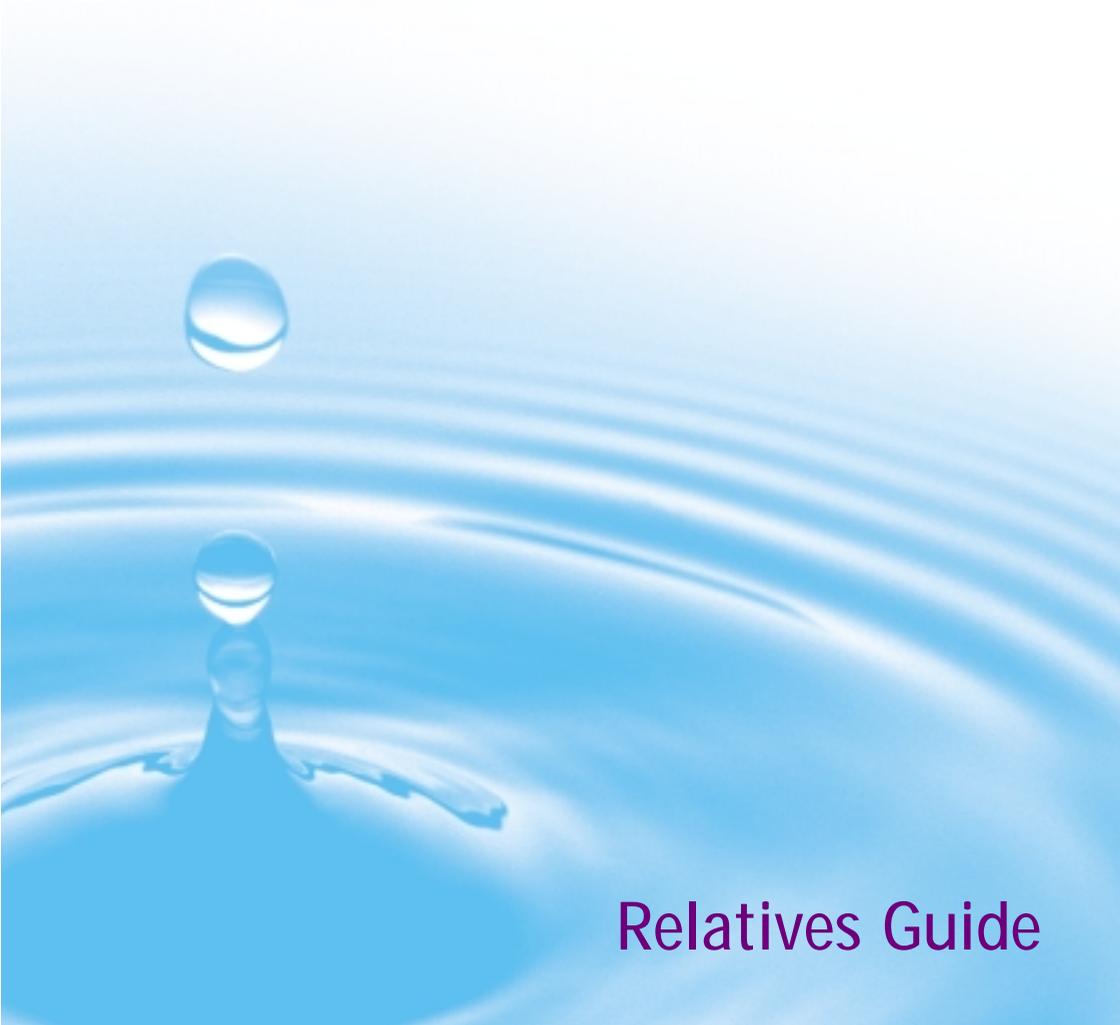


Dealing with sudden death for adults



Relatives Guide

This booklet has been produced by:

The ROYAL
HOSPITALS



Victims Unit: Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister



Common reactions following the sudden death of someone you know...

You may experience some, none or all of these emotions. These are normal feelings after a sudden death, and will fade with time and support.

Anxiety

- You may worry about your safety or the safety of important people in your life. You may want to protect yourself from or avoid situations in which you feel unsafe or unsettled.
- Crowds, traffic, or safety may worry you – sometimes in an unreasonable way. Loud noises, sudden movements, or being alone can make some people jumpier than they were before. You may find it hard to talk to other people about this.

Vivid memories

- You may have very vivid dreams or memories about the person who has died or the death. These can seem very real at the time, causing strong feelings. You may notice that your heart beat or breathing speeds up when you think about what happened.
- You may be frightened or saddened from time to time by very vivid thoughts about the person who died. At times you may think you can see, hear, smell or even speak to them. Don't worry – this is a normal reaction.
- You may become frightened when you are reminded of the incident, when you think about what happened, or sometimes at random. Distracting yourself with other thoughts or actions can help. Do something that makes you feel safe and relaxed instead.

If vivid memories become too troublesome for you, read the leaflet entitled "Dealing with intrusions" which is part of this series.

Problems with sleeping

You may have difficulties such as being unable to fall asleep, having nightmares, or worrying about having nightmares. You may also be concerned about your safety (or the safety of your house) overnight. It is okay to want the light left on, the door locked, or to share a room with someone else when you sleep.

You may want to talk to someone about this or read the leaflet entitled "Sleep disturbances" which is part of this series.

Feelings of sadness and longing

- It is normal to feel very sad and to miss the person who died. This sadness usually comes and goes and seems to hit you when you least expect it. You may find that this sadness causes physical reactions such as tightness in your throat or chest.
- You may wish you could have your life back the way it was before. You may feel sad that you will never have that life again (that things have changed forever).

All of these feelings come and go, but eventually fade over time. For most people this will take 1 or 2 years.

Mood swings

You may have mood swings or be more easily upset. You may find others have the same mood swings. This can make spending time with friends or family difficult if everyone is more emotional or aggressive than before. You may lose interest in things you previously enjoyed. These changes may affect your friendships, or cause you to become more withdrawn from people you used to be close to.

These are normal reactions. Everyone needs space, time, and patience – things will improve gradually.

Feelings of anger

Many people experience very strong feelings of anger following sudden death. You may feel anger towards:

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- The death itself;
 - Yourself;
 - The person who died (for dying and leaving you alone);
 - The cause of death (person or group you believe to be responsible);
 - People or groups who could have prevented the death;
 - Northern Ireland/"The Troubles";
 - God (for letting this happen);
 - People and the rest of the world for getting on with their lives

Anger is related to unfairness and a sense of injustice. This is understandable following sudden death. It is important that you recognise these feelings, and find a safe way to deal with them (such as taking exercise or talking to a friend). Should you need any more information on anger see the leaflet of this series entitled "Anger management".

Feelings of guilt or shame

It is very common to feel guilty. You may feel:

- That you caused or could have prevented the person's death;
- That you wished death or bad luck upon the person who died through something you said or did (e.g. if your last words to the person were part of an argument);
- That the person who died will only remember bad things about you (especially if you were not on good terms with the person before they died);
- That you should have died instead of the person you lost.

It is common to feel isolated or set apart by these feelings. You may feel:

- That you or your family are seen as different from others;
- That you have had a role in the death which you can't talk to other people about;
- That you are very vulnerable

Remember – it is not your fault. Feelings of guilt or shame are normal following a sudden death.

Changing personality/behaviour

Other people may say that you have changed or you may notice changes in your own actions. You may find that you:

- Go into a fantasy world or withdraw from others;
- Isolate yourself and want to be alone more;
- Notice a change in sexual behaviour or attitude towards your partner;
- Become very serious;
- Become more aggressive or more easily provoked;
- Take less care of yourself;
- Feel useless or struggle to keep control;
- Have difficulty with concentration and memory (disorganised or forgetful)

Some of these behaviours can cause other problems in your life – you may need help overcoming them.

Difficulties caring for others

Dealing with grief and distress while taking care of others is difficult – it involves balancing the need to grieve with the need to control it. You may feel overwhelmed by:

- The work and responsibility
- Struggling to return to routines or create new one
- Feeling isolated if you've lost a partner or source of support
- Exhaustion
- The future

Caring for other people is a demanding job – you need to seek and accept support for this. The more you take care of yourself the better able you will be to take care of others.

Work difficulties

- You may have difficulties in the workplace or with work colleagues – sometimes these can last a long time.
- You may not be as interested or satisfied by your job as before.
- You may have difficulties with concentration and memory that make paying close attention difficult.

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- You may find it difficult to keep existing friends or get along with others. They may find it difficult to understand why you are behaving differently.
 - Some people may improve or work harder at their job as it offers a release from grief.

Please remember, you may not experience any of these difficulties.

Guidelines for self-care

Each adult has their own needs – no two people will feel the same after a sudden death. Family and friends can help you meet practical and emotional needs. Information, meaning-making, and physical safety will also have a big part to play in how you cope.

Immediate needs

People need to feel safe – it is important for you (and your family) to feel as safe as possible. Have a safety routine for locking up your home at night (shutting windows, checking locks) and someone you can call when you feel unsafe. Daily routines (such as going to work) should be re-started as soon as you feel able. Avoid long or unexplained separations from family and friends.

- Have a consistent routine at home, work, and with friends
- Avoid unexplained separations – where separations are necessary they should be planned and predictable for you
- Give time and emotional support to others, and accept help in return.
- Have a safety routine (e.g. locking doors, leaving lights on at night) to help yourself relax
- Take your fears about safety seriously

Talk to other people – following a sudden death you may lose interest in other people and not want to talk to them about what happened. Talking honestly with friends and family about your feelings and confusion can help bring you back in touch with them and yourself. Talk to people or organisations who can answer your questions about what occurred – the truth is often less painful than wondering what might have happened.

- Ask questions to help you understand what happened
- Make the effort to talk to friends or family when you feel the need for support
- Find people you feel comfortable talking to and showing difficult emotions in front of

Make the loss real – sometimes it is difficult to believe that the person who died is gone, or that they won't just walk into the room like nothing happened. This is a normal reaction to sudden death. Find positive ways to remember or honour the person who died now and in the future.

- Take part in mourning ceremonies (e.g. funeral, leaving a gift on the grave)
- Share your feelings of sadness but avoid strong displays of anger, sadness, or blame
- Hold on to special keepsakes or mementos of the person who died

Long-term needs

Understanding – people of all ages need time to adjust after a sudden death. You will need to be talk and think repeatedly about what happened before you can understand it fully. Allow yourself more time to come to terms with unfairness, blame, or anger. Visit the grave or places where you feel close to the person who died. Looking through photo albums can be helpful.

- Talk with a trusted friend, counsellor or therapist about difficult issues.
- Look at albums and photographs, and hold on to good memories
- Visit the grave or other relevant places from time to time
- Talk about other feelings related to the sudden death
- Many voluntary agencies offer support and experience
- Try to clear up any confusion or unanswered questions

Deal with reminders – unsettling thoughts or images of sudden death can come at random or in response to things that remind you of what happened. These can make you upset, physically and emotionally unsettled, prevent sleep, and interfere with your work. Managing reminders and triggers can give you more stability and a greater sense of emotional control.

- Avoid unnecessary reminders of what happened until you are ready for them.
- Significant dates such as anniversaries or special occasions will remind you of the person who died.
- Prepare for court cases, coroner's investigations, and public interest by finding out what will happen and talking to other people about how you feel. Find out what details will be released at these events and how long they are likely to last.
- Be prepared for media interest in you, your family, or in other cases that may remind you of your own experience.
- Have a plan for dealing with reminders when they occur.
- Be aware that reminders will get weaker and fewer over time, and you will get better at dealing with them.¹

Share the burden – particularly for those in a caring role it is important that you seek support following a sudden death.

- Take time out for yourself
- Have adult company
- Seek out and accept help from others (family, neighbours, agencies, social services).
- Make contact with others in a similar position.
- Have adult interests.

Look to the future – expect new feelings about what happened as you grow older and get to know or understand new information. Keepsakes and anniversaries will always be special to you, and are worth taking care of for the times to come.

- Allow yourself to change your opinions over time
- Hold onto mementoes and keepsakes
- Involve yourself in anniversaries and significant occasions
- Things you enjoyed before may no longer interest you or be available – find new interests and pastimes.
- Be prepared for friends and family to have new questions about the death again in the future
- Be optimistic about the future – although things will not be exactly as they were before, things can and do get better.

¹ *Should you need more information on reminders see the leaflet entitled "Dealing with Intrusions" also available in this series.*

The future

Most of us recover from a sudden death in the family, but there is no such thing as a successful way to grief. There is no timetable for grief; for many people it is a lifelong effect. However, people's most intense reactions are usually in the first two years.

You may find it helpful to clear up any unanswered questions about what happened. It is important for you to feel safe, and get support from family and friends.

However, you might need help dealing with some specific feelings of grief, anger, or anxiety as family and friends will not always be able to help you with these.

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