

Name

**When the Death Was Sudden**

***by Susan Smith and Sherry Williams White***

**What you want to understand to help your friend after a sudden death**
Sudden deaths have their own set of obstacles for the grieving person – obstacles which you want to understand if you are to help your friend grieve a sudden loss. Here’s an overview of the complications arising from sudden deaths.

Sudden deaths are those that occur without warning. Sudden medical deaths may result from a heart attack or aneurysm; sudden traumatic deaths may be caused by a car wreck, suicide or homicide.

With no period of anticipation before the death, this grief probably is overwhelming to your friend. Quite likely, your friend had no chance to say goodbye to her loved one and she may have unfinished business with that person. In addition, she may be having more trouble than a bereaved person usually has in coming to fully grasp the reality of her loss. You may hear her saying over and over again, “But he was just here yesterday.”

This type of death is also difficult to come to terms with because it most often does not seem to make any sense. Your friend probably will want to obsessively reconstruct the events or situation preceding the death in an attempt meant to make sense of it. This is evidence of his need to understand what happened. One of the most helpful things you can do is to listen to him, no matter how many times he needs to go over things.

Another factor that affects how your friend will grieve is her experience of new and overwhelming fears. Until this point, she probably has been able to find security in the normal human contention that “bad things won’t happen to me.” Now that she has experienced a sudden death, however, she no longer believes this and can be overcome with the fear that follows.

These three factors related to a sudden death – feeling overwhelmed, reconstructing the events, and facing new fears – all add to your friend’s sense of things being out of control. Now, more than ever, your friend needs to feel like he is in control of some aspect of his life. And this is a place where you can help.

One terrific way for your friend to regain control of some part of his life is to take good care of himself physically. This is not just about being healthy, which will strengthen him as he grieves, but is about having control of his choices. Your friend did not choose for his child to die tragically, but he can choose to drink lots of water each day, to walk for relaxation, or to get enough sleep. It is simple, but profound.

For a grieving person, however, taking care of himself can be absolutely overwhelming. Your friend will need you to help him: ask him to play a round of golf or take a walk. Buy him a special mug as a way of encouraging him to drink plenty of water. Take him to dinner or have him over for a healthy meal every week.

In addition to needing more control in life, your friend needs NOT to compare herself to others who are mourning a loss. Everyone grieves differently according to their personality, health, age, attitude, etc. It is especially important, however, that your friend not compare herself to someone grieving a death that was not sudden. The grief of a sudden death is usually more difficult and moves more slowly than that of an anticipated death, for the reason already discussed here. You friend needs more time to grieve, and needs you and the rest of her friends to allow her that.

Finally, your friend, like everyone else experiencing a sudden loss, will no doubt find himself grappling with great feelings of guilt. He will be consumed with “if only” thoughts: If only I had called him. If only I hadn’t been angry. Again, these statements actually are a way for your friend to understand and then control the situation. If he can figure out what he should or should not have done this time, this kind of tragedy will never happen again.

A good way to help with this is to be the person to whom your friend can talk out his “if only” thoughts. Test out the reality of these thoughts by playing them out. What would have happened if you had called him? What would have happened if you had not been angry?

Similarly, your friend may be looking for someone else to blame for the death: a doctor, the driver of a car, etc. Again, this is normal, but dangerous. Help your friend to be careful where she places the blame; sometimes blame tears apart families when they need each other the most, or destroys other, sometimes innocent, lives.

Within the realm of sudden losses are traumatic losses such as suicide, homicide, or accidental death. These have even more issues involved that complicate your friend’s grief.

For instance, suicide is often considered avoidable. For that reason, your friend may have an enormous sense of guilt, as well as a sense of having been rejected by the person who completed suicide. It is not easy, but it is important, to help your friend see that he is not responsible for a decision another person has made.

It also is normal for your friend, a survivor of suicide, to think that she is going to complete suicide, too. It will help her to know that research has shown that survivors of suicide survivors actually find the suicide of their loved one to be a strong deterrent to self-destructive actions.

Finally, death by suicide, accident, or homicide may include involvement with the legal system. This greatly slows down the grieving process; waiting for an inquest, police report, or legal resolution requires your friend to keep the death issues active in his mind and slows the progression of grieving. You can help your friend by going through the process with him, showing up at court, covering for him at work, or helping him keep track of dates and appointments. Many communities have advocates for survivors of these type of deaths caught up in legal issues. You also may help by locating this support and making it available to your friend.