

# Dealing with sudden death in adulthood





## Common experiences following the sudden death of someone you know

When you are bereaved by sudden death you may experience some, none or all of these feelings. These are normal reactions to a sudden death. Although the feelings can be very strong, they will usually weaken over time and with reassurance.

### Anxiety

You may be worried about your own safety or the safety of important people in your life. You may want to protect yourself from, or avoid, situations in which you feel unsafe or unsettled.

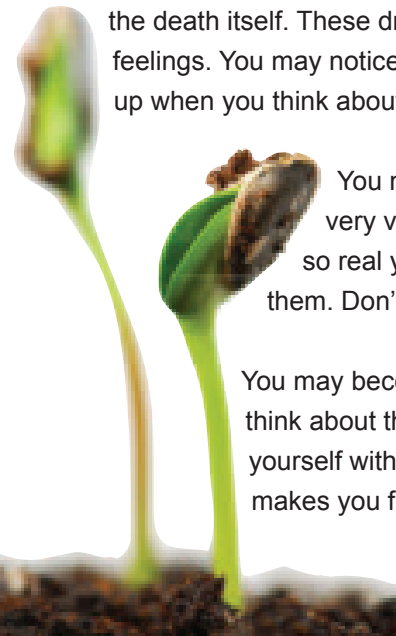
Crowds, traffic, or safety may worry you – sometimes in an unreasonable way. Loud noises, sudden movements, or being alone can make you jumpier than you were before. You may find it hard to talk to other people about this.

### Vivid memories

You may have very vivid dreams or memories about the person who has died or the death itself. These dreams can seem very real at the time, causing strong feelings. You may notice, for example, that your heart beat or breathing speeds up when you think about what happened.

You may be frightened or saddened, from time to time, by very vivid thoughts about the person who died. These can be so real you think you can see, hear, smell or even speak to them. Don't worry – this is a normal reaction.

You may become frightened when you are reminded of or when you think about the incident, or sometimes at random. Distracting yourself with other thoughts or actions can help. Do something that makes you feel safe and relaxed instead.





## Problems with sleeping

You may have difficulties with sleeping, for example, being unable to fall asleep and having (or being afraid of having), nightmares. You may also be concerned about your safety (or the safety of your home) overnight. It is okay to leave the light on, the bedroom door open, or to share a bedroom with someone.

## Feelings of sadness and longing

It is normal to feel very sad and to miss the person who died. This sadness usually comes and goes and seems to hit you when you least expect it. You may find that this sadness causes physical reactions such as tightness in your throat or chest.

You may wish you could have your life back the way it was before. You may feel sad that you will never have that life again, that things have changed forever. All of these feelings come and go, but eventually fade over time.

## Mood swings

You may have mood swings and become easily upset. You may find others have mood swings too. This can make spending time with friends or family difficult as everyone can react more emotionally or aggressively than they used to.

You may lose interest in things or activities you used to enjoy. These changes may affect your friendships, or cause you to become more withdrawn from some of the people you used to be close to. These are normal reactions – with space, time, and patience they will gradually improve.

## Feelings of anger

Many people experience very strong feelings of anger following sudden death. You may feel anger towards:

- The death itself
- Yourself



- The person who died (for dying and leaving you alone)
- The cause of death (person or group you believe to be responsible)
- People or groups you believe could have prevented the death
- Northern Ireland/"The Troubles"
- God (for letting this happen)
- Friends and the rest of the world for getting on with life.

Anger is often related to unfairness and a sense of injustice. This is understandable following sudden death. It is important that you recognise these feelings, and find a safe way to deal with them, for example, taking exercise or talking to a friend.

## Feelings of guilt or shame

It is very common to feel guilty. You may feel that:

- You have caused or could have done something to prevent the death
- You wished death or bad luck upon the person through something you said or did (e.g. your last words were part of an argument)
- The person will only remember bad things about you (especially if you were not on good terms before they died)
- You should have died instead of the person who did.

It is common to feel shame or embarrassment. You may feel that:

- You had a role in the death which you can't talk to other people about
- You and your family are now different from others
- You are very vulnerable.

It is not your fault. Feelings of guilt or shame are normal following a sudden death.



## Changing personality/behaviour

Other people may say to you that you have changed or you may notice changes in your own behaviour. You may find that you:

- Go into a fantasy world or withdraw from others
- Isolate yourself and want to be alone more
- Notice a change in sexual behaviour or attitude towards your partner
- Become very serious
- Become more aggressive or more easily provoked
- Take less care of yourself
- Feel useless or struggle to keep control
- Have difficulty with concentration and memory (e.g. become disorganised or forgetful).

Some of these behaviours can cause other problems in your life and you may need help to overcome them.

## Difficulty in caring for others

Dealing with your own grief and distress while taking care of others is difficult – it involves balancing the need to grieve with the need to be in control. You may feel overwhelmed by:

- The work and responsibility
- Struggling to return to old routines or creating new ones
- Feeling isolated, if you've lost your partner or source of support
- Exhaustion
- The future.



Caring for others is demanding; you need to seek and accept support for this. The more you take care of yourself the better able you will be to take care of others.



## Work difficulties

Work may become hard for you. You may find that you:

- Have difficulties in the workplace or with work colleagues – sometimes these can last a long time
- Have difficulties with concentration and memory that make paying close attention difficult
- Have difficulty keeping existing friends or getting along with others; they may find it difficult to understand why you are behaving differently
- Have to deal with people who do not know or understand what happened, with people who make hurtful comments either accidentally or deliberately and with people who know or think they know a lot more about what happened than you are comfortable with.

You may not experience any of these difficulties and may even find that you improve and work harder at your job as it offers a release from your grief.

## Guidelines for self-care

Every adult has their own needs – no two people will feel the same after a sudden death. Family and friends can help you meet practical and emotional needs.

Information, meaning-making, and physical safety will also have a big part to play in how you cope.

## Immediate needs

**You need to feel safe** – it is important for you and your family to feel as safe as possible. If necessary have a safety routine (shutting windows, checking locks, leaving lights on at night), and someone you can call when you feel unsafe. Daily routines, such as going to work, should be restarted as soon as you



feel able. Avoid long or unnecessary separations from family and friends.

- Have a consistent routine at home, work, and with friends
- Avoid unnecessary separations
- Give time and emotional support to others, and accept help in return
- Take your fears about safety seriously and have a safety routine to help you relax.

**You need to talk to other people** – following a sudden death you may lose interest in other people and not want to talk to them about what happened. Talking honestly with friends and family about your feelings and confusion can help bring you back in touch with them and yourself. Talk to people or organisations who can answer your questions about what occurred as the truth can be less painful than what you imagine happened.

- Ask questions to help you understand what happened
- Make the effort to talk to friends or family when you feel the need for support
- Find people you can feel comfortable talking to and being emotional with.

**You need to make the loss real** – sometimes it is difficult to believe that the person who died is gone, or that they won't just walk into the room like nothing happened. This is a normal reaction to sudden death. Find positive ways to remember or honour the person who died now and in the future.

- Take part in mourning ceremonies (e.g. attending the funeral, leaving a gift on the grave)
- Share your feelings of sadness
- Keep photos or special mementos of the person who died.



## Long-term needs

**You need to understand** – everyone needs time to adjust after a sudden death. You will need to talk and think repeatedly about what happened before you can understand it fully. Allow yourself more time to come to terms with unfairness, blame, or anger. Visit the grave or places where you feel close to the person. Looking through photo albums can be helpful.

- Try to clear up any confusion or unanswered questions
- Talk with a trusted friend, counsellor or therapist about difficult feelings and issues related to the death; many voluntary agencies offer support and experience
- Look at albums and photographs, and hold on to good memories
- Visit the grave or other relevant places from time to time.

**You need to deal with reminders** – unsettling thoughts or images of the death can come at random or in response to things that remind you of what happened. These can make you upset, physically and emotionally unsettled, prevent sleep, and interfere with your work. Managing reminders and triggers can give you more stability and a greater sense of emotional control.

- Avoid unnecessary reminders of what happened until you think you are ready for them
- Be aware that significant dates such as anniversaries or special occasions will be reminders
- Have a plan for dealing with reminders when they occur
- Prepare for court cases, coroner's investigations, and public interest by finding out what will happen and talking to other people about how you feel. Find out what details will be released at these events and how long they are likely to last. A PSNI family liaison officer, coroner's liaison officer or advocacy organisation will help support you through this time
- Be prepared for media interest in you and your family; or media coverage of other events that may remind you of your own experience.





Reminders will get weaker and fewer over time and you will get better at dealing with them.

**You need to share the burden** – it is important that you seek support following a sudden death, especially if you have a caring role.

- Take time out for yourself
- Plan to have adult company
- Seek out/ accept help from others (family, neighbours, agencies, social services)
- Make contact with others in a similar position.

## The future

Most people recover from a sudden death in the family, but there is no right way to grieve. There is no timetable for grief; for many people it has a lifelong effect. However, the most intense grief and upset will usually be experienced within the first two years.

- Be aware that your opinions might change over time
- Be prepared for new questions from friends and family in the future
- Find new interests and pastimes if the things you enjoyed before no longer interest you or are available
- Hold on to mementos and keepsakes
- Mark anniversaries and significant occasions
- Be optimistic about the future – although things will not be exactly as they were before, things can and do improve.





You may need additional support to deal with some specific feelings of grief, anger, or anxiety as family and friends will not always be able to help you with these. The booklet “Common Grief Reactions”, in this series, may be helpful if vivid memories, problems with sleeping or anger become too troublesome for you.

## Availability of booklets

The booklets in this series:

- Dealing with sudden death: helping children and adolescents
- Dealing with sudden death: information for young people
- Dealing with sudden death in adulthood
- Dealing with sudden death: common grief reactions

are available electronically to download from the bereavement page on Belfast Health and Social Care website - [www.belfasttrust.hscni.net](http://www.belfasttrust.hscni.net) and Cope with Life website [www.copewithlife.org.uk](http://www.copewithlife.org.uk)



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