

Dealing with sudden death: information for young people





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 feel more anxious than usual 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.

You may become concerned about crowds, traffic, or safety in general – sometimes in an unreasonable way. Loud noises, sudden movements, or being alone can make you jumpier than you were before. This can be difficult for you to understand and you may find it hard to talk to other people about.

Vivid memories

You may have very vivid dreams 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 breathing or heart beat speeds up.

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

You may become frightened of being in another traumatic situation (e.g. witnessing





a death, hearing the news of a death). This can happen when you are reminded of or 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.

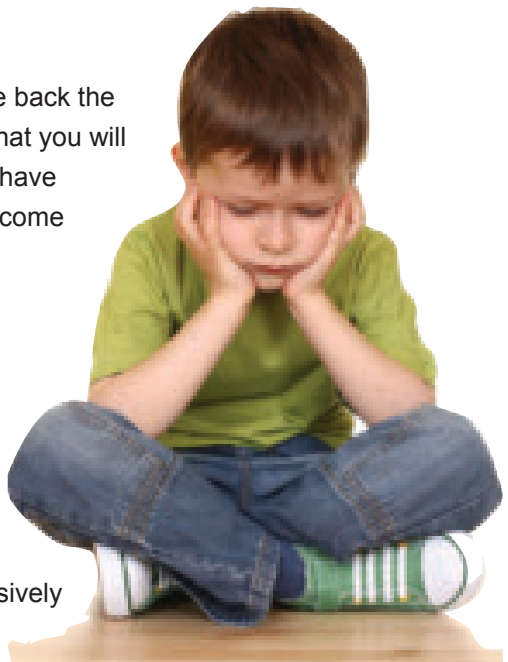
Feelings of sadness and longing

It is normal to feel very sad and to really 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 that 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 the things or activities that you used to enjoy. These changes may affect your choice of friends, or cause you to become more distant 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. You may feel anger towards the following:

- 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 who could have prevented the death
- Northern Ireland/"The Troubles"
- God (for letting this happen)
- Friends or the rest of the world for getting on with life.

Anger is often related to life being unfair or to a sense of injustice in the world. These are understandable responses following the death of someone you know. 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 to the person 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 have 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.

Remember – It is not your fault that the person died. Feelings of guilt, shame, and anger 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:

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

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

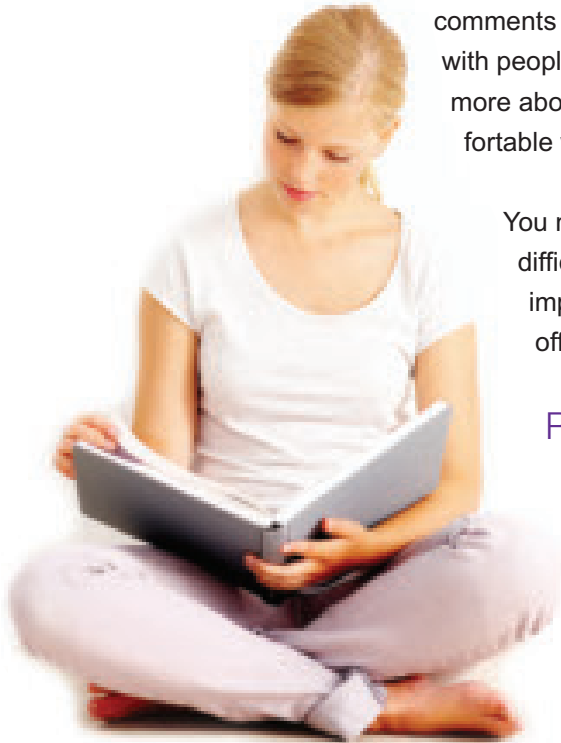




School difficulties

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

- Have problems with school work, sometimes these can last a long time
- Are not as interested in school as before
- Have difficulties with concentration and memory, which make paying close attention to school-work difficult
- Wish to think about delaying an examination until a later date. Discuss this with your family and your teachers
- Get into trouble
- Find it difficult to keep friends or get along with teachers. They may find it difficult to understand why you are behaving differently
- Have to deal with teachers and other pupils 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 as school offers a release from your grief.

Reminders

Powerful reminders of death or trauma can be unsettling if you aren't prepared for them. Sometimes they are predictable (e.g. anniversaries) and sometimes they come at random (e.g. daydreaming). Most often they



are started by something ordinary that is associated with the person who died (e.g. hearing their name spoken, seeing the place where they died, hearing music). Taking control of reminders involves developing an awareness of them and the reactions they cause in you, and changing those reactions over time. You should be able to do this on your own or with the help of a friend.

- Identify reminders in your life
- Develop a plan to avoid unnecessary reminders which are unsettling
- Plan ahead for significant dates such as anniversaries, birthdays or other occasions
- Develop a method for dealing with reminders when they arise
- Be reassured that reminders and triggers will become weaker and less frequent over time.

Events such as court cases, coroner's investigations, or media coverage involving you or the death should be prepared for. It is helpful for you to know in advance what topics will be covered at these events, and the details that are likely to be discussed.

Remember

It is important to talk to other people about your feelings, for example, a friend, parent or family member, someone from school, your GP, or a trusted adult. The booklet "Common Grief Reactions", in this series, may be helpful if any of the feelings covered in this booklet 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 and Cope with Life website www.copewithlife.org.uk

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