

Sudden/Accidental Death

One minute your life is good, and not too many minutes later your world caves in around you. With the suddenness of it comes a deep numbing shock and disbelief. Your life is inexorably changed.

Whether your loved one was killed outright in an accident, or died suddenly from an unforeseen medical problem, you are left shocked and unbelieving. You can't believe that this terrible thing has happened and that your loved one is dead.

The freezing of the last minutes' action, the inability to say good by, the amputation of the relationship between you and your loved one, dealing with legalities such as insurance or the courts, are further complicated by intense guilt and anger.

The memory of the last time you were with your love can be difficult. The scene is frozen just as it happened. You may have had an argument before he died or was killed. The memory of any unpleasant scene will be played over and over again in your mind. Angry or unkind words spoken by you or your loved one may torture you for a long time.

Also, memories of your last moments with your love can be a source of guilt. For example, if he or she was killed in an auto accident, you might feel guilty that you didn't keep him home or drive him yourself. You may feel guilty because you believe that somehow you could have prevented his accident. The "If onlys" and "should haves" are very strong in sudden deaths.

If, in fact, you were directly involved in your loved one's death, or, as in some rare cases, directly responsible for the death, you may need professional help to resolve your guilt. If it is left unresolved, it can destroy you. If, on the other hand, someone else, your spouse or another relative was directly involved, blame can destroy that relationship.

Then again, anger, even possibly rage, can be focused on individuals you hold responsible for your loved one's death. You could be angry with the medical personnel whom you believe didn't properly treat your love. You might also be angry with God for letting this happen, or even at other people who have complete families. Anger is normal and natural, but it must be resolved. Turned inward, it becomes depression.

If your loved one died suddenly from an unsuspected illness, guilt and blame can be a part of this grief also. You may blame yourself for not seeing that he was "that" sick. Although these emotions are irrational most of the time, they are very much a part of sudden deaths.

Insurance companies or the legal system can be a problem. You may be outraged with a system that sees your loved one as a statistic or a figure on an actuarial chart. You will certainly be outraged with a court system that blames him or her for his own death, or excuses the real culprit on a technicality.

With a sudden death you are left with unfinished business. Not being able to say good-bye, or tell your loved one how much you love him, or say the multitude of things you would like to have said to him, leaves you frustrated.

An important factor in sudden death is whether or not you were able to view your loved one's body. One of the benefits of the funeral is the retention of a mental image of the deceased that helps you face the reality of that he or she is really dead. People who are unable, for various reasons, to view the body have difficulty believing that he is dead. Without that mental image of him in the casket to draw on, many of people have a lingering doubt that their loved one is truly dead. Both consciously and unconsciously many wonder that maybe their child is not really the one they buried.

Some people feel the need to know specific details of the accident, or want a comprehensive explanation of the autopsy report. If this is true for you, work to have these needs filled. Question the police or emergency personnel who responded to the accident. Their names should be on the accident report that you can obtain. Your funeral director can give you details of how the body looked before it was prepared for viewing or answer other questions you may have. If the director is hesitant to do this tell him how important it is to you. Unanswered questions can plague you for years and may never go away. They can certainly impede the resolution of your grief.

Whether your loved one died from an accident, or a sudden illness, it feels like an amputation without benefit of an anesthesia. The overwhelming disbelief, shock, anger and guilt can leave you stuck in your grief. It is extremely important that you actively grieve. Allow yourself to experience and express your emotions. Talk out your thoughts and feelings.

Help in resolving your grief is essential, whether it is from a bereavement support group and/or from a professional who is trained to work with the bereaved. You cannot do it alone. The dynamics are too intense.

Margaret H. Gerner, MSW