma of Sudden Death

The inconceivable happens - a special person dies in an unexpected and traumatic way. This may be a family member, a co-worker, a friend, or the neighbor down the street...The cause can be murder, suicide, car accident, natural or man made disasters.

### Understanding the Trauma of Sudden Death

It is important to understand that a sudden death falls outside our usual experience, what we expect life to be like. Abruptly losing a special person can shatter our sense of well-being. We may experience very **strong reactions that could include fear, helplessness, shock, anger, and, sometimes, horror.** These reactions are **normal responses to an extremely difficult time** in our lives.. These trauma reactions mix with our grief, and the results can be overwhelming.

### Traumatic Stresses

While we may feel like we are in “another world,” the world around us does not stop. Feelings of trauma and grief can be compounded with additional changes and losses. Sometimes our reactions appear immediately after a sudden traumatic death and at other times it may be a few hours, days, or even weeks before we experience stress reactions. It is common to feel **a sense of numbness, “being in a fog.”**

Traumatic stress can impact our bodies, our thinking, our emotions and our behavior. We may experience a wide variety of feelings, such as guilt, fear, denial, anger, grief, or depression. We might be irritable, anxious, or feel overwhelmed or confused. Our eating or sleeping habits may change. We may not be able to recall the details of the death. Normal physical signals of stress may range from nausea, thirst, or fatigue to chest pain, headaches, or tremors. Because any of these physical symptoms may indicate the need for medical evaluation, it is important to consult a physician.

### Things that Help

The signs and symptoms of a stress reaction may last a few days, a few weeks, a few months, or longer, depending on the severity of the traumatic death. The understanding and support of family and friends can help the stress reactions pass more quickly. There are a number of things that can help during this very difficult time.

- Maintain as normal a schedule as possible (as impossible as it seems); structure your time
- Follow the basics for good health (even when you don't feel like it) – rest, eat well, exercise
- Reduce other stressors as much as possible - make to do lists, be patient with yourself when you can't find your keys, limit distractions that might interfere with concentration
- Be aware of *numbing* the pain with overuse of drugs or alcohol; go easy on caffeine
- Talk to people – reach out, spend time with others
- Do things that feel good to you – take a walk, listen to music, keep a feelings journal, etc.
- Give yourself permission to feel the pain and share these feelings with others
- Don't feel the need to fight reoccurring thoughts, dreams or flashbacks; they are normal and will decrease overtime and become less painful

Remember you are not going crazy. Your reactions are normal. However there are times when a traumatic death is so painful that professional assistance may be helpful. Seek professional help if anger, anxiety and depression persist, worsen or begin to interfere with your life, job or relationships.