

## Helping Children Cope After the Violent Death of a Family Member

*When a family member dies it is common and normal to be sad and upset. Losing a parent is always especially hard for a child. When the death is violent and unexpected there can be additional reactions that are related to the way the person died. It is normal for children and other surviving family members to have reactions and be very upset.*

*Below are some typical reactions and ideas for ways to cope...*

### **Typical reactions:**

- 1.** Shock about what happened. When a person dies violently it is always unexpected and the circumstances of the death are unnatural. It can be hard to believe or accept. It can seem unreal. Sometimes children or family members feel as if they are in a bad dream. They can feel numb and not even be able to feel anything right away. Or they can have so many feelings that it is overwhelming.
- 2.** Sadness at the loss of the person. Realizing that the person is gone forever can cause deep pain and sorrow. Crying or withdrawing is normal. Having memories of experiences with the person or thinking about the person not being there for future events are common.
- 3.** Disturbing thoughts and feelings about the manner of death. Sometimes family members imagine (or even were present and saw it) how the person died. These images can be frightening or horrific and come into thoughts or dreams even when they are unwanted.
- 4.** Guilt about the person's death. Sometimes children or family members think that maybe if they had done something different they could have prevented the death. In some cases there are reasons to believe that the person who died was at risk. It is normal to wish that something could have been done so that the death did not happen.
- 5.** Anger about the person's death. Depending on the circumstances, anger can be toward someone else for causing the death or even at the person for dying. Anger can be a tough emotion to handle. The feelings can be very strong and finding outlets that are not destructive is not always easy. Sometimes this is because it is hard to see a way to completely get it over it.
- 6.** Worry about the future. Depending on the circumstances there may be legal actions or the person's death may mean that big changes will happen in people's lives. Uncertainty about what to do or what comes next can cause anxiety.

### **Ways to Cope:**

- 1.** Take care of yourself. The best remedy for getting through an extremely difficult time is to try to eat, sleep and restore yourself so that you can face what lies ahead. Exercise, relaxation, and distraction are some ways that people use to restore themselves and get energy. These can be hard to do but they will help.

**2.** Remember that people are different. There is no one way to handle violent death. What works for you may not work for a child or for someone else.

**3.** Identify and handle feelings. Strong negative feelings whether sadness, fear, guilt or anger can be very distressing and interfere with functioning. It helps to figure out what the feelings are and come up with a way to cope that lower the intensity of the feelings. Some ways that can work:

**a.** Talk or write about the situation or feelings.

**b.** Figure out how reasonable the feelings are. If they are based on inaccurate or unhelpful beliefs, try to put them into perspective (e.g., danger isn't everywhere, I couldn't have kept it from happening).

**c.** Try to calm down when the feelings get especially strong. Relaxation exercises, slow breathing, telling yourself you can handle the situation, exercise, leaving the upsetting situation, and distraction by doing something that takes attention all can work.

**d.** Name the feelings and accept them but tell yourself that it is possible to live through having them without falling apart completely or doing something destructive.

**4.** Be aware that thoughts affect feelings and behaviors. How you understand what happened, why it happened and being able to put it into perspective will make a difference. For example, for many people spiritual or religious beliefs can help in a difficult time. Being optimistic or finding some good that has come out of a horrible situation seems to help with recovery.

**5.** Think about positive memories of the person. Although pleasant memories of a person who has died can be sad, this is a normal part of grieving. Sometimes the memories of a person who has died violently are mainly about how they died. These memories are very upsetting. They can be helped balancing them with positive memories.

### **Ways to Help Children Cope:**

**1.** Comfort and reassure them. Children, especially younger children, need to know that there are adults who can handle a difficult situation, that they are safe and will be taken care of no matter what, and that they are loved. Tell and show an extra amount of love and reassurance for a while.

**2.** Give information about the death. When children do not know facts they can imagine the worst. They should be told what happened. Graphic details are not necessary and can make things worse. How much information is needed depends on the age of the child. Younger children only need simple basic information, whereas teenagers may want (and deserve) to know everything they want to know. Answer questions in simple, honest ways. .

**3.** Create opportunities to express feelings and reactions. Encourage children to talk about how they are feeling; why they think it happened, what they think should be done. Acknowledge feelings of anger but do not encourage them, expressing a lot of anger tends to make people more angry and upset.

**4.** Try to get back to normal family routines. Of course in the beginning, there will be a period of change, adjustment, and activities that disrupt every day life. But over time, especially for younger children, it is reassuring to have a regular and stable family life. Going to school or other normal activities (e.g., sports, clubs, seeing friends) is important and healthy for children. This does not mean ignoring the death or minimizing how hard it is.

**5.** Encourage positive remembering about the person. One of the hardest parts of a violent death is thinking about how the person died. One way to help with this is to think about positive qualities or positive experiences with the person.

### **Getting Help:**

- Not everyone needs professional help. Support from family, friends and other personal resources such as your church may be what is best for you and your family.
- It can be helpful to check with a specialized counselor by phone or in-person to find out how you or your children are doing and get ideas for coping.
- Counseling may be most helpful when the feelings and reactions are not gradually getting better, are getting worse or are interfering with functioning. Sometimes it is not for months or even years before a person decides that counseling might help. This is not unusual.
- Medicine can help in some cases especially for adults or older teenagers who become very depressed, anxious or have trouble sleeping for a long time. You can check with your primary care health care provider or with a specialized counselor to see whether medicine might be a good idea.
- Keep in mind, most people gradually feel better and eventually find ways to live with the loss. In the beginning this can be hard to imagine, but time and getting support really can make a positive difference.