Dealing with sudden loss

What is grief?
Grief is the normal human response to the loss of someone loved and valued. Grief can be painful and overwhelming, and is a process that takes time. Each person feels and expresses grief differently. The circumstances around a loss can have an impact on the experience of grief, and even lead to trauma reactions where there has been a sudden, unexpected loss or suicide.

What to expect after a sudden loss
How someone grieves depends on many things, including personality and coping style, life experience and beliefs. Here are some examples of things that people experience after a sudden loss:

**Emotions**
- Shock & disbelief
- Sadness & tearfulness
- Numbness and/or moodiness
- Loss of interest in or intolerance of others
- Feelings of helplessness & powerlessness
- Anxiety, fear &/or panic
- Guilt and/or relief
- Irritability & frustration, anger & blame
- Lack of motivation
- Feelings of abandonment
- Feeling out of control or that the world is out of control
- Feeling like a burden on others

**Thoughts**
- Confusion & forgetfulness
- Poor concentration & attention
- Racing mind
- Difficulty making decisions
- Thoughts about the person and/or death
- Disturbing and intrusive imagery
- Things feel like they aren’t real
- Flashbacks where images of traumatic event come to mind suddenly or for no apparent reason
- Preoccupation with what happened and/or “why?” “If only...”, “I should have...” or “what if I had...” thoughts
- Worries about being a burden on others

**Behaviour**
- Confusion & forgetfulness
- Engaging in grieving rituals
- Talking about the person who died
- Crying
- Sleeping (more or less than usual)
- Social withdrawal and isolation.
- Easily startled by noises
- Engaging in distraction activities
- Avoidance of situations that remind of traumatic event
- Seeking control over tasks/events
- Increased alcohol and/or drug use

**Relationships**
- Social withdrawal
- Increased conflict
- Increased focus on or avoidance of certain people or places and situations that are a reminder
Physiological
• Change in appetite & sleeping
• Tiredness & fatigue
• Restlessness
• Increased susceptibility to colds
• Headaches
• Racing heart
• Trembling or swearing
• Breathing difficulties
• Muscle ache

Grief reminders
Grief is not something we get over or that ends after a certain period of time. It is instead something people learn to live and carry on with. After a death, grief can be experienced in waves again and again – sometimes even years later. Reminders often bring back the pain of loss. Reminders can be connected to sights, sounds and smells – and this can happen unexpectedly leaving a person feeling overwhelmed with strong emotion. Certain reminders are inevitable, such as the anniversary of death, birthdays, Christmas, holidays or other events he or she would have enjoyed. Even memorial celebrations for others can trigger the pain of your own loss. It is important to remember that these are normal and temporary.

Self-care ideas
Mourning the loss of a close friend or relative takes time, but over time it can also lead to a renewed sense of meaning and purpose. It is important to look after yourself and reach out for help if you need it. Some things that you can do include:

• Connect with others. Don’t do this alone. It is important to connect with others (friends, family or colleagues) who care about you. Allow them to care for you when you need it. Find someone you feel comfortable to talk to. You may be able to work through your grief with the help of family and friends, or you may need extra support. Don’t be afraid to ask.
• Work through your thoughts rather than trying to avoid them. Keep asking ‘why’ until you no longer need to. You may not ever truly know why things happened the way they did but processing these questions can help you move through and past them.
• Don’t let anyone tell you how to feel, including yourself. No one else can tell you when it’s time to “move on” or “get over it.” Let yourself feel whatever you feel without embarrassment or judgment. It’s okay to be angry, to cry, not cry, or even laugh.
• Be true to yourself. Only you know what works for you. Don’t dismiss the things that help you heal, be it a set of beliefs, a religion, faith or traditional/alternative healing techniques.
• Be patient. Understand the healing process takes time and there are no set rules about how long it should take. Everyone is different. Take each day and moment at a time.
• Practice self-care. Be kind to yourself. Do things that bring you enjoyment and comfort, such as listening to relaxing music, massage, a warm bath or meditation. Do things you enjoy or have enjoyed in the past. It is okay to enjoy yourself and laugh when you are grieving.
• Take care of your physical health. Grief can be hard on your body. Looking after yourself includes – eating regular healthy meals, getting plenty of sleep and regular exercise. It also means avoiding alcohol, tobacco, caffeine and other drugs.
• Get moving. Any physical activity is worth it. Exercise can lift you when you’re feeling low. Getting outside in the sunshine is also beneficial. Try to set yourself something to do each day, but be realistic about how much you can achieve.
• Go outside. Spend some time outdoors. Fresh air and sunlight can assist your overall health and wellbeing.
• Find out more. Some people find it helpful to read about grief, loss and coping. There are many online resources (some listed at the end of this information sheet) and books available (ask your local bookstore or librarian). You can also talk to a professional with your local support service.

How to help a person who is grieving
If someone grieving reaches out to you, they have decided they can trust you with their experience. Make time available in a private space to listen to the person and/or if you can’t be a support, help them to identify other people and supports they can rely on. Some things you can do to help a grieving person:

• Listen. Be prepared for any or all reactions. You cannot take these away, but being there, listening and showing you care can be comforting.
• Be patient. The healing process takes time. It can take months or years to overcome loss. Remember that anniversaries or reminders can re-trigger grief.

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• **Be OK with silence.** Don’t feel that you have to talk. Don’t try and fix things or make them go away. Just sit with the person.

• **Practical Support.** Ask the person what they need right now. Offer assistance with accessing information, making essential phone calls, getting medical/psychological support or meeting other responsibilities. Help connect the person with supports and services that they need to access, and processes to enable them to have time and space for grief. You could also do something practical such as offer to make a meal, do the shopping, gardening or washing.

• **Share memories.** Don’t be afraid to talk about the person who died or what they meant to you. Sharing this experience might be helpful to the person.

• **Nurture Relationships.** Keep in touch. Check in with the person a day or two, or a week later. There may be times when your offers are refused, but keep trying. If you don’t know what to say, be honest and say “I don’t know what to say but I am here for you”.

• **Be Kind.** Be kind in your language. The language you use should not judge the way the person died. You also need to be kind to yourself as you may also be affected by the loss and have your own grief to work through.

### When should I or someone I care about get professional help?

A lot of people who experience grief manage this without seeking therapy. There are times where professional support might be helpful. If alcohol and other substances are being used as a main way of coping, a professional can help identify some other coping strategies that will be more helpful in processing and moving through grief. Where there are feelings of guilt, of being burden on others, helplessness, fear, frustration or abandonment, it can be hard to share these with others. A counsellor can help you work through these in a private and confidential way.

### Where can I get more information or help?

**University Counselling Service:**

[utas.edu.au/counselling](utas.edu.au/counselling)

Free personal counselling for students (face-to-face, video, phone, instant chat and email) are available with experienced mental health clinicians between 8.30am and 5.00pm weekdays.

Online bookings: [utas.edu.au/appointments](utas.edu.au/appointments)

Phone: 1800 817 675

After Hours Crisis counselling support phone 1300 511 709 or text 0488 884 168

**Conversations Matter:** [conversationsmatter.com.au/](conversationsmatter.com.au/)

Information and resources for individuals, families, professionals and community groups to help with conversations around suicide.

**Black Dog Institute:** [blackdoginstitute.org.au/](blackdoginstitute.org.au/)

Information and resources for professionals and individuals interested in learning more about mental health and wellness.

**Suicide Call-Back Service:**

[suicidecallbackservice.org.au](suicidecallbackservice.org.au)

National 24/7 service offering free phone and online counselling for people living in Australia affected by suicide. This includes people feeling suicidal, worried about someone, supporting someone or who have lost someone to suicide.

Phone: 1300 659 467


Information and support for anyone impacted by suicide.

Phone 0400 183 490

**Headspace:** [headspace.org.au](headspace.org.au)

Information, resources and support for people 25 years and under. Includes online information, chat and phone support through eheadspace, as well as face-to-face service at a centre near you.

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