

Caught Off-Guard - How to Cope With a Sudden Death in the Family

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The age of medical technology has made it possible for 80% of all deaths to be anticipated, allowing time to plan for and emotionally adjust to the loss. Losing a loved one is hard enough to endure when you see it coming, but having a family member or friend die suddenly can put additional stress on you and can produce emotional trauma. This shock and trauma, if unrecognized and unattended to, can lead to depression and long term grief reactions. When you experience an unexpected death, the tasks of grief are more difficult and there are additional ones that must be addressed related to its suddenness and the circumstances of the death. There is no time to say good-bye, no time to plan the funeral, and no time to make sense of the event.

Initially, a person will often experience a state of shock and disbelief when s/he is informed of the death of a loved one. This event halts the flow of daily life as you know it and disrupts the fabric of current relationships. It is very difficult to relate to the world when in this state and people often find it hard to concentrate or make even the easiest of decisions. They simply need some time to let their heart catch up with what their mind has just learned.

Alarm and fear are other frequent reactions to sudden death. Especially with a death related to violent or criminal activity, you may find yourself afraid for your own personal safety. It may feel like you have lost all control of life. This can cause you to be constantly on the defensive; reacting to the world instead of participating in it.

Emotions that emerge when a sudden death occurs can be very powerful and confusing. They can be triggered when you least expect it and by unlikely events, such as the smell of a food the loved one used to make. It is not unusual to experience extreme mood swings as well. Anger

and defiance can suddenly replace feelings of sadness and remorse, only then to be replaced by guilt and confusion.

These feelings can be overwhelming and frightening. You may be tempted to conceal them by trying to be strong for others. Being the “strong one” can be helpful in the beginning because it can give you a sense of control and allows you to stay connected with others. This stance takes a great deal of energy, however, when you are trying to adjust to your unforeseen loss and you have so many needs of your own.

Another common response to sudden death is distancing from family and friends. Some feel the need to withdraw because sharing with others is just too painful or they are afraid that others will be unable to handle their feelings. They may be ashamed for some reason. Holding themselves or the loved one responsible for the death. This makes it hard for family and friends to know how to help or even if help is wanted. If this isolation goes on too long it can turn to loneliness and then depression. When unattended, a person can get stuck in a depression that thrives on guilt, anger and fear. If this happens to you it is very important to talk to your doctor or pastor to get the help that you need to get free of such a self-destructive state.

Another form of isolation that can occur as a reaction to sudden death is “spiritual isolation”. Often people feel deserted by God and have unending and confusing questions about how this could have happened and what it means to them, their lives and their relationship with God. These questions of faith are very difficult and frequently people gain answers only through much soul searching and the passage of time.

If you or someone you know experiences the sudden death of a loved one, there are many things you can do to cope and begin to heal from the shock of this loss. One of the most helpful things you can do is to recruit a friend to be your confidant. You will need someone with whom you can be completely honest and who is not afraid to be with you when you are experiencing powerful feelings. This person should also be accepting of your feelings and not try to talk you out of them or try to make you feel better. It helps if your confidant was not very close to the

deceased, so they are not at risk of also getting caught up in the strong feelings of grief. They need to be your rock to lean on.

Re-establishing your routines and sense of safety can help you stay organized as you deal with the shock and grief of a sudden death. You may want to have your confidant stay with you for a few days, just until you get comfortable with yourself again. Setting daily routines and following them will free your mind to deal with problems as they arise and give your heart a safe environment to sort things out and heal.

Exercise should be a part of your routine. Even a short walk in the park with your confidant can be healing and refreshing.

This can be a confusing and overwhelming time. You may feel out of control and at a loss for power over your own life. But remember you do have choices. Deciding whether or not to eat breakfast is a decision you can make. Start with the small ones, and work your way up.

Don't try to do everything. Ask for help. You may want to have a friend make calls to other family members and friends to inform them of the news. Another can take incoming calls of sympathy when you are not up to it. You can also get help with funeral arrangements and settling the estate.

Take the opportunity to talk with your clergy about your questions of faith. They want to be there for you and can often provide comfort and safety as you sort through your relationship with God at this time and search for the meaning of this sudden death.

It is a traumatic experience to lose a loved one, especially when you don't get to say good-bye. Planning the funeral can be more difficult since their wishes may not be known. What is important to remember is that the funeral is a time to reflect and appreciate your loved one's life, to say goodbye in a meaningful way, to connect with your spiritual support and begin making sense of your own life again. Arrange for the services to have poems, songs, readings and

eulogies that will give you and others peace of mind and comfort in the days and months ahead. Include symbolic objects, articles of clothing and momentos that help you feel close to the one you have lost.

You should also remember that the memorial service is not necessarily bound by time or place. If you are not restricted by religious deadlines, it is possible to hold off on the service until you can get a better grip on the situation and think a bit more clearly. You can also choose to have the memorial service someplace that had particular meaning to you or your loved one.

As time passes you may find that a grief support group is helpful. There are many support groups throughout the city that focus on every possible need. A support group, whether short or long-term, can give you a safe place to come to terms with the death of your loved one. These groups offer gentle, understanding support to help you deal with the range of emotions you are feeling. With the sudden death of a loved one, it may be important for you to talk with others who truly understand what you are going through. It can be helpful to compare feelings with another person who has gone through the same experience and see that they are getting better: that you can heal, too.

It is very difficult to lose a loved one suddenly. The shock will effect you both physically and emotionally. It will take time and a lot of tenderness to gradually work through your feelings and give your life meaning again. To get to know who you are in light of this important loss. It will be a true tribute to the one you have lost and a celebration of your own life if you have the courage to take care of yourself and let others care for you as well during the difficult months ahead.