

Dealing with Sudden Death

Without Warning

The impact of sudden death is devastating, for it happens without warning or a chance to anticipate what lies ahead. There is no time for good-byes, no time to make amends or ask forgiveness for harsh words spoken in a quarrel, and no time to express the love one feels but doesn't verbalize.

There are seven special features that tend to complicate the grief process for survivors:

1. Sudden death usually leaves the survivor with a sense of unreality that may last a long time.
2. Sudden death fosters a stronger-than-normal sense of guilt expressed in "if only..." statements.
3. In sudden death, the need to blame someone for what happened is extremely strong.
4. Sudden death often involves medical and legal authorities.
5. Sudden death often elicits a sense of helplessness on the part of the survivor.
6. Sudden death leaves the survivor with many regrets and a sense of unfinished business.
7. In the event of sudden death, there is the need to understand why it happened. Along with this is the need to determine not only the cause but also the blame. Sometimes God is the only available target and it is not uncommon to hear someone express anger at God or their higher power.

Grief is unlearned. It is a spontaneous response to a loss. There is no automatic strength to deal with it. Every individual must find the time and the external system to deal with it.

Advice for Survivors

- **Allow yourself to grieve.** Give vent to your intense emotions. This sudden loss has allowed you no opportunity to prepare yourself. It is better to express – rather than suppress – these feelings. Tears give release to sorrow. *Feeling* the pain is the first step in *healing*.
- **Your body's grief reaction is normal.** There are physical symptoms of grief such as fatigue, insomnia, and loss of or increase in appetite. Be aware of your body's signals. If these symptoms last more than three months, see your doctor.
- **Tell friends how you want to be treated.** Let your support system know when you need support *and* when you need to be alone.
- **Share your thoughts with a friend.** Giving vent to feelings helps to lessen the intensity of those feelings.

This information has been reviewed and recommended for use by the UAMS/CPED/Patient Education Advisory Committee.

Advice for Survivors *continued*

- **Join a support group.** If you feel overwhelmed there may be groups in your church or community that provide counseling and support. The Internet also offers many excellent sources of support.
- **Keep busy, but not to the point of halting the grieving process.** Many will stay busy to delay the pain. Take the time to mourn and let go. Keep busy, but include time for yourself as well.
- **Recognize there will always be a void.** The pain will be more manageable in time, but you may always feel your loved one's absence. Special dates and holidays are often times of greater feelings of loss.
- **Keep a journal or diary.** Write a letter to the deceased expressing how you feel about their death. This will allow you to find a way to say "good-bye".



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