



Ministry of Public Safety
and Solicitor General

Dealing with SUDDEN DEATH

... information for survivors

The sudden death of a person close to you is always a very painful and difficult experience. You will probably have strong feelings over a period of time, and sometimes they may seem overwhelming.

Some feelings you might expect to have—shock, sorrow, and loneliness. Others might surprise and confuse you. For instance, many people are not prepared for feelings of denial, anger, or guilt. Yet they are very common reactions to the death of a loved one. The pain can be physical as well as emotional. You may have changes in eating and sleeping patterns, weakness, or other physical symptoms.

Altogether, these are the feelings of grief. Working through the feelings toward a meaningful life in the future is called the “grieving process.” Although most people experience some or all of these feelings when they lose someone they love, each person is different. The feelings you have, how strong they are, and how long they last will not be exactly the same as for anyone else.

The practical things that must be dealt with at this time can be confusing and stressful as well, particularly because the loss is unexpected.

This information sheet will tell you about some feelings and experiences you may have and some of the things you can do to help yourself through this very difficult time. It also tells you how to get help or more information.

If you have lost someone as a result of a crime, the grieving process may be more complicated. There will be a police investigation. Criminal charges may be laid by special lawyers called Crown counsel, and charges may proceed to criminal court. Other people will be making decisions that affect you and your family. You may feel frustrated that you do not have control over what is happening. Under these special circumstances, you might find that you delay the

grieving process because you are very involved with the police and court system. Remember that mourning for your loved one is a normal and important part of recovering. This is a time to allow yourself to grieve, even during the court process.

What You May Experience

Shock

An unexpected death is a great shock. Shock can leave you feeling numb emotionally. You may be unable to cry. It can also affect you physically, so that you may feel tired, weak, or cold. Keep warm and rest; the physical symptoms will likely pass fairly quickly and the feeling of numbness will be replaced by other feelings.

Denial

Often an initial reaction to death can be denial. At first, your mind can refuse to acknowledge that your loved one has died. This is temporary. You will gradually adjust to the new reality that the person is no longer alive and with you.

Anger

You may feel anger at the circumstances of the death or at your loved one for deserting you. If you feel angry, do not be afraid to tell someone about it. Anger is a normal part of grieving. If you have lost someone as a result of a crime, you may feel especially angry. Talking to someone about it can help provide a safe outlet for this anger.

Guilt

Many people feel guilt because of “unfinished business” at the time of the death. You may not have said all the things you wanted to say to your loved one; you may have had differences that were not resolved. You may simply feel “guilty” for being the one who survived. These feelings also will fade with time.

Sadness

Intense sadness often comes and goes during the months after you have lost someone. Especially at first, it may feel as though the pain of the sorrow is unbearable. Crying is a very natural response and can be a great release.

Loneliness

You may suffer from loneliness, even when other people are present. You miss the person who has died. At first, you may feel a need to isolate yourself while grieving. But as soon as you are able, reach out to family and friends.

Panic and Fear

You may have sudden feelings of panic and fear. You may fear that you cannot cope with all the feelings of losing someone you love. You may be afraid of such a large change in your life, or of your own death or the death of other loved ones.

Stress

The shock of losing a loved one may result in physical symptoms of stress, such as changes in sleeping or eating habits, depression, or illness.

fainting. It is normal to have these disruptions, but as soon as possible, try to get back to regular eating, sleeping, and exercise routines. You may also want to talk to your family doctor about what you are experiencing.

Confusion

Feelings such as denial and anger toward the person who has died are often unexpected and can lead to confusion about your feelings. You might find yourself laughing one minute and crying the next.

You may also be uncertain as to how to take care of the practical details at this time. If you have lost someone as a result of a crime, you will likely feel confused and overwhelmed by the police and the court system that you have to deal with.

Dealing with Children's Feelings

Children grieve over the loss of a loved one, just as adults do. It is important to include children in the grieving process. Tell them the truth, using words they can understand, and be honest about your own feelings. Don't exclude them in order to protect them from the pain of their loss. It will only increase their confusion and fear about their own feelings and the feelings they see around them.

Young children may have a hard time expressing their feelings in words, and they may have a limited understanding of what death means. Their fear, anger and sense of loss may be expressed in changes in behaviour. They may have nightmares, or trouble eating or sleeping. They may go back to earlier childhood behaviours, such as bedwetting. Some children might become more aggressive and some might become quiet and withdrawn.

It is important that children be able to express these feelings safely. At this time, when you are coping with your own grief, it may be difficult to deal also with the special needs of children. Help is available, for children and for families, so be sure to ask for it. Contact your doctor or religious leader for help and information or, if the death is the result of a crime, call VictimLINK (*see contact information on page 4*).

What You Can Do

You have experienced a painful loss. It is important to know that you will not always feel this badly; the pain will get less intense with time. But at first, there are some things you can do that will help you adjust.

Looking after Yourself

Remember that this is a difficult time for you, so take care of yourself. Help is available if you need it — do not hesitate to ask for it.

Family and friends can be a great comfort, and expressing your feelings to them can help in the grieving process.

Talking about your feelings is a way to feel more comfortable with them and to lessen their intensity. Holding them in too long can make it harder to deal with them in the long run. It can be very important to find a situation that feels safe for you to express yourself— with relatives and friends you trust, people who have shared the same experience, a counsellor or religious leader. For some people keeping a journal of their thoughts and feelings is a help over time.

You may feel that you can't continue to ask for support from friends and relatives over a long period of time. But the grieving process takes time, so don't be afraid to lean on people. They may not offer help because they don't know what you need or they may be afraid of intruding.

Be sure to take care of your physical needs, as well. Getting enough rest, getting some exercise, and eating regularly — even if you aren't very hungry — will

help to reduce the stress of dealing with a sudden death. Plan to do something you enjoy every day — small pleasures can make a great difference.

Many people find that, even with the support of family and friends, they want to talk to a counsellor or get other professional help. This is particularly important if you are having physical symptoms, such as difficulty with eating or sleeping, or if you have strong feelings that persist or seem overwhelming. Do not hesitate to consult your doctor or religious leader. They will be able to help you or refer you to people who can help you.

If the death is the result of a crime and you need information — about the police and the court system or about any of the other things you have to deal with — or if you need to be referred for any other kind of help, you can call your local victim services or VictimLINK (*see contact information on page 4*).

Looking after the Practical Details

The following checklist might help you to look after all the practical things that have to be done after a sudden death. Use it to make your own checklist of the things that you, or those who are helping you, must do.

- Consider the practical needs of the household (getting groceries, preparing meals, etc.).
- See that there is care for any children in the
- Make a list of the immediate family, close friends, employers, and business colleagues, then notify them.
- Arrange for someone to answer your door and telephone. Ask them to keep a list of all calls that need to be returned.
- Decide on the time and place of the funeral or memorial service, and talk to the funeral home director and religious leader to plan the service.
- Select and notify pall bearers.
- Write the obituary and deliver it in person or by phone to the newspaper(s). Some funeral homes may assist you with this. If you wish people to make donations to a particular memorial or charity instead of sending flowers, include the information in the notice.
- Arrange for food/beverages after the service.
- Arrange for disposition of flowers after the service.
- Have someone you trust watch your home while you are attending any viewings or the service.

- Keep a list of people who sent flowers, food, etc., so that when you are able to you can thank them.
- Notify the deceased's lawyer or executor, who will look after details of the will. If there is no will, you may contact the Public Trustee, who will administer the estate of someone who dies without a will or next of kin.
- Notify all insurance companies.
- Check all life and casualty insurance and death benefits, including government (e.g. Canada Pension Plan benefits), credit union, trade union, etc. Check on temporary income or other benefits from these sources.
- Obtain several copies of the Death Certificate for all insurance policies, pension plans, etc. Certificates may be obtained from the British Columbia Vital Statistics Agency (*see contact information on page 4*).

Dealing with the Justice System

You may also have to deal with the police and court system. The police will ask you questions as part of their investigation. If they find the person they think is responsible for the crime, you may have to go to court as a witness. These can be confusing and frightening times for you.

There are services to help you, with trained people available to provide you with information, practical help, and emotional support. These Victim Services Programs may be based at your local police station, the local Crown counsel office, or in the community.

You may also be eligible for financial assistance and benefits under the Crime Victim Assistance Program. To find out more, contact your local Victim Services Program or call the Crime Victim Assistance Program (*see contact information on page 4*).

If You Need More Help

For information on assistance available to victims of crime in your community, call your local police, Crown counsel office, the Victim Services Program, or VictimLINK (toll free) at **1-800-563-0808**.

Crime Victim Assistance Program

- In the Lower Mainland, call:
604 660-3888
- Elsewhere in B.C., call:
(toll free) **1 866 660-3888**



VictimLINK

Call for help and information,
24-hours-a-day:
(toll free) **1-800-563-0808**

Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General — Privacy, Information and Records Office

- In Victoria **(250) 387-6898**
- Elsewhere in B.C., contact Enquiry BC and ask them to transfer your call to the Victoria number listed above:
Enquiry BC
(7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., Mon.-Fri.)
- In Vancouver, call: **604 660-2421**
- Elsewhere in B.C., call:
(toll free) **1 800 663-7867**

Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General Victim Services Division Web site:

www.pssg.gov.bc.ca/victim_services/index.htm

Vital Statistics Agency

Public office hours are 8:30 a.m. until 4:30 p.m.,
Monday to Friday, at all offices

General Inquiries

Phone: 250 952-2681 (Victoria)
Phone: 604 660-2937 (Vancouver)
Fax: 250 952-2527

Mailing Address

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Victoria BC V8W 9P3

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Fax: 604 660-2645

KELOWNA

101, 1475 Ellis Street
Phone: 250 712-7562
Fax: 250 712-7598

PRINCE GEORGE

433 Queensway
Phone: 250 565-7105
Fax: 250 565-7106

You can also contact your local government agent listed in the blue pages of your phone directory.

Please Note:

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