



Bereavement by sudden death

Introduction

It is painful and upsetting when someone dies whom you knew well. If the death is sudden, it may also feel shocking and disturbing - especially if there is uncertainty about how or why the person died or whether they took their own life.

You may have been close to the person, shared a house with them, or studied together. Even if you were not close, you may still feel affected. While you are at university, you are likely to be living away from your family and other people to whom you would normally turn in times of trouble. It might be that your university friends knew the person too, and those around you are experiencing the difficult feelings that arise when death is sudden or traumatic.

This leaflet will describe some reactions that you might experience in response to sudden death and what you can do to help yourself. At the end of the leaflet, there are links to some specific sources of support.

Some feelings you might experience:

Shock

When you hear that someone you know has died suddenly, you may feel shocked and numb as you try to take in what has happened.

It is common to experience reactions to grief, such as:

- Exhaustion
- Headaches
- Disrupted sleep
- Disturbing dreams
- Loss of appetite or a compulsion to eat
- Aches and pains
- Feeling dazed
- Confusion
- Being unable to focus on your day-to-day and academic activities
- Lack of concentration
- Poor memory
- Questioning your spiritual beliefs

The shock might make you feel and react differently than you usually would. Bear in mind that you are likely to be feeling significantly stressed as you try to take in what has happened.

Take extra care of yourself. Try not to take on too much or make any big decisions. It is ok to say 'No.'

Feeling numb or empty

Shocking news can also leave you feeling numb and/or empty while you struggle to believe what has happened. Numbness might also be experienced as a dreamlike or unreal state of mind.

Feeling this way is normal in such circumstances, and can be understood as a way of not being overwhelmed - enabling you to shut down in some ways, so that you can function in your day-to-day life.

Time will help you to comprehend what has happened.

Anxiety and Depression

Because sudden loss can feel like a traumatic event, you might start worrying about losing other people too or worrying about your own death.

This experience might also cause anxiety or very low mood if it stirs up painful memories from the past. It can help to talk with someone – a friend or a family member or a staff member such as your personal tutor or a Support and Wellbeing Officer who will signpost you to other services if that is what you need

Guilt

You may feel guilty for something you did, or did not do, or say. This is a common experience after a death, especially a sudden one, as there was no chance to try to talk about any problems between you.

Sometimes guilt represents feeling helpless in relation to what you have experienced. Acknowledging this sense of helplessness and exploring it with someone you trust might help you to make sense of the guilt you are experiencing.

Anger

You may feel anger towards the person who died. You might blame others. Alternatively, you might feel angry with yourself. Sometimes we feel angry when we are trying to make sense of something that feels shocking and difficult to take in.

Anger is a healthy emotion that can reflect feelings of “injustice”. You might want to explore ways to express this feeling - using creative media (journals, art, running, gym, etc.) or you might need to talk with someone you trust about the way that you are feeling

Why?

You may want an explanation for what has happened, and it can seem bewildering and frustrating when only partial answers are available.

This can cause confusion and a temptation to speculate about what has happened. It can be hard to accept is that sometimes there is not a full explanation.

Grief

Grief comes in waves, and sometimes these waves can feel like setbacks. This can be a tiring process, and you may well feel physically drained. You may find that you are preoccupied with what has happened or unable to concentrate on your work.

You may not want to go out or socialise with your friends. These feelings are a part of your grieving process and are temporary.

Birthdays, holidays, and anniversaries can be particularly hard. It is helpful to know that you are not 'back at square one,' just at the next step.

What can I do?

Try to take one day at a time.

There may be questions that you need to reflect on before you can let them go – often there are no answers.

This takes time.

You may experience despair because the world around you seems unsafe and unpredictable, or because you attach blame to yourself. This may be even more likely if you think the person has killed themselves. Sometimes this can lead others to think, "If they couldn't cope, how can I?"

If you do feel like this, it is particularly important to find someone to listen to you and support you. This may be a friend, a relative, a member of staff or a counsellor, chaplain, or GP (doctor). A link to our directory of resources can be found at the end of this leaflet.

Sometimes people can feel guilty about starting to feel better.

Letting go does not mean forgetting the person who has died.

Try to be kind and patient with yourself.

You might want to find out what has helped other people and choose the things that are helpful for you.

