Coping with grief when someone you love dies suddenly

For support charities go to page 16
For counselling services go to page 20
For a children’s version of this book call 0845 603 8570

Produced by Sudden
Supporting people after sudden death
This book outlines some of the feelings that you or a person you care for may be experiencing and suggests simple ways to help you cope during this time – including details of who to turn to for support.

Introduction

If you have been bereaved suddenly, or if you are caring for someone who has been bereaved in this way, this book is for you.

Bereavement is a shattering experience. When someone dies suddenly it can be particularly painful. It can affect people in a number of ways - emotionally, physically and in many aspects of their lives.

Looking after yourself at this time is very important. It can prevent long-term damage to your health and quality of life.
Feelings

The sudden death of someone close is a terrible shock. It can leave feelings of numbness, bewilderment, tiredness and helplessness – as well as deep sadness.

I can’t believe it has happened

It is common to feel as if a death has not really happened – to expect a person who has died to walk through the door or call on the phone. It is common to talk about a person as if they are still alive. The shock can be particularly hard to bear each morning when waking up and realising it is true.

It may seem so unfair – ‘why me?’ is a common thought.

I can’t do anything

It may be hard to get up and get on with normal activities.

Crises can draw out the best in us but they can also make us feel helpless. It is common to feel powerless and overwhelmed, which can be very frustrating and upsetting.

It is easy to make mistakes at times of severe stress. It is wise to avoid high risk activities such as driving or using dangerous machinery, or be extra careful if you have to do these things.
I feel scared

Sudden bereavement can make people fearful. It is common to feel alone or to worry about being abandoned by people around you.

It is common to be scared to go out. It is common to worry that other people, or you, will die suddenly. It is common to suffer feelings of panic in a busy environment such as a shopping centre or a train station.

I have frightening thoughts, dreams or flashbacks

Flashbacks about a death, or events following a death, may be experienced, when it feels like it is all happening again. Flashbacks can be frightening and disturbing.

If you are suffering flashbacks do not operate dangerous machinery or drive. Flashbacks may happen at any time.

Vivid thoughts and dreams are common – these may be about what happened, or about a person who has died, or about a fear.

It is common to dream that someone is still alive, which can be upsetting on waking.

I feel so angry

The senselessness of sudden death often leaves bereaved people feeling very angry.

It is even common to have feelings of anger towards a person who has died – for leaving you and creating such a big hole in your life.

It is also common to get worked up over minor things that are part of everyday life.

For people who do not normally get angry, these feelings may be particularly distressing.

If only...

It is common to mull over the circumstances leading up to a death and wonder if you, or others, could have done anything to stop it happening. ‘If only...’ is a common and particularly painful thought process.

Bereaved people often wish they had told a person who has died how much they love them.

Thoughts like these may lead to a strong feeling of guilt that can be hard to explain to others, particularly if people know you have nothing to feel guilty about.

Many people find it useful to talk about their fears, flashbacks, dreams or other symptoms. It can help to know that someone you trust and can talk to is nearby or on the end of a phone. Pages 16 to 24 suggest people who can help.

Crying may help – many people find it is better to express their feelings than to hold back the tears.
I feel so tense and restless

It is common to feel wound up. Stresses previously taken as being part of life can sometimes feel unbearable. This can make it difficult to rest, fall asleep or have peace of mind. It is common to feel jumpy. Listening to certain pieces of music or reading poetry may have special meaning to you and be restful.

I forget things

It may be hard to concentrate. It may be hard to remember events and names.

Bereaved people are often scared that they will forget what their loved one looked like, or forget the sound of their voice.

It may help to write down memories about a loved one who has died, or you may want to store things like photos, cards and other momentos in a special memory box.

My plans are ruined

When someone dies, plans for the future may be ruined. It may be difficult to make new plans. Big decisions may be particularly hard to make. It is common to be anxious about things.

At first, you may wish to avoid making big decisions – it is easy to make wrong decisions under stress. To begin with, it may help to focus on just one thing at a time. You can turn to page 12 for tips on getting through each day.

Nobody understands

Sometimes well-meaning people might say inappropriate things which can be hurtful, such as ‘you’ll get over it’. Some people may even behave as if nothing has happened – often because they are afraid they might say the wrong thing.

Many people whose loved ones have died suddenly are unhappy with the punishment given to someone who was held to blame. It can also be hard to bear if no-one is held to blame, or if a loved one who died was in some way to blame.

Sometimes it all feels so pointless

Sometimes it can all feel so pointless. Your deep sadness may mean it is hard to imagine being happy again.

Many people find it helpful to know that other people bereaved suddenly have gone on to lead full and happy lives, while still remembering with sorrow what happened.
Talking to people close to you

You may find that people close to you, such as any family or friends, provide you with important support. They may have wonderful qualities that go unnoticed in everyday life and which can be of great help in this time of crisis. Talking about how you feel and having a hug can help enormously.

On the other hand, you may not have this support or may find it hard to talk to these people because they are grieving too. You may be experiencing different feelings at different times. You may feel they aren’t close enough, don’t understand, or are too busy.

If you are having difficulty communicating with people close to you, it may help to give them this book, or read sections of it together. This can help explain the feelings you and they may be experiencing and make it easier for you to benefit from each other’s support.

How can I help bereaved children?

In many ways, the needs of children are the same as the needs of adults. It is important for children to understand what has happened, and to be given opportunities to talk about it and feel supported.

Who else can help me?

Many people find it also helps to talk to someone outside their own circle of family and friends.

Charities listed on pages 16 to 18 provide support services including helplines, and face-to-face support.

A month or longer after your bereavement, you should also consider getting an assessment of your needs from a health professional, as you may benefit from a course of therapy or some other treatment. See pages 20 to 24.
Physical symptoms

Many people suffer physical symptoms following the sudden death of someone close. These may occur occasionally or all the time. The trauma of your experience can place intense and prolonged pressure on your body.

I am so tired

Your energy levels may vary enormously. You may feel like you can’t do anything, or even feel hyperactive. You may have difficulty sleeping. This may lead to tiredness and then exhaustion. Your GP may be able to suggest medication to help you sleep, but this is not recommended for more than a few weeks at most. Avoid caffeinated drinks in the evening. Turn to page 12 for some suggestions on relaxation.

My muscles ache

Muscles may tense up. This may cause localised pains, such as headaches, stomach pains and backache. Women may find they suffer extra pain during menstruation, or menstruate at unusual times.

I have heart palpitations

Heart palpitations, feeling faint or dizzy, excessive sweating, tremors and choking sensations are common.

I can’t speak properly

Stutters and jumbled sentences are common.

My digestion is poor

Digestive problems may occur, such as diarrhoea.

Physical symptoms are painful and upsetting, but should fade with time and then disappear altogether. If physical symptoms persist turn to page 20 for advice on seeking help from a health professional.
Ways to relax

Breathing in and out deeply and slowly for a few minutes can be calming. This is something anyone can do anywhere – at work, on a bus, or in front of the TV.

Therapies such as aromatherapy, or massage, or just running a deep, hot bubble bath can help ease tension.

Exercise – maybe walking, swimming, yoga or jogging – can be relaxing and help you to think positively.

Hobbies, such as painting, dancing, playing music, cooking, gardening, DIY, or looking after animals may be therapeutic.

Don’t feel you have to be busy all the time. Sometimes you may feel like sitting somewhere peaceful. Grieving takes time and you may need to make time for it.

It is easy to forget to eat properly when grieving. If you find eating difficult, try to eat a little, often.

A sudden death of a loved one causes some people to think about their spiritual beliefs. Some people may find comfort from a place of worship or a place that has special meaning to them.
Things to consider

It may be better to know what happened rather than imagine things that might not have happened. Police and medical personnel should be able to answer questions and you have a right to ask.

Bottling up feelings is not a good idea. You may find you can express your feelings through talking to others. You may find you can express your feelings in a creative way, such as through hobbies or mounting photographs of the person who has died.

Look forward to things, such as holidays, or challenges at work. However, it may be wise to delay making big decisions until you feel you can cope.

Try to be helpful to others. Putting energy into loving other people can be positive. But don’t forget to think about yourself too.

Do something positive. At times, doing something, such as going for a walk, may help more than staying in. But don’t overdo it. If you feel you need to rest, then you should.

Sometimes you may not have enough energy to be as active as you would wish. This may feel frustrating and upsetting. Only doing one thing at a time can help, and higher energy levels should return in time.

Your feelings may change. You may have different feelings at different times. It may be hard to predict how you will feel. You may suddenly have new feelings. It can help to let people around you know that your emotions may be unpredictable and to ask these people to be supportive.

Some people find that substances such as alcohol or cigarettes make them temporarily feel more able to cope. However, it is not helpful to use any substance, whether stimulant or tranquilliser, in order to manage your feelings. Alcohol, for example, is a depressant and can make you feel worse.

It is much harder to identify and address emotional and physical feelings if they are masked by the effects of such substances.
Help from support charities

There are charities that aim to support you at this time, for free. Read the following pages to find out about these charities and their services.

You may want to contact one, or more, of the organisations listed in this section immediately, or later, depending on how you feel. These organisations are described below in their own words. Some additional organisations cover particular regions only and are not listed in this book. You can call the Sudden helpline on 0845 603 8570 or ask your GP or police contact for local organisations based near where you live.

Sudden

- Sudden is the charitable organisation that wrote this book. It cares for anyone bereaved by a sudden and unexpected death of any kind. Sudden’s helpline provides emotional and practical support. The helpline can find out if there is a support worker in your area who is experienced in helping people bereaved by sudden death and who can help you immediately after your bereavement. A month or so after your bereavement, the helpline can also help you access an assessment of any medical needs for any resulting conditions you may suffer, such as post traumatic stress disorder, and help you access any appropriate treatment such as talk-based therapy. The helpline can also, if appropriate, help you access assistance from a solicitor and may be able to help you deal with any practical difficulties you are facing.

Helpline 0845 603 8570 (Mon-Fri 9am-1pm, and Mon 7pm-9pm)
Membership, road safety queries and to volunteer: 01484 559909
W: www.suddendeath.org
PO Box 548, Huddersfield HD1 2XZ
General support

- **The Samaritans** is a 24-hour helpline for anyone in need.
  It is staffed by trained volunteers.
  Helpline 0845 90 90 90 (24 hours a day, 7 days a week)
  Email jo@samaritans.org  W: www.samaritans.org

- **Cruse Bereavement Care** provides support and information to all bereaved people through a network of more than 130 branches and through the national helpline. Over 5,000 trained volunteers can provide one-to-one and/or group support. Cruse also runs training courses, both for its own volunteers and outside organisations.
  Helpline 0844 477 9400 (weekdays 9.30am-5pm)
  Email info@cruse.org.uk
  W: www.cruse.org.uk
  Cruse helpline for children and young people 0808 808 1677
  Cruse website for children and young people www.rd4u.org.uk

If your partner has died

- **The WAY Foundation** provides a social and support network for men and women widowed under the age of 51 and their children. It can also put you in touch with counselling schemes for children.
  Phone 0870 011 3450 Email info@wayfoundation.org.uk
  W: www.wayfoundation.org.uk

- **The National Association of Widows** is run by the widowed for the widowed, providing support and information. It has a helpline, local branches and a contact list of widows and widowers across the country.
  Phone 0845 838 2261
  Email info@nawidows.org.uk  W: www.nawidows.org.uk

Support for families and children

- **The Child Bereavement Charity** offers information and support for families and professionals when a child dies or when a child is bereaved.
  Phone 01494 568900 (weekdays, 9am-5pm)
  Email support@childbereavement.org.uk
  W: www.childbereavement.org.uk

- **The Child Death Helpline** is a national freephone service for anyone who has lost a child of any age, including when an adult. It is run by bereaved parents who have been trained in listening skills. It is run from Great Ormond Street Hospital, London, and Alder Hey Hospital, Liverpool.
  Helpline 0800 282 986 (7pm-10pm every evening, 10am-1pm Mondays to Fridays and 1pm-4pm Tuesdays and Wednesdays)

- **The Compassionate Friends** is run by parents who have lost a child of any age including when an adult.
  Helpline 0845 123 2304 (7 days, 10am-4pm and 7pm-10pm)
  W: www.tcf.org.uk

- **Care for the Family** runs The Bereaved Parents Network (supporting those who have lost a child or a sibling of any age through newsletters, a telephone befriending network and events) and A Different Journey (supporting those who have lost a partner while still young and/or still have children at home through newsletters, a telephone befriending service and events). The organisation has a Christian ethos but welcomes other faiths or none.
  Phone 029 2081 0800 (weekdays, 9am-5pm)
  W: www.careforthefamily.org.uk/bpn (The Bereaved Parents Network)
  W: www.careforthefamily.org.uk/adj (A Different Journey)
Help from health professionals

This section explains when it may be appropriate to seek useful help from your GP or another health professional.

Some people bereaved suddenly find their extreme symptoms begin to subside within a month or two. These people still feel grief stricken, but are no longer suffering symptoms of trauma.

However, it is also normal for people bereaved suddenly to find their trauma symptoms don’t subside or get worse.

It is also normal to still feel very low or depressed.

If a loved one died a month or more ago and you are still suffering from symptoms of trauma or depression such as those described in this book or other symptoms, they are probably affecting your everyday life and could get worse. They could lead to serious problems at work or at home. They could also prevent you from grieving in a normal way.
Getting an assessment of your needs

You may be suffering from a condition such as depression or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The first step to getting appropriate help is to have your needs assessed. An assessment should identify what condition or conditions you are suffering from, so that possible treatments can be discussed with you.

You may have been offered an assessment by a health professional (for example, if you spent time in hospital because of the crash). If not, book an appointment with your GP to arrange an assessment. You can ask for this at any time, whether your bereavement happened recently or a long time ago.

Some GPs are more familiar with arranging such assessments than others. Show your GP this page to help them understand what you are requesting.

Whoever your GP refers you to for an assessment, it is reasonable to check that they are experienced and qualified to assess the needs of someone who has been traumatically bereaved, rather than the needs of someone bereaved in a less traumatic way.

Your assessment will involve you talking to the person who is assessing you in a confidential meeting where they ask you questions and you talk about how you are feeling and your symptoms.

Likely treatments you will be offered

The treatment or treatments you are offered following your assessment depends on the diagnosis given to you. You can choose to accept or decline any treatment.

If you are diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or depression or similar conditions, you are most likely to be offered a course of talk-based therapy, where you spend time talking with a therapist about what has happened, your symptoms, and ways to cope and feel stronger. You will be offered a number of sessions, usually eight or more. This talk-based therapy is often a special kind of therapy called Cognitive Behavioural Therapy.

This therapy should be delivered by someone who is qualified and experienced in helping people traumatically bereaved. It is reasonable for you to check this before agreeing to this therapy.

You may also be offered other treatments, such as drugs. Some people find some courses of drugs very helpful at this time. However, other people do not wish to use drugs, or find they don’t help.

The NHS says drugs should not be offered to you in preference to therapy if you have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

GPs are recommended to read guideline 26 from the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, which recommends in section 1.8.26 that someone who has suffered a death of someone close should be assessed for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. You can download this guideline from www.nice.org.uk
Will I get assessed and treated straight away?

The NHS often has waiting lists. Whether someone can assess you straight away, then refer you for a course of therapy that starts straight away, may depend on local resources or the severity of your symptoms. However, your GP should try to ensure that you are seen as soon as possible. Alternatively, you can consider paying for private treatment, if you are able to do so.

Lists of providers of therapists who can assess your needs, some through the NHS, some privately, are available from the following:

- **British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies** 0161 705 4304
  W: www.babcp.com

- **British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy** 01455 883300
  W: www.bacp.co.uk

- www.uktrauma.org.uk

Alternatively, the Sudden helpline on 0845 603 8570 can research local services for you.

I know someone else who might need this kind of help as a result of the sudden death. What should I do?

If you think that someone else may need help, such as a family member or close friend of a person who died, show them this book. You cannot force someone to get help, but you can give them information to help them make their own decisions.

It may be possible for a health professional to approach someone for you.

Should I consider getting an assessment and treatment for a child?

Yes. There are people who specialise in assessing children's needs and providing them with the right treatment.

If you have a solicitor helping you with a claim for compensation, they may be able to help you access an assessment and treatment.

You should consider the experience and expertise of any therapist you are thinking of using, whether you are paying for their services or not.
Recovery

A sudden death is never forgotten and grief cannot be hurried. It is normal to continue to remember and to have sad thoughts.

Recovering from your trauma, coping with your grief and rebuilding life without a loved one may be the greatest challenge you ever have to face.

But it is possible to recover. If you follow the advice in this book, it is normal for severe emotional and physical symptoms to disappear.

This does not mean you have ‘got over’ your grief. It means you have recovered from the shock.

The future

As time passes, bad days and sad thoughts will continue. For some people this happens particularly at times such as anniversaries.

Sometimes something small such as a smell, sound, comment, or photograph can trigger thoughts. When something good happens it is sometimes sad that the event cannot be shared with a person who died.

When you are newly bereaved by a sudden death, it can be hard to imagine ever being happy. But, in time, it should become easier to remember good times before a loved one died, and not just the sadness, and to appreciate the joys of life once again.

Life can be full of joys, and it is not disloyal to be happy again.
Sudden is committed to continuous improvement. Any comments on this book’s content are welcomed and can be sent in writing to the address above.

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