

MOURNING A SUDDEN DEATH

No time to say “good-bye,” “I’m sorry,” or “I love you.” Mourning for a sudden death is often longer and more intense than for an anticipated death from an illness. Survivors are caught off guard with no time to prepare. They feel shocked, deprived, vulnerable, robbed of the opportunity for final words of love, forgiveness or regret. The period of shock and disbelief is longer than it would be with advance warning.

Accidental death is the number one cause of death among people from fifteen to thirty four years of age. But sudden death can happen to anyone. Apart from murder and suicide, it may be from a heart attack or stroke, an aneurism, or even from unknown allergies such as bee stings. Whatever the case, there is always lots of unfinished business, emotional and practical. The survivors often try to visualize what happened and wonder if the loved one knew what was happening, if she were conscious, if he got any relief from the pain, if she died thinking she was alone. The body may have been severely damaged. The more bloody and broken the body, the more intense the grief will be. Imaginations can be more gruesome than the real thing, and survivors may suffer traumatic memories and dreams for a long time. Having a friend or relative along to view the body and make decisions is helpful.

It is essential that the survivors have sufficient time with the physician to understand what happened and have questions answered. An autopsy is required by law in sudden deaths. Survivors may feel guilt at not being able to protect the victim, for not preventing the death somehow, or for not being there to change the outcome. It is important that the survivors be able to separate legitimate from illegitimate guilt by getting as much information as possible. If a law enforcement person was involved, information from him/her is also essential.

In some cases, survivors may never get answers to their questions. The most difficult grief is not knowing what happened and having to deal with ambiguities. There is anger and frustration, but at whom?

The healing process for survivors involves coming to grips with the suddenness and often the senselessness of death. Joining a support group of persons who have suffered a similar loss, such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving, can help. Talking and writing can help, too. Finally, reaching out to others to prevent similar accidents and deaths can be healing.

Many relatives and friends grieve intensely for several years, and some say they never fully recover. But persons who have had support may find a renewal of energy eighteen to twenty four months after the death because of stabilized eating and sleeping patterns. For survivors, things may not get better, but they will be different, and survivors have choices about how to react, what to say and do and share.

Susan Spurgeon, *Haven Herald*, March 1996