

Coping with a sudden death

When death is expected there is time to prepare and to adapt to the coming loss and let it sink in. Sudden death can be very different. Whether accidental, traumatic, violent, associated with a disaster or disease or some other event... it is a world-changing, highly emotional and distressful time.

There is immediate and overwhelming grief: Often sudden death results in intense feelings such as being overwhelmed - unable to cope, confused, agitated, despairing, helpless and being out of control. You can be left with a real sense of disbelief as you think this can't be real, it can't be happening to me and my family. It can feel like you are wandering around in a fog, a daze.

No opportunity for goodbyes: With no time to prepare for loss and say good-bye, words are left unsaid, important things are not done and business is unfinished - regrets can be intense and long-lasting. Many thoughts beginning with "If only ..." can be going around in your head, day and night.

Your world changes: Perhaps you feel less safe, insecure, emotionally and personally abandoned, angry, immobile in the face of what has happened and what is to come. You might fear about the future and worry if you have the personal strength and ability to cope with this.

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A death is considered traumatic if it occurs without warning; if it is untimely; if it involves violence; if there is damage to the loved one's body; if it was caused by a perpetrator with the intent to harm; if the survivor regards the death as preventable; if the survivor believes that the loved one suffered; or if the survivor regards the death, or manner of death, as unfair or unjust.” [Wortman & Latack 2015]

That's a really broad definition but something else is really important to add "it isn't necessarily the specific nature of the death that makes it traumatic, rather how the event is interpreted and experienced by the individual ... their challenges are two-fold. They have to cope with the trauma and they have to cope with the grief"

(From www.whatsmygrief.com)

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No one can answer "Why?": Maybe these questions keep recurring - Why me? Why did God let this happen? Why our family? What did I do to deserve this? Who is to blame for this? You search for answers but there don't seem to be any. Nothing makes sense right now.

And then there are the immediate decisions: You can't think straight and there is the funeral to organise... arrangements to make, so many decisions, people to contact, no idea where to start! There may also be police reports, a Coroner's investigation, lawyers, insurance companies, media reports and other parties involved ... all this added intrusion to deal with.

Don't try to do it all by yourself: You may find your friends and relatives don't know what to do or how to talk to you about the situation. Maybe you can tell them what you would like them to do. Give them a task, they'll feel useful knowing they are doing something worthwhile for you. You may have to show them that you are okay talking about what's happened and that you want them to speak openly to you.

Allow yourself to grieve: It's alright to cry and be overwhelmed. Try not to bottle up your feelings. Now's the time to tell a close friend that you're struggling... really struggling! If you are feeling really overwhelmed, unable to act or do what needs to be done... talk to your doctor, community health service, or a registered psychologist or counsellor.