

When Your Loved One Died Unexpectedly

Understanding Your Unique Grief

A police officer knocked at your door or a physician delivered the most unexpected and unwelcome news of your life to you in a hospital waiting room. You reel from the shock—“No, no, no. This can’t be real, it can’t be us, it can’t be now!” has likely become the cry of your heart.

Life seems to have disintegrated for you, perhaps, and you may think that you are literally losing your mind! After a loved one dies unexpectedly, we experience shock and numbness—the natural human response to a loss that is too big to comprehend just yet.

But as the numbness begins to wear off and the full impact of this death sinks in, you will likely find yourself feeling in ways that are strange and unexpected, even though fully normal for someone facing this kind of tragedy.

Finding What Is “Normal”

Humans are made for adaptation and we face unexpected deaths in some naturally adaptive ways. For you, avoiding reminders, going out of the way to not pass the site of the accident, or not wanting to talk about it can be ways of coping with this unexpected tragedy.

You may also have distressing dreams about the event or feelings that it is actually recurring. Specialists in trauma identify a sense of increased arousal, as well. You might find yourself “diving for cover” if startled, for example. After unexpected deaths, people often report unusual difficulty sleeping, greater levels of irritability, and difficulty concentrating. While these are normal in any grief, they seem especially common after an unexpected death.

But while these experiences may be expected, they can also be very alarming. And while many people find these experiences resolve themselves in a few days or weeks, don’t hesitate to talk to a mental health practitioner or healthcare provider if they persist or cause you ongoing distress.

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Grief is the normal human response to a loss. It helps us adapt to life and move into a future that doesn’t include our loved one’s physical presence in our lives. While your grief will be similar to that experienced by people after any major loss, the suddenness of an unexpected death often complicates our grief, making it unique.

After an unexpected death, you will likely experience many of the common emotions of grief. Anger, guilt, fear, loneliness, and sadness are just a few of the common emotional responses people describe. Normal physical experiences in grief include sleeplessness, fatigue, and loss of appetite.

In addition, you will likely find yourself experiencing the social impact of grief. Perhaps you will prefer more time alone or might even try a well-meaning friend’s advice to “just keep yourself busy so you don’t think about it.” And of course, many of your friends will be afraid of saying the wrong thing so they will say nothing, further increasing your feelings of isolation.

Most people experience some mental alteration, too, including forgetfulness and lack of concentration. And don't forget the spiritual dimension of this loss, causing you to find a richly reaffirmed faith or, more likely, a real challenge to your faith. Talking with an understanding member of the clergy can be very helpful, especially if you are struggling with questions like "Where was God and why didn't He do something?"

What Do I Do Now?

Others who have experienced the unexpected death of a loved one catalog some helpful ways to cope. As soon as you are ready, you will want to consider joining a support group. There are several groups that specialize in specific kinds of death such as Survivors of Suicide, SIDS, and Parents of Murdered Children.

Consider seeking the counsel of a physician, member of the clergy, or therapist. The objectivity and "listening ear" such a person provides can help you immeasurably, especially as you work through the potentially complicated grief following an unexpected death.

Journaling your experiences can also be very healing. If this is new to you, start by writing letters to your loved one, beginning with a phrase such as, "Today, I missed you the most when. . ."

Accurate information is also vital for those whose loved one dies unexpectedly. Some family members find reviewing an autopsy report with their family doctor helps to answer some of their questions and provide more information. If your loved one died as a crime victim, you will want to access the programs and resources of your community's victim's witness program. Funeral directors, police agencies, and hospital emergency staff will know how to contact these resource people.

Finally, be sure to make connections with your family, church or temple, and community groups of which you are a part. These people who "know you best" may be some of your most faithful supporters in your grief.

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