

Unique Issues for Mourners

When Death is Traumatic

The grief process is difficult enough when a death is expected. However, unexpected deaths can result in traumatic stress reactions for family and friends. When death is sudden there are a number of factors that make the process of mourning more difficult, including no opportunity to say good-bye, the belief that the death was preventable, and the fact that such deaths are often the result from someone's choice or negligence. Grieving this type of loss can involve an extremely intense response, yet the reactions described below are perfectly normal and expected. Even though an exceptionally strong response to such a death is normal, it can be helpful to seek counseling and professional support. If you do, it is important to find professionals trained in traumatic loss interventions.

The grief response following sudden loss is often intensified since there is no opportunity to prepare for the loss, say good-bye, or finish unfinished business.

- Families and friends are suddenly forced to face the loss of a loved one instantaneously and without warning.
- This type of loss may generate intense grief responses such as shock, extreme anger or guilt, sudden depression, despair, and hopelessness.
- A sudden tragic loss shatters the survivor's sense of order and changes the world forever.
- Survivors of sudden loss may experience a greater sense of vulnerability and heightened anxiety creating fear for themselves, family, and friends.
- There may be many secondary losses: lost income, loss of home, loss of social status, loss of identity, and more.
- Loss creates within the family a sense of uneasiness, confusion, and being out of balance.
- The role the loved one played in the family is left empty. It takes time for the family to adjust and find a new balance.
- Marital and other family relationships can become strained.

Additional problems may arise if the griever witnessed, was physically injured, or was in some way involved in the death.

- Memories of the death may haunt the mourner's thoughts.
- Some mourners may experience numbness, fear and the feeling that the death is not real.



- Bereaved persons may suffer from "survivor guilt," wondering why they survived when others have died and believing they could have or should have done more to prevent the death.
- When deaths are seen as preventable, people may ask why and look for someone to blame (including themselves or their loved one).
- Preventable deaths are likely to increase a sense of guilt.
- The reaction to sudden deaths can be further complicated if the death is due to irresponsible behavior such as drunk or impaired driving; an accidental overdose; or willful acts such as murder or suicide.
- If there is a trial, the mourning process may be delayed or unduly prolonged.
- Intense anger and blame for the death can be directed at a responsible person, God, self, or others.
- It may be particularly difficult on the family if the person responsible for their loved one's death has not been caught or goes unpunished.

In public or particularly newsworthy events, mourners may also have to deal with intrusion by the media.

- Since the death was not anticipated, the deceased may have left unfinished business which the surviving family members must handle.
- The search to find meaning in the loss can challenge a survivor's religious and spiritual beliefs. Sudden losses in particular cause people to question their faith.
- Survivors are forced to rethink what's important.
- Unexpected death may leave mourners feeling that the person who died had no time to prepare for the death, though many find the knowledge of an instantaneous death comforting.
- There may be a question of whether the loved one suffered pain or anxiety before dying.
- Images of the death may take over the survivor's thoughts, rather than the memories of the person themselves, making it difficult to mourn.
- Thinking about the death may cause so much pain the mourner may try to put their loved one out of his or her mind.
- It is difficult to make sense of or understand these types of losses.
- While it is not always possible to find an answer, it is human nature to want to know "Why?"
- When a loved one's body has not been recovered or when a disappearance goes unsolved, people often experience a constant state of waiting which can interfere with moving forward.



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