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GRIEVING A SUDDEN DEATH

By John Kennedy Saynor



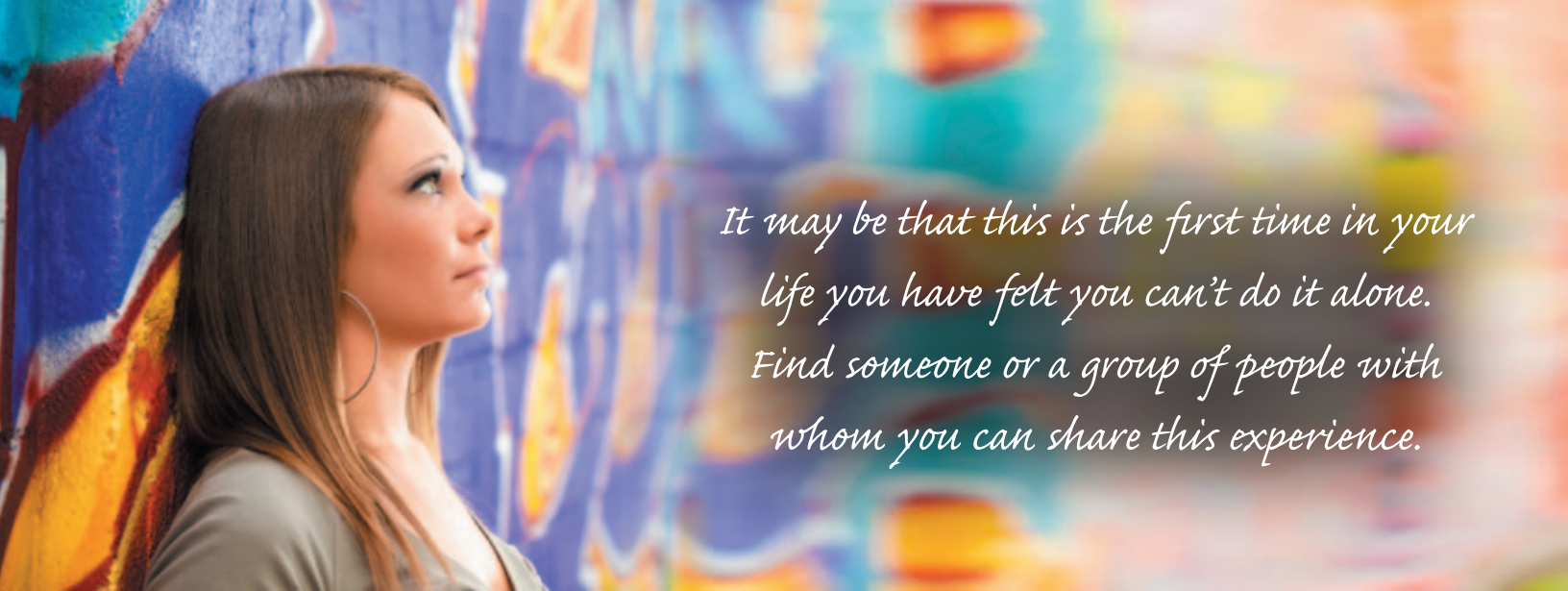
People often ask me “What is more difficult to deal with, death following a sudden death or a lingering illness?” Well, like many questions about grief and how we respond, there is no one, simple answer. There are many factors that affect how we grieve and there are several reasons why a death is sudden. A sudden death may occur as a result of a heart attack, an accident, suicide, murder or miscarriage. What I would like to do in this article is look at some of the things these all have in common. Then I will consider what we can do to help ourselves cope with a sudden death. First, what do these differing causes of sudden death have in common?

Shock We are never completely prepared for a death, no matter the cause, but the shock from a sudden death is especially intense. Shock numbs you, it makes decision making more difficult. It slows down your ability to deal with the reality of the loss. Shock decreases your ability to look into the future with any sense of hope. In short, shock slows down your ability to cope with the loss and to begin to resolve your grief.

Disbelief When there is a lingering illness, the survivors have often had time to begin to think about what life will be like after their loved one has died. When death is unexpected the element of disbelief is very strong and may border on denial. It will take longer – weeks or months – to finally come to the point of being able to say, “I know my loved one has died and is not coming home.”

Questions There will be many questions following a sudden death, one of which is “Why did this have to happen to me or my loved one?” It may take months or even years to get an answer and it may be that the answer is, “There is no answer.” In time you will come to learn to live with that answer.

Regret A sudden death robs you of the opportunity to say or do things that would have been possible if you had known the person was dying. When it isn't possible to rectify those things, we are left to deal with an enormous amount of regret and guilt.



It may be that this is the first time in your life you have felt you can't do it alone. Find someone or a group of people with whom you can share this experience.

Guilt In my opinion, guilt is different than regret in that guilt implies self-blame. “It was my fault we had a fight this morning.” “It is my fault I didn’t insist he go to the doctor with his chest pain.” Guilt is one symptom of grief that is difficult to deal with after a death occurs. With professional help, it can be dealt with and not be a hindrance to your recovery.

Unfamiliar territory When a death involves suicide, murder, or an accident, the police will be involved. There may also be a long drawn out court case. Dealing with these professionals is unfamiliar territory for most of us and will, almost certainly, mean that you will have a delayed and prolonged grief reaction.

Profound sadness Sadness after a sudden death such as suicide may be augmented by thoughts about your loved one dying alone without saying goodbye to the family. You may try to imagine what they were thinking in the moments before they took their own life. All the images and preoccupation with this death will most certainly add to the depth of your sadness.

These are just a few of the responses to your loss that are unique to a sudden death. Do not be alarmed if you see yourself in the above list of symptoms. You are feeling what you should be feeling and in the last part of this article, I will attempt to give you some tips on how you can cope with this death and your grief and how you can begin to rebuild your life.

HELPING YOURSELF RECOVER

Recognize that you are a grieving person.

This is not a time to “be brave” or to “be strong”. You have suffered a serious loss. The way humans respond naturally to any

loss is to grieve. This is going to take time. There is no easy way through grief but to face it one day at a time, recognizing how you are feeling on any given day.

Be honest with young children. This is especially true if the death is from suicide or murder. Although this may be difficult for adults, it is the best path for the children. If you are not honest with them about the cause of death, they will almost certainly find out later in life and begin to wonder what else there was you weren’t honest about.

Reach out for help. It may be that this is the first time in your life you have felt you can’t do it alone. Find someone or a group of people with whom you can share this experience. There are resources out there for you to access in your community. Your funeral director, clergy person or doctor may be able to help you find the right person.

Be aware of your own physical and emotional health. If you have concerns about your physical, emotional or mental health, make an appointment with your family doctor for an assessment.

Gradually begin to reintegrate into life. Although this death is a shock and you will feel disorientated in the early months, resist the temptation to withdraw from your family and friends. You need them more now than ever before. And they need you! Don’t refuse invitations to go out with people. If you do, they will eventually stop inviting you! You don’t want this!

Never lose hope. William Cowper, the English poet, said, “The darkest day, if you live till tomorrow, will have passed away.” If you lose hope, you have lost everything. This journey that you are on is not an easy one. It is one that will take time, determination and energy. But if you take the time and are determined to work through your grief, you will come through it a stronger person with a new vision of what life can be for you.



GRIEVING THE DEATH OF A DIVORCED SPOUSE

In a recent support group that I led, a woman attended whose husband had recently died. On the third week she arrived quite distressed because the man she had divorced several years earlier had died the previous week. After sharing with the group what had happened through many tears, she asked me, “Am I crazy for feeling this way?” My response was, “Absolutely not!”

So in this article I would like to address two subjects related to this topic: “What are the unique factors affecting the grief of a divorced or separated spouse?” and “How can I help myself cope with this loss?”

Before I go any further let me acknowledge that you may be reading this and be one of those for whom the divorce was a case of “good riddance” and you may not feel anything of what I am talking about. There are, however, a great number of people who still have feelings for their divorced spouse and actually maintain a very civil friendship with them and their new spouse or partner. It is for the later group that I am writing this article.

Unique factors affecting the grief of a divorced spouse.

The death of an ex hurts! While it may be true that you couldn’t stand living with your ex anymore, this person shared your bed with you. You had hopes and dreams that were not realized. You may have had children together. You may have maintained a good relationship with this person and recognize that you are sad the marriage failed. You may recognize that you are grieving multiple losses. Allow yourself to grieve!

Family and friends don’t know what to say to you.

This is, unfortunately, true of everyone who is bereaved. People just don’t know what to say and usually offer ridiculous comments like, “Well he or she is better off dead!”

But in all fairness to your friends and acquaintances, they don’t know whether you are sad or glad! People will talk to you if you will talk to them.

You may wonder where you fit into the funeral arrangements.

This will depend on what kind of a relationship you have had with your divorced spouse and his or her new spouse and family. But many families don’t know whether or not to phone you and let you know the person has died. There is confusion over what would happen if you attended a visitation, where you would sit at the funeral if you attended, and whether you would be welcome at a reception afterwards.

How do you support any children that may have come out of your marriage?

Your children who are the children of your divorced spouse will be mourning the death of their father. Some will not, I admit. But it may be difficult to offer them the support they need at this time.

How difficult is it to talk to a new spouse you may have?

Depending on your age, you may have children with your new spouse who may have difficulty understanding why you are feeling the way you are.

You may feel you have not been given all the information surrounding his or her death.

This may leave you with a lot of unanswered questions that will make your journey through this grief more difficult. Try to find some answers.



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How can I help myself cope with this death?

Establish lines of communication with your former spouse's family.

If communication with the family is difficult, there may be at least one person in that family with whom you can communicate. Develop a relationship with that person that opens the lines of communication with the rest of the family. For example, that person may help you understand what the family expects of you at the funeral. That person may also help you discover the details surrounding the death.

Recognize that you are grieving and that it is perfectly normal for you to be doing so. Don't try to stifle your emotions or tell yourself that you are being silly. Grieving is a normal human response to a loss. The more you feel your emotions, the sooner you will be able to move on.

Learn what you can about grieving the death of a former spouse. There are actually chat lines on the Internet

as well as a great deal of information. Go to where you can to receive support. If there is a bereavement support group in your area, make an appointment with the facilitator to see if you would fit into the group.

Forgive. It is important to forgive all those involved in this situation. Forgive your ex spouse for things they said or did that you may have never let go of. Forgive yourself for the things you said or did that you still regret. Forgiveness frees you to move on, to let the past be safely in the past, and to begin to recreate your life.

Forgive but don't forget. That may sound strange to you, but out of every crisis in life there are lessons to be learned. If you haven't already, take time to understand what there is to be learned from the divorce or separation and now the death of your former spouse.

One more thing. Although you may feel saddened and overwhelmed by this death, if you take the time to work this through it, it is possible for your life to be renewed and for you to continue to lead a happy, productive life. Never give up!

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