

When someone you  
love dies suddenly,  
or too soon in their life

# Sudden



Help after a sudden bereavement

Sudden is a free, confidential, charity service when someone you love dies suddenly, or too soon in their life.

Sudden is also for people who are caring for suddenly bereaved people.

email: [help@sudden.org](mailto:help@sudden.org)

info: [www.sudden.org](http://www.sudden.org)

# Sudden

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# This book is for you

This book is for you if someone you love, or more than one person you love, has died suddenly, or too soon in their life.

They may have died because of

- a sudden medical reason, or terminal illness
- injuries, caused by something that happened
- suicide

This book is also for you if you are caring for someone bereaved.

This book aims to help you cope and protect your mental and physical wellbeing.

This book is based on the experiences of many people bereaved in these ways, and what helped them.

Sudden provides help and support when someone dies suddenly or too soon.

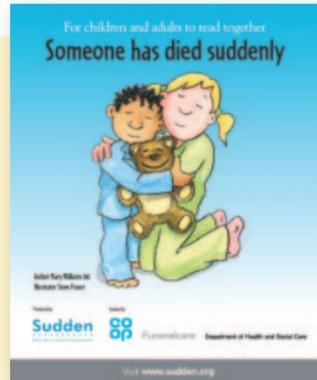
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# Help for children or young people

If a child or young person is bereaved, or has died, there are family bereavement support services for you.

Sudden can send you a free children's picture book about sudden bereavement. It explains important things children need to know, in plain and kind words and pictures.



# Share this book

Sharing this book may help you,  
and others.

Sharing this book with family or friends may help you to support each other, whatever you, or they, are feeling or thinking.

Sharing this book with someone else in your community, such as a GP, employer, or teacher, may also help them to help.

To order more free copies of this book, go to [www.sudden.org](http://www.sudden.org).

People often have wonderful qualities that go unnoticed in everyday life and which may be of great help now.

# If you, or someone else, is at risk

If health or safety is at risk at this time, for whatever reason, it is important to get the help you need.

Health and safety is at risk if someone is

- poorly, or not being properly cared for
- feeling threatened or being hurt by someone else
- having suicidal thoughts

Talk to your GP, as soon as possible, to get help.

If it is an emergency, dial 999.

Call Samaritans any time, day or night, 116 123.

# Immediate practical challenges

You may be facing immediate practical challenges and do not need to face them alone.

These could be challenges you faced already in your life, that feel harder now.

Some people face new challenges, due to the death of someone who provided income, or who provided help by caring for you or someone else.

Common challenges following any death include registering it, funeral arrangements, and dealing with a will or finances.

Sometimes a death brings other challenges, such as a post-mortem examination or police investigation.

Some bereavements mean you need help from lawyers.

Visit the Sudden website for more help and information.

# Shock, emotions and thoughts

As well as feeling very sad, it is common to suffer shock and have other emotions and thoughts.

The following pages explain shock, common emotions and thoughts, and basic ways to cope.

You may experience some, or all, of these things, or other things not listed. How you react is normal for you.

Some people feel they need to talk to someone confidentially about how they are feeling, as well as people they know.

Your GP can help you find someone to listen and support you.

You can also call Samaritans any time, day or night, 116 123.

# Shock

People in shock react in unpredictable ways, often at different times, in ways unfamiliar to them.

People may feel they cannot breathe properly, or go quiet, or scream, or moan. People may shake, or struggle to move. People may feel all kinds of heightened emotions.

Shock reactions can feel powerful, overwhelming, frightening. Understanding this is due to shock can help people cope.

It is easy to make mistakes when in shock. It is important to stay somewhere safe, warm, keep hydrated (with water or warm drinks) and have people around you.

It is important to not drive, nor do anything else that requires concentration and carries risks.

## I can't believe it has happened

Some people feel bewilderment. It is hard to believe a death has happened.

It is common to talk about a person as if they are still alive, or to feel that they may come back at any moment.

## At night

It may be particularly hard to bear at night, when tired, or if alone, or if people around you are sleeping.

## In the morning

It is common to dream that someone is still alive. This can be upsetting on waking and realising again that they are not.

This realisation can feel like another shock.

It may seem so unfair – 'why has this happened to me?' is a common thought.

## I can't do anything, can't concentrate, nor talk well

It can feel hard to get on with normal tasks. Even simple things, such as getting dressed, or doing the washing up, may feel hard.

It is common to feel unable to concentrate, and to struggle to remember things.

Some people find it hard to speak well. Some people stutter or muddle up words.

This may feel frustrating and upsetting, particularly if there is something you need to do.

Be kind to yourself. Only do one thing at once. Give yourself more time than normal to do things.

People are often glad to help with practical tasks.

Keep a list of what needs doing, including what could be done by someone else. For example, going to the shops. Visit the Sudden website for more information about finding help with everyday tasks.

## I feel tense or defensive

It is common to feel wound up. Some bereaved people feel guarded.

It can feel too hard to talk about what you are going through, particularly if you are worried people might ask questions or say things that may feel invasive, or might upset you in other ways.

Small challenges, previously taken in your stride, may easily upset you more than normally.

Feeling tense or defensive can be exhausting.

Crying can help many people. It can be better to express feelings than to hold back the tears.

## If only...

'If only...' is a common and particularly painful thought process.

Some people wish they had told a person who died how much they love them, or showed them more love.

Some people find they mull over the circumstances leading up to a death repeatedly, thinking what could have been done differently to stop it happening.

Thoughts like these can sometimes lead to feelings of guilt or shame that can be hard to explain to others, particularly if people know there is nothing to feel guilty about.

## I am worried I will forget a person who has died

It is normal for many bereaved people to worry that they will forget precious memories of their loved ones. It is common to want to hear a loved one's voice, or experience how they felt or smelled.

This longing for a person who has died may feel heart-breaking.

You may find it helps to memorialise your loved one. You might choose to:

- write down memories about your loved one and how they were important to you
- frame and display photos of your loved one, or make a digital library on a computer hard drive of pictures and videos
- store things that remind you of them, in a memory box

You may want to start a ritual. For example, a regular walk to a special place that helps you feel calm, such as a bench or tree, where you think about your loved one.

Some people find it helps to share memories. You may wish to set up an online tribute page, where lots of people can load up their memories.

There are more ideas at  
[www.sudden.org](http://www.sudden.org)

You may want to memorialise in different ways, at different times, over a long time, rather than all at once.

## If people say the wrong thing

Sometimes well-meaning people say things that may feel hurtful, such as 'you'll get over it'.

They may talk about their own bereavements, or someone else's bereavement, when you do not want to listen to someone else's story.

They may talk about how they felt when bereaved, when you feel very differently.

These things may feel upsetting, particularly if people are talking about a bereavement that you consider was less distressing.

This book can help people to be thoughtful of your needs.

If you don't feel able to show someone this book, you may find it easiest, at this time, to make a gentle excuse to leave a conversation that is upsetting you and seek support elsewhere.

## If people ignore you

Some bereaved people experience being avoided by people they know.

This can happen because people are afraid they might say the wrong thing, or don't know how they can help.

Or they might not know you have been bereaved.

You may feel that other people affected by the death are unfairly getting more support than you. This can feel painful - as though people are not recognising the effect of the bereavement on you, or that you are being rejected.

Turn to page 39 for our advice for other people, to help them to help you, better.

## I feel angry or blame someone for something

Some bereaved people have feelings of anger or blame.

Some people feel this way about a person who has died – for creating such a big hole in other people's lives.

Some people feel this way about someone who may have caused a death, or who perhaps could have done something to prevent a death.

For people who do not normally feel angry, nor blame others, nor feel defensive, these thoughts may feel particularly distressing. It may help to share them confidentially. If you need to talk to someone, you can call Samaritans any time, day or night, 116 123.

## I can't face the world yet

Some bereaved people find they struggle to face the world again. They don't want to go to places where they might come into contact with others. They don't want to talk to people they don't know, or even some people they do know.

It is normal to worry that it will all be too hard to talk to people.

It is also common to feel nervous, or jumpy, and find loud noises distressing.

It may feel easier to stay at home.

It is normal, and OK at this time, to avoid situations that could become overwhelming. It is sensible to protect yourself at this time.

It is also important to have time outside, if you can, and have time with others you trust.

Small steps can help. For example, going for a gentle walk with someone you know.

## Plans are ruined. I feel lonely and the future seems dark

Plans for the future are often ruined when someone we love dies suddenly or too soon. It is also common to feel lonely, or to worry about being alone. You may feel this way if you live alone, or with other people.

The future may feel dark, or pointless. Your deep sadness may mean it is hard to imagine being happy again.

It is common to have feelings of anxiety about what might come next - to worry about someone else dying, or something else happening that is negative, or frightening.

Many people find it helps to know that these feelings are normal at this time. Many people bereaved suddenly have gone on to feel very differently, and lead happy lives, while still remembering with sorrow what happened.

Avoid making big decisions. It is easy to make wrong decisions, or decisions you later regret, at this time.

## Faith and spiritual connection

A sudden death of a loved one causes some people to think about, and connect with, their faith or spiritual beliefs.

This can be very important to some people during their journey through bereavement.

Some people may find comfort in a place of worship, or a place that has special meaning to them.

Some people may find it helps at this time to practise meditation or prayer, particularly if it is normal for you to do so.

Some people find it helpful to seek the support of a faith or spiritual leader who has experience in helping people who have been bereaved in challenging ways.

# Despair or suicidal thoughts

For some people, it can feel too hard to bear.

For some people, this can be a fleeting thought that floats in and out, and then goes away.

For others, it can be a lasting sense of deep despair or desperation that can lead to feelings that the future is too hard to face.

This can lead to suicidal thoughts.

When in despair or having suicidal thoughts, it is hard to imagine feeling differently.

Even though it can be hard to imagine, many people have experienced despairing and suicidal thoughts and then eventually moved to a state of mind where they feel very differently, and can live a full and happy life. Often, these people have received help from others.

Please, reach out for help. It is a sign of strength, not weakness, to ask for help you need.

- Tell people you trust how you are feeling. Ask someone, or several people, to look after you closely.
- Talk to your GP. They can seek an assessment of your mental health and appropriate treatment, if you need it.
- Call Samaritans any time, day or night, 116 123.

See page 35 for information on mental health after a bereavement.

# Physical reactions and needs

Many people bereaved suddenly, or too soon, suffer physical reactions that can be distressing.

People may also struggle to look after basic, physical needs, such as getting enough sleep, food, staying hydrated, and getting gentle, daily exercise.

The next pages talk about these things and give advice.

The advice in these pages may seem obvious.

However, at a time of bereavement, it can be much harder, and easy to forget, to look after ourselves in important ways.

## Staying hydrated and eating

Staying hydrated (with soft drinks) and eating is important. Some people struggle to remember to drink and eat enough.

Try comforting drinks, for example tea, hot chocolate or your favourite fruit juice. Try small snacks that are nutritional, and you like. For example, cheese, biscuits, toast with your favourite spread, and fruit.

If you are cooking for yourself, or someone is cooking for you who doesn't normally cook, try things that are nutritional but easy to prepare. For example, baked beans, or scrambled eggs.

Ask neighbours for help. Many people love to cook for people in need. Tell people what you like to eat.

It may help to think what you would want to eat if you were ill. What are your favourite comfort foods? What is easy to swallow and digest?

## Sleep, dreams and nightmares

It is common to have difficulty going to sleep, or have difficulty staying asleep.

Some people have vivid dreams or nightmares, due to their thoughts being in overdrive. This may be followed by distressing feelings when you wake up, particularly if you wake up with a jolt in the night.

Lack of sleep and nightmares can lead to physical exhaustion.

Avoid caffeinated drinks, particularly after lunchtime. Gentle exercise, if you are able, can also help sleep.

If you are awake in the night and in distress, breathing exercises can help. See page 29.

You can talk to Samaritans, day or night, 116 123

If you are getting hardly any, or no, sleep it can be very hard to function. Try to rest when you can, for example by resting in the afternoon on a sofa, or somewhere else you feel peaceful, with your eyes closed.

Your GP may be able to give you sleeping medication, if that is what you want, which may help you for a time.

## I feel physically ill

A challenging bereavement can place intense and prolonged pressure on our bodies. It is normal to suffer one or more physical symptoms, occasionally or frequently.

- Energy levels may vary enormously.
- Heart palpitations, feeling faint or dizzy, excessive sweating, tremors and choking sensations are common.
- Muscles may tense up, causing pains, such as headaches.
- Digestive problems may occur.
- Women may suffer extra pain during menstruation.

Physical symptoms are painful and upsetting but should fade with time and then disappear altogether.

If you are worried about your health or a symptom persists, visit your GP.

## Substance abuse

Some people find they want to turn to substances such as alcohol or cigarettes, or illegal drugs. This can damage health, cause long-lasting problems and is not a helpful way to manage reactions to a bereavement.

Alcohol, for example, is a depressant and can make you feel worse.

It is much harder to identify and address emotional and physical feelings if they are masked by the effects of substances.

## Staying active

Getting outside for a short, gentle walk, even in bad weather, can help. Or you may prefer some other gentle exercise that suits you best.

If you normally exercise a lot, it is OK to not expect too much of yourself right now. You may want to take things more easily, for a while.

# Panic

Some people find that they have a level of distress that causes them to panic, feel out of control, or struggle to breathe in a normal way.

If you are prone to panic attacks at this time, it is important to stay somewhere safe, and with people who understand and help you.

Breathing exercises can be calming.

- Breathe in slowly and deeply through your nose.
- Hold your breath for a count of five.
- Breathe out slowly and deeply through your mouth.
- Hold your breath for a count of five.
- Repeat for a few minutes.

## Time for you

Take time for therapeutic, restful relaxation. This could be having a hot shower to ease the tension, spending time with family members or a pet, playing music or a computer game you love, or just resting your eyes for a while.

Do whatever is relaxing for you.

On some days you may have energy for a gentle hobby you enjoy - but remember you do not have to be busy all the time.

Simply sitting somewhere peaceful may help.

Take time for yourself, regularly.

Do things you find restful, frequently.

If you have responsibilities for caring for other people, arrange for someone else to help, for some of the time, so you can look after your own needs.

# Grief support

Grief, or mourning, is a natural process after the death of someone we love.

Grief is personal, and how you grieve is your choice. You may wish to spend some time grieving alone. You may wish to grieve with the support of family, friends or others.

You may wish to grieve in different ways at different times, depending on how you feel and what is happening in your life.

Some people talk about grief as happening in stages. During these stages we work through what has happened. The final stage is when we feel acceptance of what has happened, and we are able to lead a full and hopeful life once again.

Grief can feel particularly intense at times, for example on birthdays. Or it may feel hardest when you are least expecting it to. For example, if someone says something that sparks a memory of the person who died.

Some bereaved people feel that, over time, help from family and friends starts to fade away. You may find it helps to show family and friends this page and talk about how you can keep helping each other. Sometimes, something simple, such as a regular phone call, can make a big difference.

Some people have a regular get together to honour someone's life, for example on their birthday.

Memorialising can help people grieve together. Some people plant a tree or erect a plaque.

Some people fundraise for a charity in memory of a person who has died. (To find out about memorialising online, or fundraising for Sudden so we can help more bereaved people, visit our website.)

## Grief support services

There are many grief support services, many operated by national and local charities.

Grief support services are often appropriate to be accessed only after the early weeks following a bereavement are over (although some organisations, provide help earlier).

To avoid disappointment, it is important to understand when a service is meant to be accessed and if there is a waiting list.

Grief support services often include:

- grief counselling or support
- groups of bereaved people helping each other, together, including socially

A service may help anyone grieving, or may specialise in:

- helping people bereaved by a particular cause of death
- helping particular kinds of people, for example families, children, youth, widows, older people or people with particular faiths

Visit the Sudden website for more information about finding services that best meet your needs.

# Help with mental health

Sometimes mental health challenges can follow a bereavement.

It is understandable that bereavement can lead to some people suffering mental health challenges.

It is not a sign of failure to be diagnosed with a mental health condition at this time.

If you think you may be struggling with your mental health, it is important to seek an assessment and diagnosis so you can be given the best help, and recover.

You may be diagnosed as having complex grief reactions or a condition such as Prolonged Grief Disorder or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

It is normal at that stage to be offered therapy, provided by a specialist professional who is experienced in helping people recover. (This is different to grief support).

Therapy given is often talk-based, and over a number of sessions. Sometimes other kinds of treatment are offered too.

Many people who receive help with their mental health find it improves their wellbeing. It is important to get this help early and not delay.

## When and how to seek an assessment of mental health

If your bereavement was four or more weeks ago, consider if you are experiencing one or more of these things:

- My shock reactions are the same or worsening.
- I have new and distressing reactions emerging.
- I am suffering flashbacks or nightmares of what happened, or could happen, real or imagined.
- I feel numb, or unable to feel anything positive.
- I constantly think about what has happened, to the exclusion of everything else I need to think about.
- I cannot eat or sleep normally.
- I am having suicidal thoughts.

These things are a guide only, and do not enable you to self-diagnose. If you have any reason to think you might need help, it is important to seek help.

Show your GP this page, and the page before, and seek an assessment by a mental health specialist who understands treatment of disorders relating to bereavement or trauma.

# Help if helping a bereaved person

Your help is valuable, however small. These tips help you to help, better.

## DO:

- Do expect a range of reactions, as described in this guide. This is okay, as long as people are kept safe.
- Do ask open-ended questions relating to someone's health and safety and to inform help you provide. "Who is helping you / talking to you this week?" "What help have you been given so far?" "What shopping do you need?" "When would you like me to call you?" etc.
- Do listen patiently to a bereavement story, respecting diversity. Tell someone "You matter." Let them talk, if they want. Let them be silent, if they want.

Encourage them to talk to someone about how they are feeling and to contact their GP if they need more help.

## DO NOT:

- Do not talk about your own bereavements. This is not active listening.
- Do not say “you will feel better soon”. This can infer bereavement is trivial.
- Do not expect to make things better, soon. All bereavements take time. The task is to keep people safe and feel supported.
- Do not ignore signs someone may be at risk. For example, from suicide, or being unable to look after themselves, or being harmed by someone else. If immediate risk, dial 999. If not immediate, contact your GP for advice.

### Always prioritise your own welfare

It is possible to be traumatised by other people's experiences or be psychologically damaged by thinking you did or said something wrong.

Take time out for yourself. Eat, sleep, relax and do exercise. Get support from colleagues, family, and friends.

# Organ or tissue donation following a death

Organ donation is possible after some deaths. Tissue or cornea donation is possible after many deaths.

Thousands of people's lives in the UK are saved or improved each year by transplants. There is an 'opt-out' system in England, Wales and Scotland. This means adults are considered to have agreed to be a donor when they die, unless they have recorded a decision not to donate (or are in an excluded group).

Organ donation is only possible if a person has died in hospital in specific circumstances.

Tissue donation, such as skin, bone, heart valves and corneas, could be possible whether the death happened in a hospital or not. It can happen up to 24 or even 48 hours afterwards.

Families are always consulted before donation goes ahead, even within an 'opt out' system. The faiths and beliefs of the person who died should always be respected.

Organs or tissue are removed with care and do not delay burial or cremation arrangements nor affect ability to see a body.

If a person has died under the age of 18, the family will be asked to make a decision on donation.

If you want to find out if donation is possible, but haven't been contacted by medical staff, you need to act quickly (usually within 24 hours, although sometimes up to 48 hours, after the death).

For organ donation call 0300 123 23 23.  
For tissue donation call 0800 432 0559.

For more information, go to  
[www.organdonation.nhs.uk](http://www.organdonation.nhs.uk)

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email: [help@sudden.org](mailto:help@sudden.org)

info: [www.sudden.org](http://www.sudden.org)

If you want to talk about organ or tissue donation at this time, it is important to do so quickly. Turn to page 41 for more information.

**NHS**

**Blood and Transplant**

**Sudden**  
[www.sudden.org](http://www.sudden.org)

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