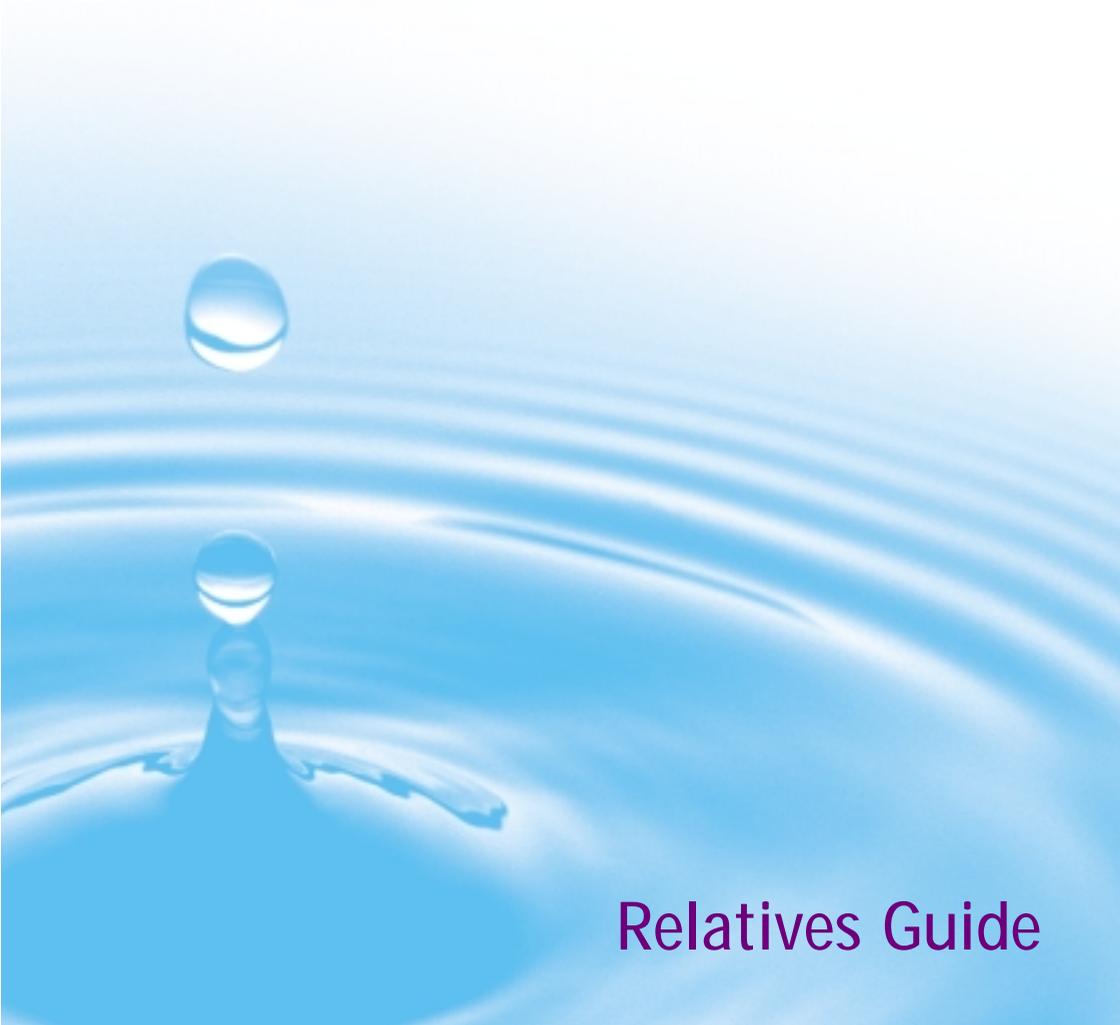


Sudden death Dealing with intrusions



Relatives Guide

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What are intrusions?

Intrusions are strong memories, thoughts or feelings about what happened (or about the person who died) that you cannot forget and find difficult to ignore. They may be upsetting and make it hard to concentrate or forget what happened.

Intrusions occur when your normal flow of thoughts is interrupted and you are reminded strongly of what happened. These intrusions can be repetitive, and become the centre of attention in your mind. Although they are difficult to control, these are normal reactions following a sudden death.

For some people intrusions may not be distressing at all. Other people may feel them very strongly. You may find that some intrusions can interfere with the ability to work, concentrate, and sleep, or make you angry, sad, or afraid.

Types of intrusions

Nightmares – these are one of the most common forms of intrusion, and are a natural reaction to fright following a sudden death. It is normal to have some type of night waking, disturbed sleep, disturbing dreams, nightmares or night terrors following a bad fright or scare. Bad dreams and nightmares following sudden death don't have to be about what actually happened.

Repetitive thoughts – these everyday fantasies, daydreams, and imaginary situations may run through your head during the course of the day. Following sudden death, you may remember some thoughts or memories of what happened repeatedly, either at random or because of a reminder (e.g. something you've seen, heard, or smelt etc. that reminds you of what happened). Intrusions can take the form of:

- Persistent thoughts relating to sudden death such as “Why did it have to happen?” or “Why me?”
- Intrusive images such as remembering (or imagining) the sights, sounds, smells, and other details of what happened
- Impulses such as panic or the urge to check doors and windows.

Unlike normal daydreams which can be enjoyable or neutral, you may find intrusions of this type unpleasant. They may make you feel sad, agitated, guilty, angry, or less hopeful about the future.

Flashbacks – these are like daydreams only more intense and realistic.

People who have flashbacks feel as if they were back at the time of death, being able to see, smell, feel, or hear what happened in great detail. Some people have vivid daydreams about what they imagined happened. If you have a flashback or vivid daydream, you may feel:

- Your emotions take over
- Your breathing and pulse become faster
- You are very frightened or scared
- You re-experience the event very vividly

Flashbacks can seem difficult or impossible to control, but you can manage them with specialist help. For most people, flashbacks will fade with time.

Repetitive play/actions – is a form of intrusion that usually only affects children. After a sudden death, they may repeatedly act out what happened through play. This is normal for children and may help them understand what happened. Older children and adults may find that they repeat activities as a way of going over what happened or as a means of coping. These actions usually fade with time.

What causes intrusions?

Intrusions are a normal reaction to sudden death. They happen after something has reminded you of the trauma (e.g. the smell of smoke, a loud noise, the sight of blood, or a news story). Sometimes they happen at times when you have nothing to do (e.g. around bedtime or first thing in the morning if you have trouble sleeping). Other times they may seem to happen at random.

Usually, people find they get fewer intrusions as time goes by, and that they become less upsetting. However, if you feel intrusions are making your situation worse (e.g. you have difficulty concentrating or getting on with your life because of intrusions) there are ways of managing intrusions.

Skills for managing intrusions and reminders

Avoidance of unnecessary reminders – some places, people, or things will remind you of the person who died or what happened. These may be overwhelming at times when you need to be in control (e.g. school-time or work hours). They may also affect your sleep or dreams. Manage your stress by avoiding severe reminders until you feel you are ready for them:

- Avoid thinking about what happened during work or school. Make time later on to think about it.
- Avoid painful reminders (e.g. location of the death) until you feel ready to deal with them
- Avoid being alone at times when you are reminded strongly of what happened (e.g. late at night)

Be aware of the things that remind you of what happened or times when you would rather not be alone. As times goes on you will be reminded less and less of what occurred.

Distraction – is the most effective way to deal with intrusions when they happen. When an intrusion occurs, if you deliberately think about something else then it won't be able to play out in your head.

In the beginning, it may be difficult for you to switch from the intrusion to the distraction. If this happens to you, there are simple ways of thought-stopping to help you interrupt an intrusion automatically. Thought-stopping actions are quick movements or thoughts that demand your attention:

- Shout "STOP!" out loud or loudly in your head
- Clap your hands together or snap your fingers quickly
- Snap an elastic band worn around the wrist

Once you have stopped the intrusion, you need to prevent it starting up again. Distracting your mind with an enjoyable job or mental exercise is a useful way to do this. Examples of distraction involve:

- Counting backwards in threes from 100 (e.g. 100, 97, 94, 91...)
- Listening to music or singing a favourite song in your head

- Replacing the negative thoughts with good ones or positive memories, particularly of a safe place or time.

Be creative: some distractions will be more suited to you than others. Find methods that work for you, and practice them.

Relaxation – this is an important skill following sudden death. Learning to relax again can take time, especially if you feel unsafe.

People relax in different ways, from taking a bath, reading a book, or watching television to long walks, running, or playing sports. Not every relaxation technique will be suitable for you, but most people are good at finding at least one that works for them. Relaxations helps you calm down after upsetting thoughts or memories of what happened. Following sudden death, you may need to find different methods of relaxing or unwinding than you used in the past. Examples of relaxing activities include:

- Taking a bath
- Watching TV
- Prayer/Meditation
- Guided imagery
- Taking long walks
- Deep breathing
- Listening to a relaxation tape
- Reading a book
- Listening to music
- Talking with friends
- Exercising
- Playing sport
- Muscular relaxation
- Yoga

Guidelines

Take a flexible approach – your needs and emotions will change over time. Be flexible and creative in helping yourself

- What works for one person may not work for another
- What works at one time may not work later on
- Men and women are likely to cope in different ways
- Be prepared to try different things

Make time to think about the things that worry you – you may be tempted to avoid thinking about what happened if it is too distressing. Having a set time (every day or week) to think about this is helpful. Spend



time thinking in private, or talking with a trusted friend, or talking with a therapist/counsellor. Many people use this time to create a diary or scrapbook to help work through their worries and other feelings.

- Make time for thinking in your daily or weekly routine
- Plan what has to be done in this time (e.g. reflection, writing)
- Spend time doing something relaxing or enjoyable afterwards.

Be aware of your reminders – identify the people, places, memories or other things that remind you of what happened. Knowing when to expect these reminders will give you more control. It can also make life less overwhelming (this can be especially important if the media or legal system is involved).

- Be aware that some things will remind you of what happened
- Be prepared for day-to-day reminders

Develop ways to deal with reminders – use distraction and thought stopping to deal with intrusions. For strong reminders (e.g. inquest or court case) use relaxation, deep-breathing, or having a friend or family member with you to reduce distress. For some people having a good cry from time to time will help clear your head and deal with reminders. Whatever method you chose, practice it to make sure it works.

- Practice thought stopping or mental distraction to stop your intrusions
- Use relaxation and/or exercise
- Make time to think about your intrusions, when and how they arise, or what they mean to you

Manage the reminders in your life – avoid too many reminders of what happened until you feel ready. If intrusions affect your concentration, memory, or emotional state then you will need to take time away from things that remind you of what happened. It is a good idea to control or limit your reminders, so that you can get used to them at a manageable pace.

- Be aware of your limits
- Identify reminders which are overwhelming

- Develop a plan for making severe triggers more manageable (e.g. having someone else around to calm you down)

Beware of using coping methods that will become a problem in the long term, such as the use of alcohol and drugs.

The future

Intrusive thoughts and images can be very upsetting and difficult to prepare for. Most intrusive memories will weaken and fade over time, with the most intense intrusions occurring in the first two years.

In the early stages intrusions tend to be strongest, and following the guidelines outlined can make the experience less overwhelming.

There is no cure for intrusions, but you can manage your reminders and reactions until you are able to deal with them. When intrusions continue or if they interfere with work, education, or family life, there are many effective ways of dealing with them.

- Many people will experience either only slight intrusions or none at all.
- For some people, intrusions can either be prolonged or have a more noticeable effect on work, education, sleep, etc. You can benefit from understanding more about intrusions, learning how to recognise them, and thinking about how to manage them.
- People whose intrusions do not fade with time or upset them a lot may want help with related difficulties (such as sleep disturbance). There are other guidelines available in this series on dealing with such difficulties.

Appendix: Dealing with images

The TV screen method

The TV screen method is a short mental exercise for children and adults. Use it to control unwanted images (remembered or imagined pictures) of what happened. These images can stick in your mind, and may be scary or upsetting. The screen method works by teaching you how to control images in your head as they occur. The more you use it the faster and more effective it becomes.

Parents explaining these steps to young children should use language that you know your child will understand:

- **Imagine a TV screen:**
 - Put the unwanted image on the TV screen so that you can see it properly
 - The picture should be as clear or clearer than it is normally
 - The TV screen can be any size as long as the picture can be clearly seen
 - The picture should stay on the screen unless you change it deliberately
- **Imagine a remote control:**
 - Imagine you have a remote control that works the TV screen
 - When you don't want to look at the image on the TV screen anymore, use the remote control to switch the television off
 - When the screen goes blank, either go back to what you were doing before or start doing something else (preferably something nice)
 - If the picture comes back on the screen, use the remote to turn it off again; or
 - If the unwanted picture comes back on the screen, use the remote to switch to another station showing a happy or comforting picture (e.g. a picture of your family, your favourite place to be, a favourite cartoon character, etc.). It is best if you pick these nice pictures in advance

- **Practice:**

- The more you use the imaginary TV and remote control the more control you will have
- The more you practice the method with children, the less they will rely on adults to explain it to them each time
- The more comforting or happy images you can think to watch instead of the unpleasant image the better

Dealing with sounds/voices – the radio method

The radio method is a simple exercise for controlling intrusive sounds or voices. Noises such as these (remembered or imagined) can be sources of distress and reminders of the trauma. The radio method is a simple way for children and adults to control these intrusions and get some predictability and stability back following a traumatic loss.

- **Imagine a radio:**

- Some children may want to close their eyes to do this, others can keep theirs open
- The radio is off and making no sound
- The radio has knobs or buttons on it so that it can be switched to different stations (tuner)
- The radio has knobs or buttons on it to make sounds louder or quieter (volume)

Make the unwanted sound or voice come from the radio:

- Get the child to switch on the radio and tune it until they can hear very clearly the noise which upsets them
- Get them to turn up or down the volume so that the sound is louder or quieter
- Ask the child to tune out the sound a bit so that they can still hear it but it is more fuzzy
- Get them to turn up and down the volume so that this sound gets louder and then quieter again
- When the child feels they know how to use the radio like this, tell them to tune out the noise completely and then turn the volume all the way down so the sound disappears and the radio goes off
- If the noise comes back get them to turn off the radio again; or
- If the noise comes back get them to turn the radio to a different stations (e.g. one that plays their favourite song, jingle, theme from a cartoon, etc)



- **Practice:**

- The more a person uses their imaginary TV and remote control the better they will work
- The more children practice the method, the less they will rely on adults to explain it to them each time

During early stages, unwanted sounds and voices may be very difficult to control. It may be helpful at night to turn on a radio at a very low level. Soft or relaxing music can often block out unwanted sounds and act as a reassurance (in the same way that leaving a low night-light on can be comforting). During the day, any music or distraction will work just as well.

Dealing with unwanted bodily sensations

There are many popular methods of calming unwanted bodily sensations. The best methods are usually those that replace unwanted feelings with pleasant ones:

- Use massage, aromatherapy, or other pleasant bodily experiences
- Take relaxing baths to let go of tension
- Use a formal relaxation or visualisation technique to get more direct control of the sensations in your body*

Other methods focus on preventing unwanted bodily sensations from arising:

- Provide your body with enough rest each night
- Use exercise and activity to burn off excess energy during the day
- Eat healthily
- Avoid excessive use of alcohol, nicotine, caffeine, or other drugs
- Provide your body with enough relaxation each day

** For more information on formal relaxation and visualisation techniques see the leaflet in this series entitled "Sleep disturbances in adults & adolescents" & "Sleep disturbances in children under 10 years of age"*

Dealing with tastes and smells

Tastes and smells which remind you strongly of unpleasant memories and events (or are re-experienced from time to time when you think about what happened) can be upsetting. These tastes and smells can be controlled with practice and some preparation:

- **Tastes:**
 - Use sweets or strong-tasting pleasant food to act as a counter-taste
 - Keep a packet of mints/chewing gum for emergencies
 - Keep bottled water or soft-drink for night-time use
- **Smells:**
 - Use a favourite scent (perfume/after-shave) as a counter-smell
 - Breathe through your mouth (less ability to smell)
 - Keep relaxing or distracting smells for night-time use (e.g. lavender/Olbas oil)
- **Other methods for tastes and smells:**
 - Use a formal visualisation or relaxation method to get more control of your sensations and reactions to them
 - Use distraction to keep you occupied

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Summary

Traumatic memories are a normal part of traumatic bereavement. They can be overwhelming and more difficult to deal with from time to time. These are the times when you are most in need of control. Problems with intrusions can be eased through the steps outlined below.

Preparation

Identify your reminders – things that you see, hear, or feel that trigger intrusive thoughts or remind you of the traumatic loss. Examples: people, places, times of day or year, anniversaries, music, news items, traumatic memories, etc.

Identify repetitive thinking patterns – thoughts, images, or impulses related to traumatic loss that are persistent and difficult for you to control. Examples: persistent memories or imaginings of something traumatic; having the urge to check window/door locks; wondering “Why me?” or “If only I...”

Plan ahead –

- Prepare yourself for situations which you think might be especially likely to trigger your intrusions (e.g. anniversaries, court or coroner’s investigations, involvement of the media). Decide how to deal with these and practice the method you chose.
- Decide what to do when you are having repetitive thoughts or traumatic memories. You will need to calm your thoughts as well as any physical response. Practice the method(s) you choose.

Skills

Avoidance – avoid situations which remind you strongly of your loss and may overwhelm you. These can be dealt with at a later time.

Distraction – redirect your thinking away from repetitive or intrusive thoughts as soon as they occur. Use thought stopping to clear your mind if intrusions are difficult to control. Practice distraction in advance, including a method you can use in public when necessary.



Relaxation – make time for relaxation. Identify positive activities that might relieve your stress, tension, or unwanted feelings and make time for these (e.g. exercise, fitness training, writing, hobbies, etc.). Practice until you are happy that you can become relaxed in a short space of time.

Guidelines

Take a flexible approach – the strength and number of intrusions will vary over time so be flexible in how you deal with them. Men and women are likely to have different reminders and coping methods. Use different skills for different situations. If something doesn't work, try again or try something new!

Set aside time to think about what's worrying you – plan what has to be done during this time, and allow time for relaxation afterwards.

