

Helping Yourself Heal

It's All about Giving Yourself Permission to Mourn

Someone you love has died. You are now faced with taking care of all the details of resolving their accounts and notifying various government agencies. And you've got to find time to feel the feelings, and think the thoughts surrounding the death of the person you've recently lost.

You've simply got to mourn. It's just that simple. It is an essential part of healing. You are beginning a journey that is often frightening, painful, overwhelming and sometimes lonely. We have some practical suggestions to help you move toward healing in your personal grief experience.

No one will grieve in exactly the same way as you. Your experience will be influenced by a variety of factors: the relationship you had with the person who died, the circumstances surrounding the death, your emotional support system, and your cultural and religious background.

As a result, you will grieve in your own special way. Please don't try to compare your experience with that of other people, or make assumptions about how long your grief should last. We suggest taking a "one-day-at-a-time" approach that allows you to grieve at your own pace.

Talk about How You Feel

By sharing your grief outside yourself, healing occurs. Ignoring your grief won't make it go away; talking about it often makes you feel better. Allow yourself to speak from your heart, not just your head. Doing so doesn't mean you are losing control, or going "crazy". It is a normal part of your grief journey.

Find caring friends and relatives who will listen without judging what you say. Seek out those persons who will "Walk with, not in front of, or behind you" in your journey through grief.

Avoid people who are critical or who try to discount what you are experiencing. They may tell you, "keep your chin up" or "carry on" or "be happy." While these comments may be well-intended, you do not have to listen, and you certainly shouldn't try to keep your chin up. You have a right to express your grief; no one has the right to take it away.

Expect to Feel a Mixture of Emotions...at Unexpected Times

Experiencing a loss affects your head, heart and spirit. So you may experience a variety of emotions as part of your grief work. Confusion, disorganization, fear, guilt, relief or explosive emotions are just a few of the emotions you may feel. Sometimes these **emotions of grief** will

follow each other within a short period of time. Or they may occur simultaneously.

As strange as some of these emotions may seem, they are normal and healthy. Allow yourself to learn from these feelings. And don't be surprised if out of nowhere you suddenly experience surges of grief, even at the most unexpected times.

These grief attacks can be frightening and leave you feeling overwhelmed. They are however, a natural response to the death of someone loved. Find someone who understands your feelings and will allow you to talk about them.

Feeling Numb? It's OK...in Fact, it's Expected

Feeling dazed or numb when someone loved dies is often part of your early grief experience. This numbness serves a valuable purpose: it gives your emotions time to catch up with what your mind has told you. This feeling helps create insulation from the reality of the death until you are more able to tolerate what you don't want to believe.

Be Tolerant of Your Physical and Emotional Limits

Your feelings of loss and sadness will probably leave you really tired. Not only that, your ability to think clearly and make decisions may be impaired. Respect what your body and mind are telling you. Nurture yourself. Get daily rest. Eat balanced meals. Lighten your schedule as much as possible. Caring for yourself doesn't mean feeling sorry for yourself; it means you are practicing tried-and-true survival skills.

Build a Network of Support

Don't isolate yourself. We know that reaching out to others and accepting support is often difficult, particularly when you hurt so much. But the most compassionate self-action you can do during this difficult time is to find a support system of caring friends and relatives who will provide the understanding you need. Find those people who encourage you to be yourself and acknowledge your feelings, both happy and sad.

Engage the Healing Power of Ritual

The lighting of a candle in the evening; writing a letter to a loved one, and then burning it, symbolically sending the messages of love up into the heavens. Don't feel shy - your personal rituals are just for you, to help you feel better, and find a spiritual connection.

The Hopi Indians of Arizona believe that our daily rituals and prayers literally keep this world spinning on its axis. Through little rituals and thoughts we create a life that speaks to each of us, even in the darkest of times.

So, if you're inspired to do so, create small rituals to help you express your feelings and pay tribute to someone who was, and always will be, loved.

Embrace Spirituality

If faith is part of your life, express it in ways that seem appropriate to you. Allow yourself to be around people who understand and support your religious beliefs. If you are angry with God because of the death of someone you loved, recognize this feeling as a normal part of your grief work. Find someone to talk with who won't be critical of whatever thoughts and feelings you need to explore.

You may hear someone say, "With faith, you don't need to grieve." Whatever you do, don't believe it. Having your personal faith does not insulate you from needing to talk out and explore your thoughts and feelings. Always remember that to deny your grief is to invite problems that build up inside you. We heartily recommend expressing your faith, but express your grief as well.

Search for Meaning

You may find yourself asking, "Why did he die?", "Why this way?", "Why now?" This search for meaning is another normal part of the healing process. Some questions have answers, yet some do not. Honestly, it's not important to get clear answers. What's important is to know that healing occurs in the opportunity to pose the questions, not necessarily in answering them. Find a supportive friend who will listen attentively as you search for meaning, without feeling the need to offer their opinions unless you ask them to. An English writer and poet living in the 19th century, Martin Farquhar Tupper, said it best: "Well-timed silence hath more eloquence than speech".

Treasure Your Memories

Memories are one of the best legacies that exist after someone loved dies. Treasure them. Share them with your family and friends. Recognize that your memories may make you laugh or cry. In either case, they are a lasting part of the relationship that you had with a very special person in your life.

We often suggest that, when the time is right, you create a Book of Memories™ in honour of your loved one.

Move Toward Your Grief...Not Away from It

The writer George Eliot penned these beautiful words..."She was no longer wrestling with the grief, but could sit down with it as a lasting companion and make it a sharer in her thoughts."

When we meet with families, we often share this imagery with them. It communicates the

work, in this case the "wrestling" one has to do with the emotions of grief, as well as the long-term goal of the work: becoming comfortable with grief; to sit with it, to embrace it. And, more importantly, to recognize it as your ally, and a natural part of loving someone.

In fact, the capacity to love requires the necessity to grieve. You can't heal unless you openly express your grief. Denying your grief will only make it become more confusing and overwhelming. Embrace your grief and heal.

Reconciling your grief will not happen quickly. Remember, grief is a process, not an event. Be patient and tolerant with yourself. Never forget that the death of someone loved changes your life forever. It's not that you won't be happy again. It's simply that you will never be exactly the same as you were before death.

Coming to Terms with Unexpected Death

Death is never easy, but for families and friends affected by a sudden death of a loved one, grief is especially traumatic. Deaths caused by accidents, homicide and suicide typically seem premature, unjust, and wrong. Completely wrong.

It's common to have obsessive thoughts and feelings about what the death must have been like for the person who died, and what might have been done to prevent it.

Strong feelings of anger and regret are also common. Understanding and expressing these feelings helps survivors, over time and with the support of others, come to reconcile their loss.

What is Sudden Death?

Sudden, unexpected death is just that: death came without warning. It may happen in a few seconds or minutes, such as in an accident or from a heart attack, or a random, seemingly senseless act of violence.

Sudden unexpected deaths also happen when the person is not expected to die in a certain way or place. He or she may not even be expected to die at all.

Some people, not knowing the person was ill, may think of their death as sudden and unexpected. A person who was expected to take many months to die may also die a death that is seen as sudden. They may be expected to get worse slowly but then die in a short period of time. Death may also seem sudden when people are expecting a different outcome. The person may die in a few weeks when they were expected to live for months or even years.

What Thoughts Arise in Those Left Behind?

The sudden loss and death of a person may cause shock and confusion at first. They may have more need to go over and over the events around the death. They may think that mistakes

were made, and feel guilty or angry.

The police, courts, media, and insurance companies may get involved with the death. People may feel they need to help resolve the practical issues involved in the situation, instead of facing their grief, and moving through it.

The following may be some of a survivor's feelings or actions after the sudden unexpected death of a loved one:

- They may tire easily and be physically inactive.
- They may instead become manic and way-too-busy.
- They may tenaciously hang on to clothing or other belongings.
- They may have really poor concentration, not able to think clearly, or have trouble making decisions.
- They may have no appetite at all, or eat too much...or any combination of the two.
- They may sleep too much or not get enough sleep.

Grief is a cycling process, and all of these symptoms may wax and wane, come and go, with the "seasons" of grieving.

If You Lost Someone You Love Suddenly

The following may help you cope with the sudden unexpected death of a loved one:

- Rest is important. Do not try to do everything all at the same time. Do only what is needed and let other things wait until later. Ask your family, friends, or caregivers for help.
- Share your feelings. Try saying what you really feel or share stories of the one who just died. Often just talking things out with someone you trust is a big help.
- Take good care of yourself. Do not forget to look after yourself and other family members or friends. You should eat healthy food and keep yourself healthy.
- When the time is right, try to get out of the house a little each day. Go for a walk or meet with a friend. Be sure to spend time with your family or friends. But, remember, it is also important that you have time to yourself each day.

The Essential Lesson Within

Here's the truth of things: if your loved one died from a sudden death, you have been brought face-to-face with the realization that tomorrow is promised to no one. This awareness can help you keep in mind what is important in life, so you don't get lost in trivial matters and lose sight

of those things that are most important to you.

It is an ironic but one consequence of sudden death is that it can make you appreciate life more than you ever would have if you had not undergone such a traumatic experience.

Now we know that no one in their right mind would seek out such a loss in order to teach themselves a lasting life lesson, but it does let you pull something meaningful out of such a tragedy.

