



Coping with grief when someone you love dies suddenly

Author: Mary Williams OBE

The printing of this book is kindly funded by
Mazars Charitable Trust

Introduction

This book is for people who have suffered the shattering experience of a loved one dying suddenly.

It aims to help you understand emotions and feelings commonly suffered. It provides straightforward advice on how to cope and who can help you to recover.

The book is by Sudden, a charitable initiative supporting people bereaved suddenly. For more information, go to www.suddendeath.org

Contents

Chapter one:

Emotions and feelings p3

Chapter two:

Getting through each day p11

Chapter three:

Getting help from others p21

Chapter one:

Emotions and feelings

The sudden death of someone close is devastating. It is not only incredibly sad, but it is also the worst shock of all.

This chapter lists emotions and feelings often experienced in addition to sadness.

Knowing these emotions and feelings are normal at this time may, in a small but significant way, help you to cope with them.

Chapter two and three then provide advice on how to cope with these symptoms and recover from them.

I can't believe it has happened

It is common to feel as if it has not really happened – to expect a person who has died to walk through the door or call on the phone. It is common to find yourself talking about a person as if they are still alive.

It can be particularly hard to bear each morning when waking up and realising it is true. It may seem so unfair. 'Why has this happened to me?' is a common thought.

I feel helpless

It is common to feel helpless, bewildered, powerless and overwhelmed. This can be upsetting and debilitating.

It may be hard to get up and get on with normal activities.

You may also find yourself making simple mistakes when doing the simplest things.

It is wise to avoid high risk activities such as driving or using dangerous machinery, or be extra careful if you feel you have to do these things.

I feel scared

You may feel anxious and fearful. It is normal to worry more than usual that other people, or you, will die too.

It is common to be scared to go out. It is common to suffer feelings of panic, anxiety and confusion if in a busy environment such as a shopping centre or a train station. You may feel jumpy and nervous in such situations.

Chapter two gives advice about planning and getting through each day.

Frightening thoughts, dreams or flashbacks

Vivid thoughts and dreams about the death, the person who has died, or a fear, are common.

Flashbacks to the time when the death happened may be experienced. This means it feels like it is happening again. Not everyone suffers flashbacks, but if you do, they may happen at any time and be frightening.

Many people find it helps to talk about thoughts, dreams or flashbacks. Chapter three gives advice about talking to others.

If only...

It is common to keep mulling over the circumstances leading up to the death and wondering if anything could have been done to stop it happening. 'If only...' is a common and particularly painful thought.

Suddenly bereaved people often wish they had told a person who has died how much they love them, or told them this more often.

Thoughts like these may lead to strong feelings of guilt that can be hard to explain to others.

Crying may help – many people find it is better to express feelings than to hold back the tears.

I forget things and am disorganised

Because of the enormous stress you are suffering, it may be hard to take in information you are told, or recall important facts, remember to do things, or do things as well as you would at other times.

This can be particularly challenging if you are involved in procedures such as organising a funeral, understanding the findings of a postmortem examination, or the processing of someone's will.

It can also be challenging if you have to work, or have domestic responsibilities such as caring for dependents.

If anyone else can help you, let them share the work.

Suddenly bereaved people are often scared they will forget things about the person who has died. They are scared they will forget their voice, things they said, or how they smelt. There are suggestions about how to keep someone's memory alive in chapter two.

I feel angry

It is common to feel angry after a sudden death. There may be someone or something to blame. Or you may even feel angry towards the person who has died for leaving you.

It is also common to get worked up over minor everyday things that normally you take in your stride, but now seem unbearable.

For people who do not normally get angry, these feelings may be particularly distressing.

It may help to remember your anger is a temporary symptom of your bereavement, and not your true nature.

Nobody understands

People might say inappropriate, hurtful things to you such as 'these things happen', or 'you'll get over it'.

They may talk about their own bereavements that happened in circumstances you consider less devastating and of no relevance to your situation.

Some people may even behave as if nothing has happened.

These people may want to help, but not know how. Many people can help. Chapter three gives suggestions on how to seek constructive help from others.

Physical symptoms

Many people who suffer a sudden bereavement and the associated shock find they suffer from physical symptoms as well as strong emotions.

The trauma of your experience can place intense and prolonged pressure on your body. Heart palpitations, feeling faint or dizzy, excessive sweating, tremors and choking sensations are common.

Digestive problems may occur, such as diarrhoea, or you may struggle to eat well or often enough. Muscles may tense up. This may cause localised pains, such as headaches, stomach pains and backache. Women may find they suffer extra pain during menstruation, or menstruate at unusual times.

You may have difficulty sleeping. This may lead to tiredness and exhaustion. You may feel like you can't do anything, or even feel hyperactive.

You may have difficulty speaking. Stuttering and jumbling your words is common.

Whatever your physical symptoms, understanding they are connected to your bereavement can help you cope with them. Over time they should subside. Chapters two and three include useful advice on recovery.

Lost and different futures

When someone dies suddenly who was at the centre of your world, the future can seem pointless and bleak. Your plans and hopes may be ruined, and your deep sadness means it may be difficult to imagine a different yet happy future.

The stress of sudden bereavement can also be so exhausting that every day can feel like an impossible mountain to climb.

It is important to know that you can recover from the shock by looking after yourself and seeking help, as the next two chapters explain.

Many people also find it helpful to know it is normal for suddenly bereaved people to go on to lead full and happy lives, while still remembering with sorrow what happened.

Chapter two:

Getting through each day

Looking after yourself at an early stage can help your symptoms to subside and helps prevent long-term damage to health and quality of life. Below are some suggestions that may help you.

Be aware that your feelings may change

You may have different feelings at different times. Your feelings may change suddenly and unexpectedly, which can be exhausting and stressful. It can also be very challenging, for example if you suddenly feel extremely bad in a public place or at work.

It can help to let people around you know that your emotions may be unpredictable and to ask these people to be understanding and supportive.

It can also help to remember that your welfare matters, and looking after yourself when you are experiencing a strong emotion, regardless of where or when that happens, is the most important thing you need to do. Take time out for yourself, rather than try to carry on.

Putting energy into loving other people can also be positive. But think about your needs first.

Be aware that energy levels may vary

Sometimes you may not have enough physical energy to be as active as you would wish.

Sometimes you may not have enough mental energy or find it very difficult to engage in a conversation or debate a point, which can be particularly frustrating if you are normally articulate, feel very strongly about something or need to say something.

You may find this upsetting, particularly if you are normally an energetic person who multitasks and gets things done.

Don't demand too much of yourself. Try to only do one thing at a time for now. If you feel you need to rest, then you should. If there is someone else who can do tasks for you, let them. Higher energy levels should return.

Food

Some people forget to eat properly or find eating difficult. But it is important to look after your own nutritional needs.

Try to eat a little, often. You may find it helps to stock your fridge and cupboards with foods that are tasty, good for you and comforting but take little time to prepare, such as fruit juice, pots of yoghurt, crackers and carrot sticks.

Unless you have specific dietary requirements, now is not a time to worry about calories. Eat what you want and when you want. If a cup of hot chocolate or a pudding is comforting to you, then eat it.

Exercise

You may not feel like exercising at all. However, gentle physical exercise, such as going for a short walk in a park, accompanied by someone who cares for you, may sometimes help more than staying in.

Swimming, yoga, jogging or whatever sport you normally do may be relaxing for you and help you to think positive thoughts.

Be aware that very energetic exercise can release chemicals into your system called endorphins that can trigger strong emotions, so you may want to consider avoiding such exercise for a while.

Use of substances

Some people are tempted to use alcohol, cigarettes or illegal drugs to help them temporarily feel more able to cope. However, it is not a good idea to use any substance, whether stimulant or tranquilliser, to manage your feelings.

It is harder to identify and address feelings if they are masked by substance use, and the effects of substance use may be negative rather than positive.

If you suffer from a substance abuse problem, then now is the time to seek treatment. Visit your doctor.

Sleep

It is common to struggle sleeping. Yet continuous lack of sleep is damaging to your health so it is important to try to get as much sleep as you can.

If you find you are regularly awake most of the night then drop off from exhaustion as dawn approaches, try to arrange your life so you can have at least some lie-ins without disturbance.

If you need to take time off work to catch up on sleep, then take it. An exhausted employee is not an effective employee.

Your doctor may be able to prescribe medication to help you sleep but this is not recommended as a long term solution.

Avoid caffeinated drinks after lunchtime, try moderate exercise so your body is tired, and at bedtime try the relaxation techniques suggested further on in this book.

Knowing what happened

If you are unsure about what happened when your loved one died, it may be better to know rather than imagine things that might not have happened. Police and medical personnel should be able to answer questions and you have a right to ask.

If you don't feel able to ask, a family member or friend could ask on your behalf.

Creative therapy to help you remember

You may find it helps to express yourself and remember a person who has died in a creative way.

For example, by making a memory box containing items that belonged to them, mounting photographs, painting a picture, writing down your memories, creating a song or a poem, or planting flowers or a tree. You will have your own idea, of meaning to you.

Some clothing that belonged to the person who died may carry the smell of that person. Some

people wish to preserve that smell. Keeping items in an airtight ziplock bag can help.

Taking time out to do such things is not frivolous. It can be very helpful to your recovery and give you reassurance that someone's memory is being kept alive.

Relaxation techniques

Many suddenly bereaved people feel very tense. Breathing in and out deeply and slowly for a few minutes can be calming. This is something anyone can do anywhere – at work, on a bus, or in front of the TV.

Therapies such as aromatherapy, massage, or running a deep, hot bubble bath can, for some people, help ease a small part of the tension.

Sometimes you may just feel like sitting somewhere peaceful. Your recovery will take time and you need to make time for it.

An example of a breathing exercise

This simple exercise is suitable for most people in reasonable health and can help some people feel a little calmer.

You can do it anywhere, anytime. It can be useful if you are feeling stressed in a public place, for example on a train.

Breathe in deeply, then breathe out deeply, then count to two.

Breathe in deeply, then breathe out deeply, then count to three.

Breathe in deeply, then breathe out deeply, then count to four.

Continue with the exercise, increasing each count by one each time, up to no more than a count of six or less depending on what you feel comfortable with, then go back to two.

Try this exercise in your own home first to see if it works for you.

Enjoying activities and making plans

Many people find long-standing hobbies, such as cooking, gardening, playing music, or looking after pets, are therapeutic for them.

Some people find work is a stable and reassuring aspect of their life that gives them a sense of control and continuity.

Make time for whatever helps you.

Think about what the day might bring and avoid unnecessary activities that are likely to make you feel worse. For example, it may upset you to watch a movie or read a book featuring sudden death. Or it may upset you to visit a public place with lots of people and noise. Or your job may be too demanding for you at this time and you may need to take time off.

Try to plan things you can look forward to, such as seeing a friend. However, avoid making big or complex plans until you feel you can cope.

It is easy to make wrong decisions under stress. For now, it may help to focus on just one thing at a time.

Chapter three:

Getting help from others

Most people find they need help from other people to make a full recovery.

This could mean help from people you already know, or from others, and often from both.

This chapter explains the people who may be able to help you, and how to access this support.

Help from people close to you

Some people find family or friends provide important support at this time. Talking about how you feel or just having a hug may help enormously.

This is much better than bottling up your emotions.

On the other hand, you may feel you don't have this support. You may find it hard to talk to people around you because they are grieving too and experiencing different emotions at different times. You may feel these people aren't close enough or don't understand you.

People around you might want to help you but not know where to start.

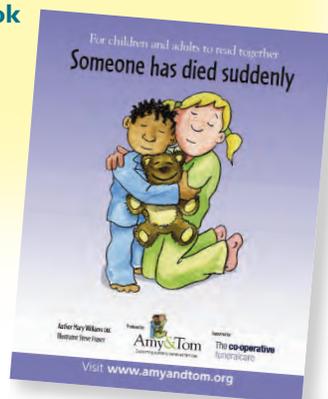
If you are having difficulty communicating with people around you, it may help to read this book together. This can help explain feelings and make it easier to support each other.

Helping children

In many ways, children have the same needs as adults. Children want to know what has happened and be given opportunities to talk about it and feel involved and loved.

It is much better to tell children things than keep them in the dark. Children have powerful imaginations and they may imagine something even worse than the truth if you don't include them.

Someone has died suddenly is a children's picture book by Sudden's Amy & Tom project, It is for children of any age to read with an adult. The book encourages children to ask questions and think about their feelings and the future. It also provides workbook space for writing down memories. Go to www.amyandtom.org to order a copy.



Help from bereavement charities

Some people find it helps to contact a bereavement charity. Different charities offer different services in different ways, and you may want to give this some consideration before deciding which charity to contact.

Bereavement charities may offer emotional support and information help lines (by phone or by email), support literature, face to face support in your home, group meetings, or holiday retreats.

Some charity services are staffed by professionals with qualifications and experience in providing support to suddenly bereaved people. Others are staffed by volunteers who have experienced a similar bereavement themselves.

Some charities are well resourced and can offer a range of help right away. Others may have funding restrictions and limited services or waiting lists.

For a list of charities, go to www.suddendeadth.org Your doctor or someone else in your community such as a police officer or faith leader may be able to tell you about additional local services.

Help from an expert therapist

It is common for the feelings described in chapter one to begin to subside gradually and go away, even though you are still grieving. However, it is also common to find some or all these feelings don't go away or even get worse.

If it is a month or more after your bereavement and you are still suffering these feelings, it is time to consider seeking professional help to enable you to recover. It is not a sign of weakness to do this. You have suffered a terrible event and are correctly putting your welfare first so you can have a positive future.

The recommended help for people who have suffered a sudden bereavement and have ongoing trauma symptoms is usually 10 or more confidential one-on-one sessions, with a psychological therapist who has training and experience in helping suddenly bereaved people to recover, through talking.

This approach is backed by government advice. For example, England's National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence guideline 26 (www.nice.org.uk/cg26).

Your symptoms may be described by medical personnel as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or depression resulting from traumatic grief. This is normal and just a way of defining your symptoms so professionals can try to help you appropriately.

Finding the right therapist for you

A first step is to visit your doctor and explain you have been suddenly bereaved, explain all your symptoms, and ask if they can provide access to an appropriately qualified and experienced therapist.

You can talk to your doctor even if your bereavement happened a long time ago.

Some doctors may have a better understanding than others of how to help. Some doctors have access to qualified and experienced therapists and others may not, or not know about them. Show your doctor these pages to help them understand your request.

If your doctor cannot refer you quickly to an appropriate therapist, you may wish, if you have available funds, to seek help privately. For organisations that can help you do this go to www.suddendeadth.org

I know someone else who needs help

If someone else may need help, such as another family member, show them these pages. You cannot force someone to get help, but you can give them information to help them make their own decisions. It may also be possible for a health professional to approach someone for you.

You can also ask on behalf of any children you care for. Children can benefit from therapy just as much as adults, and there are therapists who specialise in working with suddenly bereaved children.

Hopefully you will find your therapist effective. However, some people find they have to try several therapists, a bit like trying several different drugs to cure a difficult illness. If you don't feel your therapist is helping, you may wish to try someone different, always checking they are qualified and experienced.

Drug treatments

You may be offered drugs by your doctor, such as sleeping tablets or anti-depressants.

Some suddenly bereaved people find some drugs helpful at certain times and for certain reasons. Other people prefer never to take drugs.

Drugs may mask rather than cure symptoms, may impede your ability to function normally, may have a range of side effects, and may be addictive and difficult to give up.

You are recommended to consider carefully and discuss with your doctor the purpose and risks of any drugs you are offered and the duration over which you may take them. Expert therapy is the recommended treatment for suddenly bereaved people suffering ongoing trauma symptoms, not drugs.



This book is published by Sudden, a charitable initiative supporting people bereaved suddenly by any cause. Sudden is an initiative by Brake, the road safety charity. Go to these websites for more information on Sudden and Brake
www.suddendeath.org
www.brakecharity.org

To order our picture book for suddenly bereaved children go to
www.amyandtom.org

The printing of this book is kindly funded by Mazars Charitable Trust.

COPYRIGHT ©Brake 2011

All worldwide rights reserved. No part of this publication or its design may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form by any other means whatsoever: i.e. photocopy, electronic, mechanical recording or otherwise without the prior written permission of the copyright holder.