



# COPING WITH GRIEF AFTER A TRAUMATIC OR SUDDEN LOSS

When a family member or close friend dies, it is common and normal to be sad and upset. Losing a loved one suddenly is always especially hard. When the death was violent, traumatic, or unexpected, there can be additional reactions related to the way the person died. It is normal for surviving family members and friends to have complex grief. Below are some typical reactions and ideas for ways to cope.

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## TYPICAL REACTIONS

1. **Shock about what happened.** When a person dies suddenly in a traumatic event, it is unexpected for their loved ones. It can be hard for friends and family to believe or accept. It can seem unreal, like a bad dream. The brain can feel foggy, and it can be hard to remember details or conversations. 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.** 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 witnessed) 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.** 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. Finding outlets that are not destructive is not always easy. It can be hard to imagine ever feeling better.

6. **Worry about the future.** Depending on the circumstances, there may be legal actions that result. 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.

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## 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. Relaxation, distraction, physical activity and going outside are some ways that people use to restore themselves and get energy. These can be hard to do but they help.

**2. Remember that people are different.** There is no one way to handle a traumatic or sudden 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 are normal but can be very distressing and interfere with functioning. It helps to figure out what the feelings are and do things that provide some short-term relief. Some ways that can help:

- Talk or write about the situation or feelings.
- 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 stopped it from happening).
- Try to create calm when the feelings get especially strong. Relaxation exercises, slow breathing, telling yourself you can handle the situation, exercise, leaving an upsetting situation, and distraction by doing something that takes attention all can help.

- 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 memories of a person who has died traumatically are about how they died. These memories are very upsetting. It can help to balance them with positive memories. It can also help to tell others it's ok to talk about the person. They might not want to upset the family members by talking about the person. But it can be reassuring to know the person is never forgotten.

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## 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. 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 child. Younger children only need simple basic information. Avoid unclear phrases to describe death (such as "they passed away," or "they've moved on.") Teens 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, and what they think should be done. Acknowledge feelings of anger but do not encourage it. Expressing a lot of anger tends to make people angrier and more upset.

4. **Try to get back to normal family routines.** Of course, in the beginning, there will a period of change, adjustment, and activities that disrupt everyday life. But over time, especially for younger children, it is reassuring to have a regular and stable family life. Going to school, participating in activities, and keeping the bedtime routine 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 sudden, traumatic death is thinking about how the person died. One way to help is to think about positive qualities or experiences with the person.

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## GETTING HELP

- Not everyone needs professional help. **Support from family, friends and other personal resources** such as your cultural or religious community may be most helpful.
- 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. You can call our Center at 206-744-1600.
- **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 teens who become very depressed, anxious, or have trouble sleeping for a long time. You can check with your doctor or with a specialized counselor to see whether medicine might be a good idea.
- **Most people gradually feel better and eventually find ways to live with the loss.** In the beginning this can be hard to imagine. Time passing and social support can make a positive difference.
- **Please contact us** if you are coping with grief after a traumatic or sudden loss and you need help. We are always glad to talk.