

# *Family and Caregiver Education*

## BEREAVEMENT

### **Coping with Sudden and Unanticipated Loss**

When a loved one dies in a sudden or unexpected way, our world implodes. We often feel lost, numb and full of emotions at the same time. We cannot grasp why, and it can be both shocking and impossible to believe at the same time. Other common reactions can be disorganization, disbelief, anger, physical symptoms, mood swings, guilt, feelings of isolation and being stuck and helplessness.

When we feel lost and directionless, even the smallest decision feels like a huge mountain to climb. As we are still trying to grasp what has happened, we are often expected to make important decisions we in no way feel capable of making. This can increase the feeling of unreality and create more trauma and uncertainty. Having a trusted friend or family member to rely on during this highly emotional time is one of the best ways to navigate the immediate decision-making that can occur.

### **Disenfranchised Grief**

Disenfranchised grief is often a by-product of a sudden loss. We may not feel we can talk about the death with others or that others will understand and support our loss because of the nature of the loss. Suicide, an overdose, a loved one dying in the commission of a crime, a medical illness such as AIDS or even a person in a long-term coma are all examples of disenfranchised grief. It is characterized by intense feelings of loss and abandonment — and the idea that others will not support us in our grief because of the way in which the death occurred.

If the death is violent (murder, traumatic accident, suicide, etc.), law enforcement and the courts are often involved. This can prolong or may even temporarily halt the grieving process while the survivor faces the possibility of the death being unresolved, for an extended period of time. There is often an autopsy, and the knowledge of what has happened to the body adds another layer of grief. In order to resume a semblance of their own life, the person may put their grief “on hold” while many issues work their way through the courts. Seeking out professional help to navigate feelings of anger, guilt and extreme loss can assist a person in moving forward when they feel stuck and alone. Support groups are another way to find others who may be experiencing a similar type of loss and may aid in processing many of the complicated feelings arising from this type of sudden loss.

**Bereavement Services**

**(602) 530-6970**

## Managing Your Grief

Use Your Support System: This might be a family member, friend, support group or even a stranger who has suffered a similar loss. There are many organizations that support individuals in their grief journey. Websites such as [sudden.org](https://www.sudden.org) (any sudden death), [compassionatefriends.org](https://www.compassionatefriends.org) (death of a child), [asfp.org](https://www.asfp.org) (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention), [hov.org](https://www.hov.org) (open groups for loss), [griefhealing.com](https://www.griefhealing.com) (resources and support for many types of loss) can offer information and support while you grieve.

Contact a Professional If Needed: It is OK to ask for help. A professional counselor can help you process your feelings and act as a guide to support you on your grief journey. In addition, they can assist you with the trauma of sudden loss. If you are in crisis, please dial 988 to get immediate help.

Be Patient With Yourself: Each person has their own timeline for grief. Many factors work to shorten or lengthen this timeline, including the type of loss, the closeness of the person to you, your own coping skills and many other factors. Sudden loss can extend our grieving process and it is OK — even desirable — to be patient as you cope with the physical and emotional effects of that grief.

Create a Daily Routine for Yourself: Many times, our lives change so significantly that our normal routines do not exist anymore, especially initially. It's important to have some type of daily routine to give ourselves purpose and a reason to get out of bed. It is OK to start slow and not take on too much responsibility at first.

Seek Out Ways to Calm and Soothe Yourself: Grief requires a tremendous amount of emotional energy and often leaves us feeling exhausted, even when we are not doing anything physical. Some people need time off work, others want to keep busy in whatever way they can. Seeking out new ways to cope with your emotions, utilizing family, friends and pets for support, allowing yourself to have quiet time, journaling your emotions, adding light physical exercise daily, and giving yourself grace during this difficult time will help you process your grief in healthy ways.

There is no “one-size-fits-all” for grieving. The path we follow will be different from someone else's path and it is important to honor your instincts and do what works for you. Your grief is unique and the time it takes to navigate your feelings and slowly patch together your broken heart is unique to your grief journey.

Visit [hov.org/grief-support](https://hov.org/grief-support) for more information.