

Sudden death Information for pupils



Schools Guide

This booklet has been produced by:

The ROYAL
HOSPITALS

EHSSB

Learning Together

SOUTH EASTERN EDUCATION
AND LIBRARY BOARD

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

© SG/03/03



Feelings about the sudden death of someone you know...

You may experience some, none or all of these feelings. These are normal reactions following sudden loss. Although these feelings can be very strong, usually they can be overcome with time and reassurance.

Anxiety

- You may feel more anxious than usual about your safety or the safety of important people in your life. You may want to protect yourself from future trauma or avoid situations in which you feel unsafe or unsettled.
- You may become concerned about crowds, traffic, or safety in general – sometimes in an unreasonable way. Loud noises, sudden movements, or being alone can make people jumpier than they were before. It can be difficult to understand when it happens to you, and you may find it hard to talk to other people about.

Vivid memories

- Some of you may have very vivid dreams (either during the day or at night) about the person who has died or the death. These can seem very real at the time, causing strong feelings. You may notice, for example, that your heart beat speeds up.
- You may be frightened from time to time by very vivid thoughts of the person who died. This is so real that at times you may think you can see, hear, smell or even speak to the person. Don't worry – this is a normal reaction.
- You may become frightened of being back in a traumatic situation (e.g. witnessing a death, hearing the news of a death). This can happen when you are reminded of the incident, when you think about the incident, or sometimes at random. If it happens to you, you may wish to distract yourself with other thoughts or actions. Go and do something that makes you feel safe and relaxed.

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 fear of having nightmares. It is okay to want the light left on, the door left open, or to share a room with someone else when you sleep. You may also be concerned about your safety (or the safety of your house) overnight.

You may want to talk to someone about this or read the leaflet entitled "Sleep disturbance in adults and adolescents" which is part of this series.

Feelings of sadness and longing

- It is normal to feel very sad and to really 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 your life was the way it was before. You will feel you will never have that life again (that it has been changed for good).

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

Mood swings

- You may have mood swings and become easily upset. You may find others have the same mood swings. This can make spending time with friends or family difficult as everyone can react more emotionally or aggressively than they used to.
- You may lose interest in things or activities that you used to enjoy. You may find that these changes affect your choices of friendships, or cause you to become more withdrawn from some people you used to be close to.

These are normal reactions – everyone needs to be given space, time, and patience and these will gradually improve.



Feelings of anger against people or things

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

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

Anger is often related to life being unfair or to a sense of injustice in the world. These are understandable responses following the death of someone you know. It is important that you recognise these feelings, but also that you find an outlet for them which will not create further difficulties (such as 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 may have caused the person's death;
- That you could have done something to prevent it;
- That you wished death or bad luck upon the person who died through some thoughts or words (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 shame or embarrassment. You may feel:

- That you and your family are 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 that the person died. Feelings of guilt, shame, and anger are normal following a death.

Changing personality/behaviour


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

- Isolate yourself and want to be alone more;
- Become very serious;
- Feel useless or struggle to keep control;
- Retreat into a fantasy world or withdraw from others;
- Become more aggressive or more easily provoked;
- Take less care of yourself
- Have difficulty with concentration and memory (become disorganised or forgetful)

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

School Problems

- You may have problems in school or with school work – sometimes these can last a long time.
- You may not be as interested in school as before.
- You may have difficulties with concentration and memory, which make paying close attention to school-work difficult.
- You may wish to think about delaying an examination until a later date. Discuss this with your family and with your teachers.
- You may find you get into trouble in school.
- You may find it difficult to keep friends or get along with teachers. They may find it difficult to understand why you are behaving differently.

- 
- Teachers and other pupils may not know or understand what happened.
 - Other people may make hurtful comments either accidentally or deliberately.
 - Some people in school may know or think they know a lot more about what happened than you are comfortable with.
 - Some people may improve or work harder at school.

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

Dealing with reminders

Strong reminders of a death or trauma can be unsettling if you aren't prepared for them. Sometimes they are predictable (e.g. anniversaries) and sometimes they come at random (e.g. daydreaming). Most often they are started by something ordinary that is associated with the person who died (e.g. hearing their name spoken, seeing the place where they died, hearing music). Taking control of reminders involves developing an awareness of them and the reactions they cause in you, and changing those reactions over time. Most people will be able to do this on their own or with the help of a friend.

- Identify reminders in your life.
- Develop a plan to avoid unnecessary reminders which are unsettling.
- Plan ahead for significant dates such as anniversaries or birthdays.
- Develop a method for dealing with reminders when they arise.
- Provide reassurance that reminders and triggers will become weaker and less frequent over time.

Events such as court cases, coroner's investigations, or media coverage involving you or a traumatic death should be prepared for and discussed. It is helpful for you to know in advance the topics which will be covered at these events, and what details are likely to be discussed. Should you need any more information on reminders see the leaflet of this series entitled "Dealing with intrusions".

Remember

It is important to talk to other people about these feelings, ideally to a friend, parent or family member, someone from school, your GP, or a trusted adult.

Authors:

P. Donnelly	Consultant Clinical Psychologist	The Royal Hospitals, Belfast
G. Connon	Assistant Psychologist	The Royal Hospitals, Belfast

Editorial Group:

N. Rooney	Consultant Clinical Psychologist	The Royal Hospitals, Belfast
A. Healy	Therapist; Director Family Trauma Centre	South and East Belfast HSS Trust
E. Smyth	Senior Educational Psychologist	South Eastern Education and Library Board
M. McCann	Director/Counsellor	Cruse Bereavement Care
T. Costello	Senior Social Worker	North and West Belfast HSS Trust

Acknowledgement/ Source Material: Southern Education and Library Board;
Salford Educational Psychology Service.

What else?

There may be a need, from time to time, for specific help to manage or control certain excessive intrusions or distress. These are best discussed with your GP, health worker, or social services representative, who will be able to consider your options and information available to you. Referral to bereavement/trauma groups and voluntary agencies can also be arranged through these sources.

Professionals guide

Traumatic grief in early childhood

Ages 0-5

Traumatic grief in middle childhood

Ages 5-10

Traumatic grief in adolescence

Ages 10-18

Traumatic grief in adults

Traumatic grief

Anger management

Traumatic grief

Dealing with intrusions

Sleep disturbance in adults
and adolescence

Sleep disturbance

in children under 10 years of age

Self care for workers supporting
the traumatically bereaved

Guidelines for the immediate response
to children and families in traumatic
death situations

Relatives Guide

Dealing with sudden death in early
childhood Ages 0-5

Dealing with sudden death

in middle childhood Ages 5-10

Dealing with sudden death in adolescence

Ages 10-18

Dealing with sudden death for adults

Sudden Death

Anger management

Sudden Death

Dealing with intrusions

Sudden Death

Insomnia and sleep disturbance
in adults and adolescents

Sudden Death

Sleep disturbance

in children under 10 years of age

The Coroner

Schools Guide

Traumatic grief in early childhood

Ages 0-5

Traumatic grief in middle childhood

Ages 5-10

Traumatic grief in adolescence

Ages 10-18

Sudden death

Information for pupils

Individual booklets are available from your local health centre, library or school
The full series can be downloaded from www.royalhospitals.org/traumaticgrief