



When Someone Has Died Suddenly

What might I feel?

Bereavement can be devastating in any situation, but sudden bereavement has the added layer of shock and disbelief. When someone who is special to us dies suddenly, it can be hard to believe the person has died and that you will never be able to see or speak to them again. There may be moments when you forget what has happened (for instance, when you first wake up in the morning), only to be flooded with intense feelings of grief when the realisation hits you.

There is not one right way to grieve, and people will grieve in different ways at different times. You may feel shock, sadness, anger, worry, and guilt. You may feel out of control, isolated and hopeless. You may have mood swings, lose your appetite, struggle to concentrate, have difficulty sleeping, and experience nightmares. You may lose interest in everyday life and in the activities you used to enjoy. You may feel numb. All these different reactions are normal following a bereavement.

People describe grief as being like a roller coaster. You may feel okay one minute and then feel overwhelmed by sadness the next.

It is impossible to say how long you will feel this way and everyone will be different. Grief is an on-going process but gradually over time you should start to find things easier. If you find that your feelings are very strong or do not seem to get better after about four weeks, then you or your parent should talk with your GP as they may be able to help you access more help.

What can help?

Be kind to yourself. Acknowledge that it is normal to experience a range of thoughts and feelings when someone you love dies suddenly (understanding that everyone will grieve in different ways will also help you support other people suffering from bereavement). Find ways to express your feelings in appropriate ways (e.g., allow yourself to have a good cry if that is how you feel, if you feel angry use a pillow to scream into or hit out at, exercise is another way of exerting some of the energy you feel when angry).

Talking can help. This could be talking to your parent, friend, trusted adult or a grief professional. Not everyone feels comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings and if this is how you feel that is ok, but if things start to become overwhelming, then it might be time to find someone who you are comfortable sharing your feelings with.

Grief can make us feel lonely and isolated. Try to spend time with your family and friends- they will want to support you but may need some help knowing what the best thing to say and do is. You may also find it helpful to connect with other young people who have been bereaved (you can find access to peer support groups at bereavement agencies such as Winston's Wish and Cruse).

Eating a healthy diet, regular exercise, and getting a good night sleep can all help with grief. You may not feel like eating and may find it easier to eat little and often, rather than having big meals. It is important to stay hydrated by drinking plenty.

You may not feel like doing any exercise but try setting yourself small achievable goals that you can build on (e.g., initially go out for a brisk 10-minute walk). Exercise can be helpful as it helps to produce mood enhancing hormones.

Try to maintain a healthy night-time routine. We understand that it can be difficult to switch off at night so try to find things you can do before you go to sleep that will help calm your mind (e.g., listening to music or an audiobook, having a break from screens, using a scented pillow spray that will help you relax, trying relaxation and deep breathing techniques).

Try to think of a variety of things you can do which will help you feel a bit better, both at home and outside (e.g., looking at photos, listening to music, watching particular programmes/films, going for a walk, spending time with your pet, leisure activities, exercise); consider this your emotional first aid kit that you can choose from when feeling low. Plan fun things that you can look forward to.

Maintain your usual routines as much as possible. You may find the thought of going back to school overwhelming but going back to school as soon as possible can be helpful. Talk to your parents and teachers about what could make things easier for you when you return to school (e.g., having a named member of staff and designated place in school that you can go to if you're feeling upset, understanding what your friends/classmates/teachers have been told about what has happened). You may find the thought of a more gradual reintegration back to school easier to cope with (e.g., just attending for a short time or for certain lessons initially).

Find ways to remember the person who has died. This may include going to somewhere special that helps you remember the person, thinking about a happy time you shared with the person, and talking to other people who knew the person who died and who can share their memories with you. Another really helpful activity is to make a 'Memory Box' which contains items that will help you remember positive things about the special person (it could be photos, souvenirs from times spent together, the person's favourite CD/perfume/scarf etc.). Be mindful that there are likely to be events during the year that will trigger upsetting feelings for you (e.g., birthdays and other special events); talk to your family and teachers about what you would like to do on these dates.

Try to think about your hopes for the future and make plans that you can look forward to. Avoid making any major life changing decisions while you are grieving.

Useful Resources

- 'Hope Again' is a website for young people by Cruse bereavement agency that provides information and support (<https://www.hopeagain.org.uk/>). If you'd like to speak to someone about how you are feeling, you can email them at hopeagain@cruse.org.uk or call the free helpline on 0808 808 1677. You can also use the 'talk to us' button on their website <https://www.hopeagain.org.uk/hope-again-talking-about-it>.
- There are many useful apps that can help you cope with difficult feelings. For example, 'Virtual Hopebox' is an app that can be personalised and contains simple tools to help with coping, relaxation, distraction, and positive thinking. 'MindShift' and 'Smiling Mind' also have tools to help with relaxation.

- There are many novels on the topic of bereavement written for young people (e.g., 'Vicky Angel' by J.Wilson, 'A library of lemons' by J.Cotterill, 'My sister lives on the mantelpiece' by A.Pitcher, and 'A Monster Calls' by P.Ness).
- It is important to remember to look after your own wellbeing. The 'Your Mind Matters' website provides lots of resources and information on services that can help you in West Sussex (<https://www.westsussex.gov.uk/campaigns/your-mind-matters/>).

How can I help a friend who is grieving?

Give them your time and attention. Nothing you can say or do can change what has happened but just being there and offering a listening ear is sometimes more than enough. Let them know they are not alone but also give them space when they want it.

Ask them if they are ok. People often will simply answer "I'm fine" even when they are not. Asking the question twice and asking further questions can encourage a more honest response. Ask them in a space where they won't be worried about being overheard. Accept that they may not want to share their feelings but make sure they know that you are available if and when they do want to talk.

Listen without judgement. Avoid interrupting or giving too much advice, unless they are specifically asking for it. Whether they open up to you or not, try to show them that the way you feel about them has not changed and you just want them to be okay.

Try to help them identify other people who can help them. They may prefer to talk to someone else instead of you, perhaps a trusted adult or professional. You could offer to go with them but give them the option to say No.

You may need to share the information. If you are very worried about your friend or you feel unable to take it all on yourself, you will need to tell a trusted adult. Your friend's safety and your own well-being is what is most important even if sharing the information could affect your relationship. They may be grateful to you in the future when they look back on what happened. If you can, let your friend know that you need to tell an adult, perhaps they can tell you which adult they would prefer you tell.

Look after yourself. It can be emotionally draining to be there for someone who needs help. Make sure you have support for yourself.

For further information see 'Helping someone else' leaflet by the Anna Freud Centre (https://www.annafreud.org/media/8030/helping_someone_else_accessible_pdf.pdf).

Dr Amy Farrer. Educational Psychologist. February 2022