

Coping with Grief After a Sudden Death

A sudden death brings about particular feelings, specifically shock and disbelief, which are caused by the unexpected and devastating nature of the experience. While you can never feel completely prepared for a death, a sudden death leaves a person feeling particularly vulnerable.

Although it is impossible to address the many unique reactions to a sudden death, there are some similar issues and feelings that people grieving a sudden death most commonly confront:

- Shock; feeling disconnected to your feelings or to other people
- Disbelief; feelings of numbness or a belief that there has been a mistake
- Helplessness; lack of knowing what to do to be effective during this painful time
- Regret; feeling as though you had missed opportunities to say or do things
- Guilt; believing or wishing you could have done something to prevent the death
- Anger; at the situation or with the person for no longer being present
- Sadness; frequent crying

Grieving individuals may also be impacted physically:

- Difficulty sleeping
- Changes in appetite
- Loss of energy
- Focus/concentration difficulty

*Because of the sudden nature of the death, you may experience an unexpected sequence of feelings. Specifically, you may have a delayed grief reaction resulting from the difficulty of being able to initially comprehend the events or meaning of the death.

Tips for Coping:

- Consider sharing your thoughts and feelings with others
- Pay close attention to and get help for any change in physical and emotional health as they may be related to the loss
- Be active in making choices and engaging in activities
- Journal your thoughts and feelings
- Create ways of remembering your loved ones
- Establish realistic expectations for yourself while grieving
- Talk to professionals

Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) is available for support. Please call 847-491-2151 (daytime or after-hours). Our offices are located on the Evanston Campus at Searle Hall, 2nd Floor, 633 Emerson Street, and on the Chicago Campus at Abbott Hall, 5th Floor, 710 N. Lakeshore Dr.

When a friend is grieving:

Do

- Be a good listener. Be genuine.
- Take over when you can without being overly solicitous.
- Expect emotional ups and downs (sometimes sudden).
- Recognize that after a parent loss, things will never be the same for that person.
- Expect a shift in the person's perspective. What was important and meaningful before may seem trivial now.
- Be willing to agree with the person that this is a terrible event, that it's not fair, that it's desperately sad.
- Check to see how the person is, even many months after the loss (that's exactly the time when most other people stop asking).
- Allow the grieving person to share even angry or guilty feelings with you. Those are normal feelings and need to be expressed. Not rejecting them does not mean you agree, it means that you are available to listen.
- Expect some changes in how the person relates to you. They may be more distant or more needy or alternate between these. Tolerate this as best you can.
- Recognize that when you care about someone who has a loss, it is painful and hard on you, too. It can bring up some of your own issues of loss as well. Take care of yourself!

Avoid

- Avoid making any assumptions about how the person will feel, behave, or what he/she will need from you. Be available and open to what is needed.
- Avoid expecting the person to return to "normal" on any known schedule.
- Avoid expecting the person to follow any socially-ordained models for bereavement.
- Avoid "comforting" statements (e.g., "time heals all wounds," "it's all for a reason").
- Avoid taking it personally if your efforts at comfort are rejected or don't seem to help.
- Avoid "skirting around" the issue of the loss because you think it will make the person too sad if you ask about it or say you're sorry (the person is thinking about it already and might really appreciate the gesture).