

Coping with grief when someone close has been killed

Grief

Grief is normal when someone close to you dies. The way you grieve can be influenced by your culture, experience and religious beliefs.

There are many emotions connected with grief which you may experience all at once or separately over time. These emotions may come back to you again and again. The trauma of a violent death and the experience of a trial may cause your emotions to be more intense and painful, last longer and be repeated more often.

Below is a brief description of some of the feelings and emotions you may already be experiencing and others that may follow.

Shock

At first shock protects you from the total reality of what has happened. This can help you get through the early stages including the practical arrangements and the investigation. It is not unusual to feel shock and a sense of unreality for longer than if the death had been from another cause. But the feeling of everything being unreal may become a problem if it goes on too long.

Anxiety/Stress

Suddenly the world becomes a very unsafe place. The unthinkable has happened.

Emotional outbursts As the shock begins to wear off you may feel very strong emotions and want to cry.

Breaking down or losing control in this way can be frightening, but for most people it is a very important and normal part of grieving.

Panic is a part of grief that you can feel at any time. It may be connected with a loss of emotional control. It can develop with physical symptoms such as feeling sick, dizziness and palpitations. It can be very difficult to cope with and be very frightening. Often the feeling is caused because you feel lost and you cannot believe what has happened.

Depression and loneliness You may feel depressed and lonely, and it can seem that those feelings will last forever. A time of quiet sadness when you think about the person you have lost is a very important part of coping with your loss.

Physical symptoms Other symptoms of grief which you can have at any time are physical symptoms. These can include:

- headaches;
- feeling sick;
- being exhausted;
- not sleeping or having bad dreams;
- losing your memory or not being able to concentrate;
and
- putting on or losing weight.

Guilt You may feel guilty about things you did or did not do. And you may feel especially guilty thinking you should have protected the person who has died or done something to prevent their death. This guilt is almost always unjustified. You may also regret things you did or did not say.

These feelings are made worse because of the suddenness of the death. Guilt is a normal reaction to this situation.

Anger You may feel very angry about what has happened and search for someone to blame. If someone is arrested you have a target for this anger. However, you may also feel angry towards the police, the lawyers or the system of justice. You can even feel angry towards other family members, yourself or the person who has died. Anger is natural. However, reactive anger to murder or manslaughter can be extremely intense. You may find that at a later date counselling could help, as anger can be misdirected and can cause nervous and physical health problems.

Looking to the future

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Hope Eventually hope will reappear. You will not forget, but you will feel better. It may take several years for the whole family to reach this stage. Your experience will mean that things will never be the same again. But it becomes possible to think about other things and even to look positively to the future.

Recovery Coping with all these different emotions can be extremely difficult. You may find talking to a counsellor helpful. Your family doctor may also be able to help.

Grief is a very personal emotion. Your need to share emotions or experiences will be different to other people's. Self-help groups can offer you the opportunity to share your feelings with other people who have suffered a similar tragedy.

There are also some practical things that can help you. These include seeing the person who died, going to their funeral, and also talking about them with family and friends.

Practicalities You may well be suffering from shock to begin with and this may be followed by strong emotions. It is generally advisable not to drive immediately after the death if you can possibly avoid it. If you do need to venture out at all, for example to do some shopping, try to make sure you are not alone.

Going to see the person who died Seeing the person can be the first step towards handling grief and helping you face the reality of death. A lot of people who do not see the person often find it harder to accept that they have died.

Being worried or frightened about seeing the person is perfectly normal. You may feel that they will seem artificial. Or you may not want your last memory of them to be in a coffin or at the mortuary. You may be worried about how they will look because of the circumstances of their death.

It is likely that you will be unable to see the person until after a post mortem has been carried out. This is because a large proportion of the investigation into the death is carried out then, not only in the post mortem examination, but in preserving other evidence such as clothing, dirt, bloodstains or anything else that could have value to the investigation. To make the person presentable for viewing before a post mortem takes place could result in a loss of forensic evidence. If you are permitted to see them before a post mortem you will almost certainly not be allowed to touch them. Your police Family Liaison Officer will explain why you can or cannot see the person and, if you can see them, whether you can touch them or not.

When the post mortem is finished, you should be able to see the person when you feel ready. If you ask, the police Family Liaison Officer will tell you what you can expect them to look like so it does not come as so much of a shock to you if there were serious injuries.

The funeral Every culture has rituals and customs for funerals. The funeral or memorial service is a time when the reality of what has happened can start to sink in. Religious funerals can give you the chance of adjusting to the death through your beliefs. Whatever happens at the funeral, it is important that it is meaningful to you.

Depending on the circumstances there may be a delay before the funeral can take place. This can add to the length of the grieving process. You may find a memorial service helpful in overcoming this.

Family and friends Family members can be an important source of help and support, but they may find it difficult to talk openly about their feelings because they are scared of upsetting you and each other. Everyone grieves differently so you should be careful that nobody feels left out, especially children.

Friends can also be a comfort and support to you after someone close has been killed. But it can be difficult for them to know what to do or say for the best. If you tell them how they can help this will be best for you and for them.

Some people feel more comfortable offering practical help such as cleaning, cooking, shopping and looking after children. Other friends can help by just being there, talking and letting you cry.

Some friends may avoid mentioning the name of the person because they are worried about upsetting you. However, it is important for you to be able to cry and talk about them, so you may need to raise the subject yourself. Being upset is part of grieving, and avoiding it can often mean it takes you longer to recover.

Emotions can return at any time. Festive occasions, birthdays and anniversaries can be very upsetting and painful times. It may be difficult for some people to understand if you are taking longer to recover. However, relatives and good friends can help just by being around.

To begin with, family occasions can seem difficult. Try to do this gradually and just go along for a short time – one hour or so. Do not expect too much of yourself.

Getting back to normal activities You may find it difficult to go back to normal day-to-day things. But doing so is part of recovering. A sign that you are better able to cope is when you allow yourself to laugh. At first you may feel guilty, as if you should not enjoy your life any more because someone close is gone. Slowly you will be able to laugh and smile again.

This stage may not start until several months after the death. A lot of the time people you work with and friends do not understand that getting over a violent death of a family member is much more complicated than getting over many other types of death. And they may not realise that the recovery time may be longer.

Children

It is often difficult to know how much to tell a child or whether or not they should go to the funeral. These are very difficult decisions and many of the answers depend on how mature the child is, how sensitive they are and their relationship with the person who has died.

Support and attention This may be a confusing and chaotic time, when you and the other adults around children are caught up in your own emotions and thoughts. However, it is important that you give children lots of attention and support.

Children under three have little or no understanding of death. They will know that something is wrong and that their parents or family are upset. At three or four they will know something bad has happened and will feel the loss of a close relative even if they do not understand death. Children aged five to eight will act similarly to younger children but may ask more questions.

Older children will understand what has happened and feel the same emotions as an adult. It is not a good idea to try to hide the fact that someone has died from children. They are bound to find out sooner or later. And they are less likely to misunderstand if they know that they can get an honest answer to their questions.

Talking about what has happened The suddenness and violence of the death may make it more difficult to know what to say to children. Sometimes children have unrealistic views about the effects of murder and violence. They need

to understand that it is not normal or acceptable behaviour. With older children it may be important to talk to them about the circumstances of the death.

Children have the same need as adults to talk about the person they have lost. You should answer their questions calmly and truthfully in a way they will understand. You should try not to stop them from talking, even if you think that you are protecting them from being upset.

How and what to tell a child

This will depend on the age of the child, gender and other factors, such as whether they saw the person die. It is important that a parent, if possible, gives the information. But if this is not possible, then someone that the child trusts should tell the child. This is going to be the most difficult thing that you have ever done, so make sure that someone is close at hand for you.

The child or children should be sat down somewhere quiet. Always give children information that is factual and known to be correct. Check that they have heard what has been said, and repeat the information. Children's reactions will vary and can induce disbelief, sobbing, anger, and in some cases no reaction at all.

Younger boys are more likely to ask detailed questions, and then ask for more information later. This isn't morbid curiosity, it helps them to have some understanding and to process the information. Girls are more likely to be emotional and to seek out friends and others that they trust to confide in. They seek to make sense of things by talking and grieving more openly.

Assure children of whatever ages that you will be “there” for them. If you have to leave them to identify the person who died, or for any other reason, ask them who they would like to stay with, and tell them that you don’t know how long you are likely to be. Offer continuous reassurance, as life will seem unsafe. Arrange to phone them, as children feel very vulnerable, and may be frightened that if this can happen to one person, then it can happen to you too.

Here are some guidelines:

Going to see the person who died Always ask the child if they want to see the person who died. Ensure that, if possible, the visit takes place in the hospital Chapel of Rest, and before the post mortem examination, but bear in mind that this may not be possible. If they want to visit, arrange this as soon as possible via the police or mortuary staff.

Every child is different, and what is right for one may not be for the other. If they do want to go, prepare them for the visit by giving information to them. You may want to warn them that the person will look different and that they will be cold to the touch.

If you can, try to take someone else with you who knows both you and the children well. You can then go in first if you want and prepare yourself as much as possible for seeing the person. You should also take tissues with you. Explain that the room will be quiet, and try to answer any questions the children may have before you go in. It is advisable to check that they still want to say “goodbye” and give them the opportunity to change their mind.

Leaving the Chapel of Rest can be very difficult. Children should never be rushed, and should have as little or as much time as they need. After seeing the person who died you should ask the children what they would like to do next. Encourage the children to express themselves but do not pressurise them to talk.

Children grieving Children deal with death in their own way. They may talk about what they will miss, such as an outing or holiday. This may seem selfish, but it is their way of expressing the loss they feel. Encourage children to say what they feel. They may often find it helpful to draw or play games expressing how they feel.

Children sometimes show their grief by spending more time alone or by behaving badly. Children should be loved and supported even when they show difficult behaviour. If they carry on behaving badly, you may want to ask a professional counsellor for help.

Children and the funeral You may want to protect children by leaving them out of the funeral arrangements. But they have the same need to adjust to the death, and it may help them if they are involved.

Try to keep children informed as much as possible. It will help if they know what a coffin is, and what it looks like. Try to involve them in the planning of the funeral. Ask a relative or family friend to stay close by during the funeral. They can take the children out from the funeral if they find it too difficult. You may want to take crayons and paper with you for younger children.

After the funeral talk to the children and continue to offer reassurance.

Sudden death is different, and a sense of disbelief is there for all who have to deal with it. There is no right or wrong way of coping with your loss, just your way and their way. But if you are able to give children and young people the information they need, to provide them with love and support, and an opportunity to say "goodbye", it won't make your situation better, but may help to make it less bad. When children return to school you should ensure that schools and the children's personal teacher are aware of what has happened and that the children are grieving.

The future

When something awful happens, you may feel overwhelmed and worry that more disasters will follow. You may lose your sense of security and may want to rush into things without thinking. The truth is that the world is no less safe than it was. You can only deal with one problem at a time, and it is best to spend a little time each day deciding what needs to be done today and what can be left until tomorrow.

Take care of yourself. If you don't want to do something, don't do it. Use your family and friends for support and advice. This way you will come through your grief and gradually get back a feeling of being in control of your life.



Ministry of
JUSTICE


Home Office

**The Attorney
General's Office**

Criminal Justice System: working together for the public

Published by the Office for Criminal Justice Reform in March 2009.
Product code: BEREAVCOPING/09/E Reference: 291974
www.cjsonline.gov.uk



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