

*EXPERIENCING GRIEF  
FROM THE DEATH OF A LOVED ONE*



BOULDER COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

Victim Assistance Program

303-441-3656

## **FROM ALL OF US AT THE BOULDER COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE**

We are truly sorry that you are experiencing the death of a friend or loved one. It is probably one of the most difficult times of your life. This loss is almost always a shock—physically, emotionally, and cognitively—and it can be temporarily debilitating. But you will get through it if you can let yourself experience your own natural process of grief.

Each of us has our own personality and our own history of past losses. We also have likely internalized the messages about grieving we got from growing up in our families and our culture. That's why—at the most painful time of our lives—each of us also grieves in our own way.

Remember that this is a very abnormal time in your life. Your responses may even make you seem foreign to yourself, but that is because “normal” life as you have known it has abruptly and significantly changed.



### ***What is Grief?***

Grief isn't just one feeling, nor is it a singular experience. Grief is a natural response to help us survive a significant loss. It is given to humans (and some animals) to help us get through it and find a new way to live our lives without our loved one.

Grief is a process that affects us emotionally, cognitively, physically, socially, and sometimes spiritually, all at the same time. People have written about “phases” or “stages” that we go through and which can serve as helpful guides for us. But the truth is that each one of us grieves in our own way and in our own time. Despite what some people say, there is no “timetable” for grief and our grief responses change over time. Dr. Therese A. Rando, a leading expert in grief and trauma, said, “Your grief will take longer than most people think and will take more energy than you ever imagined.”

(Attached is a list of natural responses to a death).

*Shock* is almost always the first reaction to the loss of a loved one, even if he/she had a long illness. Your life may seem surreal for a while. That is normal. But it is also a time when we may be responsible for making decisions about funeral arrangements and other necessary demands on us. As best you can, allow trusted people around you to help you walk through this.

*Emotionally*, it is natural to have intense and sometimes contradictory feelings. In the early days, we typically swing back and forth among a series of feelings or they arise like “waves” coming over us at any time. These can naturally include: intense sadness, fear or anxiety, numbness, anger, fragility, guilt, irritability, or simultaneously, some people feel relief or even happiness, depending upon the situation. *Be gentle and compassionate with yourself.*

Accept whatever you are feeling at any given time without reproach — “do not feel bad for feeling bad.” Above all, make time and space for those feelings and share them with others who are nonjudgemental—don't let anyone tell you what to feel or when. Guard against

turning to frequent use of drugs, alcohol, or other ways to numb feelings. It will only prolong your process.

*Cognitively*, it is natural to have difficulty making decisions, frequent forgetfulness, an inability to concentrate, questioning of your actions before the death, having “if only” thoughts, avoiding reminders by finding constant distractions, staring off “into space,” etc. If you work outside home and have taken time away from work after a loved one’s death, you will likely experience some cognitive disruptions. It is normal and will lessen over time.

*Physically*, grieving is exhausting. It is also natural to have difficulties with sleep (especially in the middle of the night), eating too much or too little, nausea, headaches, digestive difficulties, noise sensitivity, shortness of breath, feel and aching in your chest , etc. Becoming sleep deprived at this time only intensifies things. Rest as much as your body needs. If you are having difficulty sleeping, consult your personal healthcare provider for suggestions. Avoid long term use of prescription sleeping pills.

*Behaviorally*, you may feel restlessness, the need to avoid reminders of your loved one, or the opposite, that is, clinging to reminders, or the need to control everything around you, overactivity, etc. That is normal.

*Socially*, allow yourself to get the help and support of trusted friends and family. Although for many people asking for help is difficult, this is the time to change that and let others help in a wide variety of ways. For others, leaning on friends and family is natural and healthy. Be especially aware that there may be additional strains on your close relationships because they may not know how to be helpful to you. They may unintentionally say or do something that is hurtful. Or, possibly they are experiencing their own grief in their own way. Differences in how you respond to each other will likely require increased sensitivity and understanding. Above all, avoid prolonged withdrawal and isolation.

*Spiritually*, some people find comfort in their religious or spiritual faith and spiritual communities. The death may even deepen their faith. For others, the death may lead to questioning one’s relationship with “God” (however that is defined) or with spiritual beliefs. If you have a pastor or priest or spiritual counselor with whom you feel comfortable, reach out to him or her for support.

### ***Things That Can Affect Your Grief Responses***

Several factors will affect how you will respond to the death of a loved one, some of which are:

- Who the person was in your life and the role they played
- The nature of the relationship—the length of the relationship, if it was strong and secure or ambivalent with mixed feelings, the level of dependency
- How the person died
- The losses you have experienced and if were you able to express your feelings about those losses. Feelings from previous losses that you grieved earlier may come up.
- Personality, age, gender, and how you typically cope with stressful situations
- Your physical state
- Social and cultural factors

## ***Anticipated Death v. Sudden Death***

**(Adapted from *How To Go On Living When Someone You Love Dies*, by Dr. Therese A. Rando)**

In both sudden and anticipated death, there is pain. However, while the grief is not greater in sudden death, our capacity to cope is diminished and our responses can be much more intense. This is because when a sudden death occurs, our abilities to adapt to the change are so severely assaulted and the ability to cope is so critically injured that you may feel completely overwhelmed. That is normal.

When there is a sudden death, the loss sometimes doesn't make sense. This is especially true if the death was due to an accident or violence or some other "avoidable" cause. The critically important understanding of why something happened and putting it into context is often missing. Consequently, if your loved one died suddenly, you may be unable to grasp the situation and find it difficult to understand the implication of the loss. Accepting that the death occurred can be difficult, even if you intellectually recognize that it happened. It may continue to seem inexplicable for a long period of time. You will have to go over the story repeatedly to try to make sense of it.

Even if the death of a loved one was anticipated or predicted, there is always some degree of shock. But, in those cases, there also has been a valuable period of time in which to prepare. On the other hand, if the death was sudden, you were robbed of the opportunity to "finish business" with your loved one. You weren't given the time to say and do important things—such as being able to express your love, gratitude, apologize, and/or tell the person what he or she meant to you. So, in addition to the pain of the loss of your loved one, you must also grieve the loss of what wasn't said or done before they died.

For survivors whose loved one died suddenly, grief symptoms tend to persist longer. The physical and emotional shock that is a normal part of acute grief appears to be more intense and long-lasting.

## ***Telling Children***

It has been found that the best approach to take in telling children about a death is to be honest and straightforward, speaking to them at their level of development and answering their questions in the same manner (see enclosed "*Helping Children Heal The Effects of Loss and Trauma*"). If children are kept in the dark, they may become more frightened and confused. A child can easily sense something is wrong and may take on unnecessary guilt.

Help and encourage your children to decide for themselves how best to deal with their grief. Children need to be reassured that someone will care for them and that they will be safe. It is important to reinforce the fact that the child is not to blame for the death. Often they believe that they are in some way responsible.

Depending on your family traditions and values, you may want to ask family or friends, including children who are old enough, whether they want to be involved in the funeral. Again, there are no rules. It has been found that it can be detrimental to force a child to participate as well as prohibiting a child from attending or taking part in a funeral service.

Children need to grieve in their own time and their own way. Children are generally more resilient and stronger than we normally believe. One thing to keep in mind is that a child who is old enough to love is old enough to feel the loss and grieve.

### ***Signs of Healing***

J. William Worden, PhD, a Harvard professor, identified four things we need to do over time in order to heal from the emotional wounds of the death of a loved one. For some, it will take longer than others to get through it. Try to allow for differences among each other during this time.

- To accept the reality of the loss; to pass through the shock and denial and get to acceptance that it really is true and it really is permanent.
- To experience and express the range of emotions of grief: pain, anger, rage, guilt, fear, joy, relief, etc., whatever they are without judgement. To adjust to an environment in which our loved one is gone. This may include learning new skills and taking on new roles.
- We don't "get over it" but, over time, to be able to withdraw enough emotional energy to have it available to be able to give of ourselves in new ways to other relationships or causes.

***Natural Responses  
to the Death of a Loved One***

Grief takes longer than most people think.

Grief will take more energy than you would ever have imagined.

Your grief will involve many changes and be continually developing.

You will grieve for many things, both symbolic and tangible, not just the death alone.

You will grieve for what you lost already and for what you have lost in the future.

You may experience grief spasms, acute upsurges of grief that occur suddenly with no warning.

You may feel like you are going crazy.  
(You are not).

You may be obsessed with the death and preoccupied with thoughts of the person who died.

You may find that there are certain dates, events, and stimuli that bring upsurges of grief.

Society and some of the people near to you will have unrealistic expectations about your grieving and may respond inappropriately.

Children grieve differently at different ages.  
(See enclosed explanation of children and grief)

***Suggested Coping Skills***

Eat Healthy.

Try to get extra rest/sleep.

Drink plenty of water.

Exercise, even a little.

Get a massage.

Allow yourself the full range of your feelings, without judgement

Find safe people to be with who are good listeners.

It's ok to tell and re-tell the story of what happened. It's okay not to tell details of the event to just anyone who asks.

Allow others to help.

Remember that people are well-intentioned.

Join a support group—just try it.  
(See enclosed list of groups)

Meditation, prayer

Find time to be alone.

Art, music, reading, sports, etc.  
Writing/journaling

Create photo albums

Ceremonies and rituals