



## When a Death Comes Unexpectedly

By Larry A. Platt

Every death creates a special pain unique to each survivor. Yet death that comes without warning can leave an especially terrible grief.

Such a sudden and instant loss of a loved one is devastating in its impact. Initially, you feel only shock and numbness. This can't be true! You imagine walking from this nightmare to find the world still filled with all the people that you love. This feeling of unreality can persist even after the rituals surrounding the death.

Especially if your loved one met with violent death, you find your sadness and rage at this senseless injustice too great for your spirit to contain. You feel overwhelmingly guilty at not having been able to protect your loved one, however unrealistic such thoughts might be. You feel extremely vulnerable and powerless. The depth and chaos of your feelings may even convince you that you are "going crazy."

### Working your way through

Your experience of grief after an unexpected death can be so terribly agonizing that you feel powerless to stop its flow. Yet, though it may not seem possible at the moment, you can work through your grief—moving beyond the trauma of the loss of your love while still preserving the bond between you.

■ ***Don't be afraid of your feelings.*** Losing a loved one often evokes emotions the survivor has never felt before. Especially because of the circumstances of the death you are mourning, the feelings of grief will be some of the most intense you will ever encounter.

These are not the feelings you ordinarily experience in everyday life. As you feel intense emotion—sadness, anger and possibly even revenge, fear, loss of control—you may think your reactions are normal. While your emotions may be very strong and enduring, they are nonetheless a normal part of the acute grief associated with an unanticipated death.

■ ***Bring closure to unfinished business.*** Following the unexpected loss of a loved one, you may have a need to bring closure to your relationship with that person. Thoughts and feelings you never fully shared with the deceased fill you with a sense of incompleteness.



If this sense of incompleteness continues, you need to address your unfulfilled relationship. In order to articulate your thoughts and feelings, you might try writing letters to the person who has died, keeping a personal journal, or speaking directly to the lost loved one. Such activities can help you to resolve the unexpressed feelings that can be so pronounced following a sudden death.

***How you grieve depends on a number of things: the way you learned to cope with stress in your life before this tragedy; the quality of the relationship you had with the person who was killed; the circumstances under which your loved one was killed; the success you have dealing with the criminal justice system, insurance companies, and the myriad of other systems you will be forced to deal with in the aftermath of your tragedy; your religious beliefs and ethnic customs; and the emotional support your family and friends.***

■ ***Find support through sharing.*** In the darkness of despair, you might forget that there really are others who care for you if you will let them. You may not want others to see you distraught. If you reveal the magnitude of your loss to those close to you, you fear you will bring them pain as they see you suffer. So you might tend to isolate yourself, seeking to conceal your grief.

Yet the supportive presence of those who live on and care about you can be your greatest source of healing. Try to set aside any natural reluctance to reveal personal pain, and allow your circle of caring friends and family to gather around you in this critical need.

You will experience a liberation of your emotions when you outwardly express your innermost fears and agony. Such sharing not only expresses the pain, but also rebuilds your trust in loving relationships with others.

*"The measure of life, after all, is not its duration, but its donation."  
-Peter Marshall*

■ ***Be patient with yourself.*** When something hurts so deeply, it's natural to seek relief. You want to escape from the continuing endurance test that the struggle with grief imposes. Yet, despite your best efforts, the slow and agonizing process of grief may seem to continue unabated, and you become desperate and frustrated with the unrelenting sameness of your hurt.



Again. you might begin to worry something is wrong with you, fearing you have gone beyond normal limits and lost control. Grief, however, is a process that does not end quickly or automatically-or even predictably. The fault is not in you. When you find yourself doubting your capacity to recover, be patient and realize that the grief process, while lengthy, ultimately does provide relief.

■ **Seek new routines.** The memories of the one you have lost will be with you throughout your life. The dates, places, and bits from the past that remind you of your loved one will continue to have the power to evoke your grief.

Yet, as painful as these connections may be now, they will slowly merge into a blend of pleasurable remembrances and poignant reminders. Over time, the reminders will gradually decrease, though the ones that remain may still at times rekindle your pain with the same intensity as in the early phases of grief.

On the most difficult days, try to establish some new routines. The changes need not be radical. The addition of new rituals or activities during the holidays or on the days filled with special meaning can help you to maintain the memory of your loved one while still embarking on a new chapter in your life.

■ **Let yourself feel good again.** You may have trouble imagining that you could ever feel joy again. It almost seems wrong to laugh, have fun or enjoy life when someone you love has died. Some people even feel that they must suffer in order to prove how much they cared for the one who is gone.

Happiness is never a betrayal of love, however. Remind yourself of your reasons for living. You have a future worth enduring for, and you are allowed to feel a renewed sense of purpose and pleasure in your life.

Because you feel so diminished by the death of the one you loved, you may think you have nothing to offer to those around you. Yet your experience is of immeasurable value. You now know the powerful truth of what it is to feel the pain of the loss of love. You are especially able now to minister to others who face the same devastating loss.

You also hold the precious knowledge of how important love can be and how vital it is as a source of joy in life—yet how easy it is to take love for granted and overlook the abundance of love that surrounds you. Sharing that truth can enlarge the lives of everyone.

■ **Draw upon the power of prayer.** In your struggle with loss, you may sometimes feel as though you are completely alone. Yet no matter how abandoned you feel, God is present in your life. God has never stopped loving you or the one who died. God is not passively observing your agony; God feels the depth of your pain. God wants to share your burden of sorrow and guide you along the pathway to healing.



In prayer you can express your sense of desperate loss, your anger at the injustice of this sudden death, your helplessness. and your need for God's healing. Within your covenant with God, you can share the darkest despair and anger and hurt in your heart and let God lead you to hope and understanding and peace.

### **Dealing With Violent Death**

***Stabilizing can take much longer when the death was a violent one. Beware of developing unrealistic expectations of yourself. Your worst times usually are not at the moment a tragic event takes place. You're in a state of shock then. Often you slide "into the pits" four to seven months after the event—the time when most people expect you to be "over" your loss.***

***When people ask you how you're doing, don't always say "fine." Let some people know how terrible you feel. Take time to lament, to experience being a victim. Beware of allowing yourself to be "put on a pedestal" by others who tell what an inspiration you are because of your strength and your ability to cope so well. If they only knew!***

### **Take Heart**

As agonizing as life's journey is right now, without your loved one, the path to adjustment will slowly become a kinder walk. Take comfort in realizing that the pain of your loss would not be intense if your love had not been so strong. Take heart in knowing how deeply you loved in the time you had together. Gradually replace thoughts of loss with memories of love. Recall as many moments of pleasure as moments of pain.

Coming in terms with your grief in this way does not mean you will forget your loved one. You will have that person with you forever; a part of you will always remain connected to that person, that time. Yet there is much to do with the rest of your life. Take hope in knowing that the lessons of loss will lead to a fuller understanding of the meaning of life.

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