

Sudden Loss



A GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING
TRAUMATIC GRIEF

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Introduction

Many of us move through the world feeling safe and secure. Our daily routines make life predictable. This gives us a sense of order and control.

When someone we know dies without warning, our lives are torn apart. We are left shattered and heartbroken. Our sense of order and control can be destroyed.

If you are reading this, someone important to you may have died unexpectedly. You've been forever changed by this devastating loss. You might struggle with intense emotions or feel totally numb.

Maybe you know someone who is facing a sudden loss and you want to support them. In any case, this booklet can help you understand why sudden loss is so hard. It also provides coping tips and encourages you to write about your loss.

Share your answers with people in your support system, or use the questions to start a journal. If all of that is too overwhelming, that's okay. You can skip the questions. Just learning more about sudden loss can be one small step forward in your journey.

These may be the darkest days you have ever faced. You are *not* alone.
We are here to support you.

About Sudden Loss

A sudden loss occurs when someone dies unexpectedly. The death is often tragic. The person who died may have been a big part of your life — a close friend, child, sibling, parent, grandparent, spouse, partner, or significant other.

Causes of sudden loss include:

- Sudden illness (heart attack, stroke, disease, etc.)
- Accident (car crash, fall, drowning, work-related, etc.)
- Line of duty (military, police, firefighters, etc.)
- Miscarriage or stillbirth
- Terrorism or mass violence
- Overdose
- Murder or violence
- Suicide
- Missing person
- Natural disaster
- Unknown

Each kind of loss has its own set of challenges for survivors. Check one above that is most similar to your loss. Are there other details you would like to describe? What was the person's name? Do you know what happened to the person?

There are two distinct parts of sudden loss: TRAUMA and GRIEF. Both are hard to face on their own. Facing them together is what can make sudden loss so hard to process.

Trauma from Sudden Loss

The phrases “sudden loss” and “traumatic loss” are often used interchangeably. They are not quite the same. Sudden loss is almost always traumatic. But not all traumatic loss is sudden.

Trauma is the emotional response to an extremely disturbing event. *Any* type of loss can be traumatic. It is not always the way the person died that makes the loss traumatic. It is more about how you — the survivor — experience the loss.

Your loss may be traumatic if:

- The loss was sudden or untimely
- The death involved violence, injury to the person’s body, or murder
- The death was unfair
- The death could have been prevented
- The person who died might have suffered
- You witnessed the death, were involved in the event that caused the death, or were injured in the event
- You suffered multiple losses at once
- There was hope the person would get better
- You had to make decisions about life support, other medical procedures, or organ donation
- You were not there or heard the news from someone else
- You do not know what happened to the person, where their body is, or any details about the death
- You had to answer questions for an autopsy, a police investigation, or court proceedings
- You had to deal with news/media exposure

Check any that apply to your loss.

Complicated grief: PGD and PTSD

Trauma from sudden loss can lead to complicated grief in some cases. This is also called “prolonged grief disorder,” or PGD. PGD is often compared to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It is common to feel symptoms of PGD or PTSD after a sudden loss, such as:

- Feeling constantly depressed, hopeless, or worthless
- Feeling numb, empty, or joyless
- Feeling constantly afraid, unsafe, or anxious
- Having no interest in activities or plans for the future
- Withdrawing from friends and family
- Having big mood swings
- Being overly angry, bitter, or hostile
- Self-destructive or addictive behavior
- Severe memory loss
- Flashbacks (replaying the person’s death over and over in your mind)
- Chronic insomnia
- Vivid nightmares
- Triggers (sights, sounds, or smells that cause fear)
- Avoidance (going out of your way to avoid triggers to the point it affects your daily life)

Check any symptoms that apply to you now. How long have you had these symptoms? _____ days / weeks / months / years

If you have thoughts about harming yourself or others, please call 1-800-273-TALK (8255) *now*. A trained agent will listen and get you help if you need it. The calls are free, private, and available 24/7.

Normally, grief has ups and downs. There are no ups with complicated grief. Intense feelings of grief may last for a long time. If these feelings last for longer than a few weeks, you might have PGD (prolonged grief disorder) or PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder).

A grief therapist can tell you if you have PGD or PTSD. They can provide treatment if needed. It is best to work with a counselor who has experience with complicated grief. Ask your doctor or contact us for a referral.

Was anything else traumatic about your loss that you would like to describe? _____

“An abnormal reaction to an abnormal situation is normal behavior.”

— Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*

Grief from Sudden Loss

You will grieve in your own unique way. For most, grief is a very fluid journey. Some days will be unbearable. Other days may feel easier. Just when you think you're doing okay, you might be hit with a huge wave of grief. This kind of back and forth is normal.

You might suffer some common symptoms of grief, but they can be much more intense. It is also common to feel "stuck" in grief for a long time after sudden loss. This is because the trauma of the loss often delays the grief process.

Common emotions of grief include:

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sad | <input type="checkbox"/> Scared |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Angry | <input type="checkbox"/> Shocked |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hopeless, empty | <input type="checkbox"/> Anxious |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ashamed | <input type="checkbox"/> Disbelief, denial |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Regretful | <input type="checkbox"/> Confused |

Common physical symptoms include:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sleep problems, fatigue | <input type="checkbox"/> Stomach pain |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Loss of appetite | <input type="checkbox"/> Headaches |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Changes in weight | <input type="checkbox"/> Dizziness, nausea |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Chest pain | <input type="checkbox"/> Trouble concentrating, being forgetful |

Check any that apply to you. What other emotions or physical symptoms do you feel?

What can delay the grief process after sudden loss:

- Complete shock and disbelief that the person is gone; the feeling this is a bad dream and the person will come back
- Feeling helpless, overwhelmed, and powerless to protect yourself or your loved ones
- Symptoms of complicated grief or PTSD (see page 4)
- Not having time to prepare, getting closure, or being able to say goodbye
- Complex practical, legal, and financial matters as a result of the loss
- Extreme guilt about things you did/didn't say or do

“Secondary losses” can also delay the grief process. They may happen right after the death or over time. Examples:

- Loss of confidence or purpose
- Loss of faith, hope, or goals for the future
- Loss of identity or role within the family
- Loss of relationships with family, friends, and others
- Loss of job, income, or financial security
- Loss of housing or community
- Loss of respect for the person who died
- Loss of trust in people or authorities

Other: _____

Check any that apply to you.

Coping with Sudden Loss

The days right after a sudden loss can be a blur. There is little time to grieve. You might feel like a robot going through the motions just to get through each day. Or you might feel frozen and helpless from shock.

As the initial chaos settles down, the numbness that protected you may start to fade. The pain of loss can hit you hard. You may start dwelling on painful thoughts. It is important to find healthy ways you can cope. **All loss is unique, all grief is unique, so the way you cope will be unique.**

How you cope can be affected by factors such as:

- **How the person died** (see page 2).
- **Your relationship to the person who died.** How was the person related to you? _____

- **Your response to hardship.** How do you usually respond to crisis? _____

- **If you have support.** Who is part of your support system? _____

- **If you've experienced past trauma.** If you had a past trauma, briefly describe what happened: _____

- **Other stressors** (stress with work, family, finance, health, etc.). What other stressors are in your life? _____

The next sections list tips to help you cope with sudden loss. Some may work for you, some may not. You may need special support for your loss. **Contact us if you're struggling. We can help you find the support you need.**

Self-care

- **Allow yourself to feel the way you feel**, however you feel. ALL of your feelings are valid.
- **Be where you feel safe and secure.** If that is not your own home, stay with close friends or family. Or ask someone you trust to stay with you for a while.
- **Take time to reflect** and acknowledge your loss. A few quiet minutes each day can help you process the shock.
- **Don't hold your emotions inside.** Find a safe space to scream, hit a pillow, or cry. Tears help release tension and lower blood pressure.
- **Face your pain**, even though it may be agonizing. Masking grief with risky behavior (drugs, alcohol, overeating, gambling, etc.) may delay the grief process. This can keep you from healing in the future.
- **Be patient with yourself and with grief.** You've just survived a terrible trauma. Forgive yourself if you forget things or can't focus. Grief is a process. You don't have to be tough or "get over it."

- **Take care of your basic needs.** With all that has happened, it is easy to forget to take care of yourself. If you need to stay in bed at first, that's okay. As time passes, take one healthy step at a time.
 - Drink plenty of water and eat well. If a full meal is too much, snack on healthy, easy-to-eat foods throughout the day.
 - Practice good hygiene. Brush your teeth, bathe, and change into clean clothes. This can refresh you and get you back into a routine.
 - Get sleep or rest if you can't sleep. Avoid taking medication to sleep. A warm bath or hot tea can help you relax.
 - Try a meditation app. Meditation can pull you into the present moment. This may help pause disturbing thoughts or worries about the future.
 - Exercise can release energy and strengthen your body. If a daily routine is not possible, start with stretches in bed or a short walk.
 - Avoid relying on alcohol or drugs. Substance abuse harms your body. Alcohol and drugs numb your feelings. This might make you feel better now, but it can further delay the grief process.
 - Call your doctor if physical pain or other symptoms do not get better over time.

“Self-care is giving yourself permission to pause.”

— Cecilia Tran

Sharing the news

- **Think about how you want to share the news.** Some people want to share it themselves. Others find this overwhelming. Maybe you don't want to share it at all.
- **Prepare a general answer** if you don't want to give details. For example, you might simply say, "He died unexpectedly at home." If you'd rather not share details, say so. Most people will understand.
- **Choose a point person.** Ask someone you trust to field calls, emails, and questions if that is easier for you.
 - Let the person know what you want to share, and what you want to keep private.
 - Consider forwarding calls or setting the do-not-disturb feature on your phone.
 - Your point person could start a group message by text, email, or on social media to send updates. List people to include below.

- **It's okay if you don't want to share the news.** Be aware people may still try to reach out. If you don't have a point person, set an autoreply or post on social media. Let others know you need privacy and time to grieve.

Practical matters

- **Accept help from family, friends, or your community.** Some people find it hard to ask for help. It is important that you have support, now more than ever.
- **Keep a notebook and pen handy** (or keep notes in your smartphone) for lists and reminders. This will help take the burden off of you to remember details when you're feeling overwhelmed.
- **Start a list of things you need help with.** People often want to help but don't know how. A list might include:
 - Caring for children and/or pets
 - Taking phone calls, answering emails, sharing the news, checking social media
 - Getting groceries/meals
 - Talking to visitors and accepting gifts, meals, etc.
 - Helping with household chores
 - Paying bills
 - Getting the mail
 - Helping write an obituary
 - Planning the funeral/memorial service
 - Helping with legal, financial, or other complex matters

Check any you could add to your list. What other tasks would you add? _____

- **Plan a funeral, memorial service, or celebration of life** to help bring closure.
 - Plan the memorial when you are ready. If it is too overwhelming to make plans now, just take care of the burial/cremation as needed. A memorial service can always be set at a later date.
 - Involve others in the planning. Close family, friends, and even children may want to help.
 - Contact a local funeral home for help with planning. Ask us for a referral.
 - Keep plans manageable and affordable. The memorial can be a simple gathering of close friends and family to celebrate the person's life.
 - If you do not know what happened, a memorial service or celebration of life can still be planned. It may not bring full closure, but it can help to mourn your loss with others.
- **Wait some time before making big decisions,** such as big purchases or moves, if possible. If you can't wait, reach out for help. Even if you know how to handle complex matters, you may not be thinking clearly now. Contact friends who work in law, finance, real estate, insurance, etc. Support groups may have contacts, as well.

"The reality is that you will grieve forever. You will not 'get over' the loss...you will learn to live with it. You will heal...but you will never be the same."

— Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving*

- **If you are currently working:**
 - Talk to your supervisor about time off. Many employers have bereavement leave or will work with you to plan time off. Ask if you can use vacation or sick leave, if needed.
 - Talk to your supervisor if you need more time off past paid leave. For some, the thought of going back to work is overwhelming. Ask if you can work remotely, work half days, or help in another area until you are ready to return.
 - For others, staying involved with work is a welcome distraction. If keeping busy helps you, be sure to set aside some time to acknowledge your grief. Burying yourself in work all the time may delay the grief process.
 - Write a message for coworkers. Ask your supervisor to send it to your team before you come back. This may help you avoid having to answer the same questions over and over again.
 - Let coworkers know as much or as little as you want about your loss. Consider a quick visit to your work place before your official return. This can give you time to talk to coworkers so you can focus on work when you get back.

What to expect in the weeks/months ahead

- **Waves of intense physical symptoms and emotions may continue.** You may have grief attacks as special dates, other people, and even sights, sounds, or smells remind you of the person who died. You may have flashbacks of the event that trigger panic or fear.
 - Slow, deep breaths can help calm you.
 - Use your senses to bring yourself back to the present. Focus on a nearby object, smell, and/or sound to help you recall where you are.
 - Remind yourself that you are safe and that you will be okay.
 - Keep taking self-care steps (see pages 9–10). Take each day moment to moment.
- **Intrusive thoughts about the death or “what ifs” might replay in your mind.** This is normal after sudden loss. It is the brain’s way of processing trauma. Set aside time to spend with family or friends, look through photos, and talk about good memories.
- **You might search for clues about what happened.** This helps some people process trauma. Some questions have no answers. Try not to dwell too long on these.
- **Painful thoughts may interfere with daily life.** If this does not get easier to manage over time, it may help to talk with a professional counselor or therapist.
- **You might start to feel lonely or isolated.** You may feel like nobody understands what you’re going through. Close friends may drift away or seem uneasy talking about your loss. Resist the urge to withdraw. See “Mourning: Expressing Your Grief” on page 21 for ways to stay connected.

- **There may be conflict among family or friends**, adding even more stress. Conflicts are often over money, property, moves, funeral plans, child custody, or judgment over how people grieve. Some disagreements can be settled with better communication. Others may need a therapist or a special type of lawyer (a mediator) to step in.
- **Questioning how you view the world** is common after sudden loss. It is a natural way to cope with trauma. After a sudden loss you might:
 - Ask “Why?” “Why did this happen?” “Why me?”
 - Change your beliefs or spiritual/religious views or question the meaning of life.
 - Be angry at yourself, others, the person who died, or God. You may try to assign blame, even if nobody was at fault. Blame is one way we try to make sense of something so senseless.
- **Guilt is common with sudden loss**, especially if you were involved in the traumatic event. Acknowledge the guilt. But accept that you cannot change the past. Feelings of guilt might include:
 - Feeling directly at fault for the death, through your actions or words.
 - Believing you could have saved the person, that if you had noticed the signs you could have prevented the death.
 - Feeling bad that you weren’t with the person or that you didn’t get to say goodbye.
 - Thinking, “It should have been me.”
 - Feeling like you didn’t do enough for the person when they were alive.

- **Forgiveness can be a pathway to healing.** But when there is a person (or people) directly at fault for a traumatic loss, forgiveness can seem impossible.
 - Forgiving the person does NOT mean you are okay with what they did. When you forgive someone, you aren't doing it for them. You are doing it for *you*. Use forgiveness as a tool to let go of anger.
- **If you are having trouble forgiving yourself,** answer the questions below. If you answer "yes" to any of them, you deserve forgiveness.
 - Did you mean well for the person who died?
 YES NO
 - Did you make what you thought was the best decision based on what you knew at the time?
 YES NO
 - Are you flawed (like *every* person on earth) and not able to make perfect choices all the time?
 YES NO
 - Would the person who died want you to forgive yourself and to be happy?
 YES NO

"You can clutch the past so tightly to your chest that it leaves your arms too full to embrace the present."

— Jan Glidewell

If you have children

- **If you are struggling to care for yourself or your children**, reach out to family, friends, or trusted neighbors for help right away. It can be hard to care for children right after a sudden loss. You may have less patience to deal with the daily routine of care.
- **Don't hide your feelings** to try to protect children. Sharing your emotions shows them it's okay to share how they feel, too.
- **Children want to know what happened**, just like adults. Be as direct as you can. With traumatic loss, there may be things about the person's death that you are not comfortable sharing with children. Adjust your answers based on the child's age.
- **Avoid euphemisms**, such as saying the person "went to sleep" or "has gone away."
- **Grieving children need to know they are cared for** and protected, no matter their age.
- **Children grieve differently than most adults.** It is normal for kids to bounce between grieving/feeling sad and playing/laughing. Children may (or may not) show symptoms of grief at unexpected times.
- **Keep track of how older children are doing in school.** Big drops in grades, disinterest in activities, or changes in behavior can be a sign they may need extra support. Stay in contact with teachers and guidance counselors.
- **Find a counselor or therapist** who specializes in grief support for children or teens. This may be helpful if the children were involved with or witnessed the death. Contact us for a referral. We can also help if you are not sure how to talk to your child about the person's death.

Helping Others through Sudden Loss

You might know someone who is suffering a sudden loss. You want to help them, but you are not sure how. Reading this booklet is a good first step.

It is important not to downplay the person's loss. Do not act like you know what they are going through. Even if you had a similar loss, or are grieving the same loss, your grief will be different than theirs. Below are more ideas on how to support survivors of sudden loss.

Helping out:

- Ask the person if they have a to-do list, or offer to help them make one.
- Be specific about which task(s) you can do.
- Be flexible. Allow them to give you a schedule that works best for them.
- If your task requires a visit, follow the person's lead on how you interact. Unless it seems like they want you to stay, keep the visit short.

If you can't help out:

- Send flowers, a card, or an email to let the person know you're thinking of them.
- Check in with a text or call every few weeks; this can help the person with feelings of isolation.
- Consider making a donation to a charity in memory of the person who died. Families often suggest where donations can be made.

Things to avoid saying:

- “Let me know what I can do.”
- “I know how you feel.”
- “She’s in a better place now.”
- “It was God’s will.”
- “Be strong.”
- “He did this to himself.”
- “You can always have more children.”
- “Everything happens for a reason.”

Things you might say instead:

- “I am so sorry for your loss.”
- “You and your family are in my thoughts.”
- “I cannot imagine how you feel.”
- “I would like to help. Can I bring you dinner this week, or is there something else you need?”
- “Text or call if you need to talk. I’m up early/late.”
- “There are no words right now. Just know that I care and I am here for you.”
- “My favorite thing about/memory of your loved one is...”
- “I’ve been thinking about you. How are you doing?”

It is okay if you don’t know what to say. Sometimes a hug or sitting quietly with the person — just letting them know you care — is enough.

Mourning: Expressing Your Grief

Some survivors are able to process their loss and move forward. Others take a very long time to heal. In fact, some may *never* fully heal from the trauma of sudden loss. For all survivors, expressing grief is an important step toward healing.

What you can do:

- **Find someone you trust to talk to.** Even if you can't make sense of it, talking about your loss can help. Talk to family, friends, therapists, chaplains, or clergy. Contact us if you need help finding support.
- **Find other healthy ways to express your grief,** such as:
 - Volunteer or donate in the person's honor.
 - Start a blog or a journal, share your feelings in posts on social media, or write letters. Avoid sharing toxic thoughts publicly.
 - Use creativity to express your feelings. Draw, color, take photos, listen to music, dance, etc.
 - Reading can be an escape. Some like to read about grief and loss to learn about what they're feeling.
- **Live in the moment.** What is important to you? Spend time with people you love or doing things you love.
- **Be patient.** This could be a journey of years. One day it may be possible to accept your loss, find peace, and move forward with hope. Until then, be gentle with yourself.


"Some things cannot be fixed;
they can only be carried."

— Megan Devine, *It's OK That You're Not OK*

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