



NHS

Dorset County Hospital
NHS Foundation Trust

Patient Information

for relatives or friends

coping with grief



Introduction

This booklet has been written to help when you have been affected by a traumatic incident such as dying and/or death.

By their very nature, these events are distressing to everyone. The emotional and physical reactions that follow such events are usually intense, they often confuse, frighten and shock. You may also be surprised by reactions that are unfamiliar and seemingly out of character.

This booklet offers advice which helps you understand and cope with your reactions.

How you might feel after a dying/death event

Sadness

Deep feelings of sadness are common, especially when tragic deaths have occurred or when someone is going through the dying process.

Helplessness

A feature of such traumatic incidents is that they are overpowering. Such crises can draw out the best in us but they can also make us feel powerless or unable to help.

Reliving the event

The impression left may be so strong that it is revisited long after it actually happened.

Flashbacks and dreams are common, as is the re-experiencing of the feelings that have surfaced.

Sometimes, too, you may suddenly start to feel as if the original event is about to happen again.

Re-experiencing can be very distressing and frightening, but this is not at all unusual.

Numbness

The shock of a dying/death event can leave you feeling numb and emotionally exhausted. Feelings you used to have may be blocked for a time and your ability to deal with day to day pressures reduced. You may want to withdraw from contact with other people, and give up leisure interests and activities you used to enjoy.

Living on borrowed time

These events can change your outlook on life in important ways. Hopes for a better future may be lost or changed with deep disappointment being common.

Tenseless and restlessness

You may feel wound up, making it difficult to rest, fall asleep or have peace of mind. Poor memory for events and names goes along with finding it hard to concentrate.

Crying does help. It is better to express your feelings than to hold back the tears.

How you can be affected physically

As well as emotional strain, you may also be affected physically. This may occur very soon after a death event but can develop many months later. Some of the common signs are:-

Tiredness and exhaustion

It is possible that news of a death will put intense and prolonged pressure on the body; this does not always stop when an incident is over. Your body may continue to be physically and emotionally over-aroused leading to tiredness at first and, later, exhaustion.

It is hard to wind down.

Muscle tension

The strain under which you are placed expresses itself in tensing of muscles in different parts of the body. This can be accompanied by symptoms ranging from general stiffness and tension, to specific localised pains, headaches, choking sensations in the throat and chest and dizziness.

Palpitations of the heart

All emotional reactions are associated with short or long term bodily responses such as palpitations of the heart, excessive sweating, mild tremors that may develop into periodic shaking, stomach pains and problems with digestion.

Medical treatments can provide some relief from these reactions. It is important to keep in mind that onset is linked to the traumatic event and that talking it through with someone is the most important step towards finding long term relief.

Remember

You may experience some or all of these reactions only occasionally or all the time. In all instances, the signs tell you that nature's healing ways are at work, helping you adjust to what has happened. Typically, reactions start to lessen within a week or so, before fading away altogether over a longer period of time. If they do not, then it is important that you should take the initiative and talk to someone about your reactions to your prolonged grieving experience.

Anger

Intense feelings of anger may be caused by seemingly minor events. Your sense is of this “being out of character”. Relatives, friends and colleagues may comment on changes in you since the traumatic event. More constant anger may be felt about the injustice and senselessness of what happened or towards those who appear to have caused or let the death happen.

Guilt

Rather than feeling relieved at having survived when others are dying or dead, it is common to feel guilty. This takes the form of wondering if more could have been done to help. You may question whether you deserve to have survived when seemingly more deserving people were not so lucky.

Fear

New fears and worries may appear in your life. These may be about going out of doors, meeting familiar faces, being afraid to leave those you care for most, or being left by them.

Other fears centre on breaking down, losing control, having unbearably intense feelings, or worry that a similar event may happen again.

Relationships

Stresses and strains previously taken as being part of life can appear unbearable to someone who has been through a traumatic incident. A tendency to withdraw from close contact with relatives, friends and colleagues is often observed, leading to additional personal problems. Relationship difficulties may get worse along with a growing sense that “nobody can possibly understand what I am going through”.

This mistaken view is a major obstacle to seeking help and support at a time of need. Other people are your main source of comfort at a time of crisis.

What you can do to help yourself

The most important thing is to avoid bottling up feelings you have about what is happening however shocked and surprised you may be. The following reactions are common during the dying process and after the death event.

- flashbacks
- repeated, intrusive recollections of the end or the news
- sadness
- dreams about the news event
- not wanting to be reminded of the news event
- loss of enthusiasm
- fatigue
- emotional withdrawal

To reduce the impact of the news of a death you may find it helpful to;

- Accept that it is normal to feel “not normal”.
- Make sure you know what did happen rather than rely on what you think has happened.
- Let yourself experience the feelings you have about what happened and **talk to others about it.**
- Think of the meaning of life following the news breaking and death and continue to make plans for the future.

Some of these ways of helping yourself appear to contradict one another, but you need to find time and place for both! It will take time to come to terms with your experience - healing requires time.

NB: Accidents are more likely to happen during severe grief. You need to be especially careful when driving, at work and around the home.

When to ask for help

Dying/death are extremely distressing occasions and the resulting trauma may go on for a long time, or have a special and personal meaning for you. Under such circumstances you may wish to seek further help.

You should consider this:

- if your intense feelings or body sensations continue to be overwhelming
- if your feelings are not falling into place
- if memories, dreams and images of the particular event continue to intrude on your consciousness making you feel frightened and deprived of rest.
- if you can find no relief from tension, confusion, a sense of emptiness or exhaustion
- if your work performance is affected

- if you have to keep active to avoid feeling upset
- if you have nightmares or cannot sleep
- if you find yourself getting uncontrollably angry
- if you have no person or group with whom to openly share your feelings
- if your relationships are suffering badly or people keep commenting on how much you have changed
- if you find yourself more accident prone
- if you find your smoking, eating and drinking habits change for the worse
- if you find yourself relying more on medication
- if you feel “burnt out”.

Where to find professional help

Your GP can refer you to local specialists who will help you cope after an event. Special support groups do exist to support the dying, the grieving survivors and their families. Make yourself known to the relevant organisers.

