

# Dealing with the Death of a Loved One

# (BADGE)

**Victim Assistance Unit  
Denver Police Department  
1331 Cherokee Street  
Denver, Colorado 80204  
(720) 913-6035**

Office Hours are 7:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. daily

The following are some agencies you might need to contact:

1. Denver Coroner's Office  
660 Bannock Street  
Denver, CO 80204  
**(303) 436-7711**  
[www.denvergov.org](http://www.denvergov.org)  
**Click on link to Medical Examiner's Office**
2. Notify life insurance companies. They will require a copy of the death certificate which is available from:  
  
Bureau of Vital Statistics  
605 Bannock Street  
Denver, CO 80204  
**(303) 436-7350**  
[www.cdphe.state.co.us](http://www.cdphe.state.co.us)
3. Contact the Social Security Office to set up an appointment to inquire about benefits: **1-800-772-1213**  
[www.SSA.gov/survivorsplan/index.htm](http://www.SSA.gov/survivorsplan/index.htm)
4. Department of Veterans Affairs  
**1-800-827-1000**  
[www.vba.va.gov/bin.vre/index.htm](http://www.vba.va.gov/bin.vre/index.htm)

## NOTES

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**ADDITIONAL SUPPORT GROUPS AND  
AGENCY TELEPHONE NUMBERS**

## **SUPPORT GROUPS**

**HEARTBEAT.** Support group for anyone who has lost a loved one to suicide. In Denver, call (303) 436-4100 or call Suicide Education & Support Services at 1-970-506-2737.

[www.endsuicide.org/heart2.html](http://www.endsuicide.org/heart2.html)

**HOSPICE OF METRO DENVER.** Variety of support groups. Call (303) 321-2828, ask for the Bereavement Department for information.

[www.denverhospice.org](http://www.denverhospice.org)

**MAAD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving).** Peer counseling for families of victims of drunk drivers. Call 1-800-438-6233 to find a local group.

[www.madd.org](http://www.madd.org)

**POMC (Parents of Murdered Children & Other Survivors of Homicide Victims).** Call 1-888-818-7662 to locate a group in your area.

[www.pomc.org](http://www.pomc.org)

### **JUDY'S HOUSE**

Grief support services for children & teens. Call (720) 941-0331.

[www.judishouse.org](http://www.judishouse.org)

**SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome) PROGRAM.** Support for parents and relatives. Call 1-800-332-1018 in Colorado or 1-800-214-1863 in the US to locate a local group.

[www.sids-network.org](http://www.sids-network.org)

Dealing with the death of a loved one is one of the most difficult experiences you may face in your life. After the initial shock and numbness wear off, you may experience some depression. Your emotions may go up and down, but your pain may be there for a long time. Give yourself time to heal slowly – grieving is an important process. It can also be emotionally draining, confusing and sometimes frightening because many people are unfamiliar with death and the impact associated with it.

At some time in life we all feel loss and must find a way to cope with it. This booklet is intended to help you understand grief.

## **INTRODUCTION**

## **IMMEDIATE RESPONSES TO THE DEATH OF A LOVED ONE**

The most immediate response to the death of a loved one is shock. You may feel numbness, a feeling of being disassociated from your body, or a sense of **not** feeling that keeps the full awareness of the death in the background.

This shock may last for days or weeks and is a buffer so that you are not overwhelmed. It may seem that you are not reacting at all. There is a wide range of responses to the death of a loved one. You may respond in the following ways:

### **SUPPORT GROUPS**

**AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF RETIRED PERSON (AARP).** Offers a number of free services to widows and widowers. Call 1-888-687-2277 to find a local support group.

[www.aarp.org/griefandloss](http://www.aarp.org/griefandloss)

**CARING FRIENDS.** Support group for widows and widowers ages 20 to 45 and their children. Call Marty (303) 989-5960 for information.

**COMPASSIONATE FRIENDS.** For parents who have lost a child through death. Call 1-877-969-0010.

[www.compassionatefriends.org](http://www.compassionatefriends.org)

**EXEMPLA HEALTH CARE'S ANSWERLINE.**

Information on support groups. Call (303) 425-2929 for information.

**EXEMPLA LUTHERAN HOSPICE.**

Bereavement support groups for families dealing with the loss of a loved one. Contact the chaplain at (303) 467-4979.

**FOOTPRINTS.** Support groups for all types of death loss. St. Mary's Church, 6853 S. Prince, Littleton, CO 80120. Call Rose Marie (303) 794-3844 or Caroline (303) 794-5818.

**WHERE TO GO FOR  
HELP AND SUPPORT**

## **WHERE TO GO FOR HELP:**

Often in times of distress we turn to our families for help. It is important to remember that your family members are experiencing feelings similar to your own. They may be so involved with trying to cope themselves, that they don't have the energy to help you. You may not be able to give them emotional support either. Don't feel that you have to be strong for others. Take time to heal yourself.

Sometimes friends and relatives may not seem to understand. They may tell you not to dwell in the past or to "get on with your life." These comments are usually said in an effort to help, but may make you feel isolated and alone.

There are places you can go for help. There are counselors who understand grief and who are there to let you talk, cry and/or share your experience. They can help you find ways to cope with your loss. There are also support groups with people who have suffered a similar loss. Don't be reluctant to ask for help.

### **Reach out for support.**

- Physical, mental and/or emotional numbness.
- Feeling of unreality.
- Hyperactivity.
- Disorganized thinking.
- Chest pain.
- Outbursts of crying.
- Being passive – not feeling.
- Thinking about not wanting to live.
- Shortness of breath / tightness of throat.

You are unique and your response will be unique.

## **IMMEDIATE RESPONSES TO THE DEATH OF A LOVED ONE**

## **STAGES OF GRIEF**

Grief is a reaction to a significant loss. Most people who have lost a loved one, report going through several stages of grief. These stages vary in length for each individual. Any feelings you have are normal. Remember that the intensity of these feelings will not last forever.

The "impact stage," involving shock, disbelief and denial, is the first stage. You may feel numb, paralyzed, confused or helpless. It is too soon to accept the depth of your loss.

Next, the reality of your loss begins to sink in. This can be very upsetting. You may feel overwhelmed by guilt, anger and/or depression. You may feel vulnerable. You might find yourself directing anger at the nearest person, whether appropriate or not (your spouse, children, doctor, clergy, God or even the dead person him/herself).

- Work can help to ease your mind, but be careful to do only as much as feels comfortable and no more.
- You will probably need more rest than usual.
- Ask for help with daily tasks. People want to be helpful.
- Reach out to others. Don't isolate yourself. Accept support and understanding from your friends, family and fellow employees.

There is no need to overprotect yourself. Understand that most of your energy is being used in the healing process.

## **SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR HEALING**

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Take care of yourself. Don't expect too much. Take some time to let your body and emotions rest. Take care not to overextend yourself.

- Eat a balanced diet.
- Stay away from alcohol and tranquilizers – they will only delay the healing process.
- Give yourself permission to pamper yourself or to be pampered.
- Take baths, walk in the park, read a book, get a massage, listen to music, and/or go to a movie. Do whatever makes **you** feel better.

Your mind may wander, making it difficult to read, write or make decisions. Sleep can be difficult, leaving you tired and less able to deal with everyday matters. Your eating habits may change. You may also be more susceptible to minor aches and illnesses. You may have an irresistible urge to get away, a fear or dread of being alone or a heightened fear of danger.

Remember that any or all of these feelings/reactions are normal and that they will not last forever. These stages can be experienced in any order, and also over and over again. Most individuals will move beyond this stage of anger and depression into the acceptance or recovery stage with time. This does not mean that you will forget your loved one or that the pain disappears completely. But you do slowly heal and start to break the strong emotional ties with the past and focus on the present and future. You become aware of sources of strength within yourself and decide to move on with your life.

## **STAGES OF GRIEF**

## TYPES OF RESPONSES

When the numbness/shock wears off, you may experience the full impact and pain of your loss.

**EMOTIONAL RESPONSES** – You may experience any of the following: crying, feelings of being overwhelmed, anger, sadness, guilt, loneliness, helplessness, acute suffering, emptiness, hopelessness, despair, panic, depression, bitterness, self-pity, resentment, abandonment, desire to withdraw, etc.

**PHYSICAL RESPONSES** – Your body may react to grief with: numbness, fatigue, exhaustion, dizziness, blurred vision, headaches, digestive problems, nausea, diarrhea/constipation, weight change, tightness in the throat, difficulty breathing, tightness or pain in the chest, sleep disturbance, blood pressure changes, decrease in resistance to illness, lack of muscular strength, a feeling of emptiness, loss of interest in sex, etc.

**CHOICES** – Remember you have choices and options. In making decisions you may gain some feeling of control in the situation. Some questions need to be addressed immediately:

- Do you want a funeral or memorial service?
- Where do you want to hold the service?
- What can you comfortably afford?
- Do you want burial or cremation?
- Will there be a viewing or visitation?
- Do you want an open casket?
- Do you want to write the obituary?
- Who do you want to write the eulogy?
- Do you want a memorial or flowers?
- What music would comfort you?

**VIEWING THE BODY** – Do what feels comfortable. This may help in the acceptance of the death and for others it may feel awkward. It is also a time of saying goodbye to your loved one. Viewing the body often makes the death a reality and triggers open expression of grief. The viewing can be done in the days before the service, as well as at the service.

**Remember you do have choices.**

## FINAL ARRANGEMENTS

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In this time of loss, making decisions about the way you choose to honor your loved one may be difficult. If the death is sudden and plans have not been made, you can still make solid choices. The funeral or service can be an important ritual acknowledging the life and death of your loved one. It may be useful to understand that the planning may be difficult/painful.

### **Important things to remember:**

**FAMILY MEETING** – Decide together the most appropriate way to honor and remember your loved one.

**SUPPORT** – The funeral or memorial service is an occasion for support by family, friends and the community.

**CHILDREN** – Should you include them? Yes, if they are willing to participate. Grief is a family affair. Being included in the plans and attending the service will allow the children to express their feelings. Be honest and answer questions as they ask them. The fear of the unknown is greater than the known.

**MENTAL RESPONSES** – As your mind attempts to take in your loss, you may experience confusion, decreased self-esteem, lack of concentration, denial, a sense of unreality, detachment, loss of control, insecurity, disorganized thinking, “If onlys” and regrets, hostility, unfairness of the situation, searching for the deceased, thinking you are going insane, thinking constantly of your loved one, thoughts of dying, dreams of the deceased, etc.

**SPIRITUAL RESPONSES** – In your need to find a meaning related to your loss you may feel anger at God or a higher being, and a need to question “Why did this happen?” You may question, temporarily abandon or change your belief system. You may become more religious than in the past or search for answers about the meaning of life and death.

These feelings and responses may come in waves, may vary in length and/or intensity and are part of the grieving process.

## TYPES OF RESPONSES

## REACTIONS TO LOSS

At times you may seem fine and then, for no apparent reason, the pain may wash over you like a wave and knock you down. Maybe a sight, smell or sound that you didn't even recognize will trigger that wave of pain. Let it be there, it will subside.

Lowered self-esteem may be a result of feeling that you must have done something bad to deserve this kind of pain and loss.

**DETACHMENT** – Feeling detached from yourself and others is common during the grieving process. You may feel empty and disconnected – that you are a “shadow of your former self.” Know that this sensation is normal.

**DENIAL** – Denial can manifest itself in expressions such as, “This just can't be true!” or the feeling that it's all a bad dream and you'll soon wake up and all will be well.

- Let people know that you need someone to continue to listen to you, even though you may be retelling or repeating your story.
- If this is accurate, tell family and friends you will need more calls after several months when the reality sets in and the loneliness begins.
- It's okay to cry, get angry or express your emotions with family and friends.
- Remember to take your time when making decisions and arrangements.
- If you have children, ask their friends, teacher and/or coaches to help you support them.

## COPING WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS

## **COPING WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS**

Friends and family may feel inadequate and they may not know how to support you in your grief. How can you help them to help you?

- If you feel comfortable, let them know that it is helpful to talk about your loved one. Memories are precious and need to be shared.
- If someone offers to help, give him/her specific tasks for which you have no energy (i.e., errands, bringing in dinner, answering phones, etc.) See if someone is willing to coordinate these tasks.

**GUILT** – You may feel guilty. Grief often involves guilt. “If onlys” and “I should have” may be swimming around in your head. Express your feelings, know that all relationships have their difficult moments and shortcomings. Forgive yourself and remember the loving fun-filled times too.

**ANGER** – You may be feeling anger at your loved one for dying and leaving you. You may know that this is unreasonable, but you still feel angry. It is normal to feel anger at someone for dying, even if s/he had no control over dying.

**Remember, everyone reacts differently to grief. Give yourself all the time you need to heal.**

## **REACTIONS TO LOSS**

## **REACTIONS OF CHILDREN**

It is impossible to predict how an individual child will react to the death of a loved one, and there can be many, varied responses. Two responses are insecurity and distrust. The child may think that if a loved one deserts (dies) him/her others may too. Some children fear that they themselves will disappear (die). S/he needs to be reassured that there is no reason to think this will happen. The child needs an extra amount of love, support and affection.

Another response is bodily distress. Children may not be able to sleep, may have more nightmares, lose interest in eating, may wet the bed and/or may have trouble at school.

Many children will show an unending curiosity about death and ask questions repeatedly. It is best to answer these questions honestly and openly to the best of your ability.

It is common for children to feel very guilty about family death, especially of a sibling or parent. Children have difficulty separating their thoughts and acts. They may think their own bad thoughts caused a person to die. Sometimes, they may act badly to get attention or to get the punishment they think they deserve.

Children may not show obvious grief. They may simply imitate the dead person in play activity, and seem unconcerned. Remember that this reaction is normal also.

Regardless of the individual child's reaction, s/he needs to feel safe and loved. There is so much happening at the time of a death that children sometimes are forgotten. It is important to include children in your grief. Let your child see your feelings so s/he understands that it is okay to feel hurt, angry, lonely or sad. It is best to be honest about the death and to share your true feelings about what happens when we die. Saying the dead person has "taken a journey" or "gone to sleep" can cause confusion. Honest, direct explanations plus a lot of love and reassurance will help your child(ren) deal with death.

## **REACTIONS OF MEN AND WOMEN**

Men and women often deal with feelings differently. Society encourages women to openly express themselves while encouraging men to "be strong." Women may want to talk about their grief. Men may want to keep their feelings inside and focus their energy on work. These differences may make it difficult for husbands and wives to support each other. Communication, trust and acceptance of differences can help.

## **REACTIONS OF CHILDREN, MEN AND WOMEN**