

TIPS FOR FAMILIES EXPERIENCING TRAUMATIC DEATH

When death comes suddenly, unexpectedly, and violently, family members are often left in a state of shock and numbness. They are often unable to think clearly and react decisively. Listed below are some guidelines to assist families in the weeks and months ahead.

1. As soon as possible, identify your closest "inner circle" of family and friends. Who do you trust and feel you can depend upon? Of these, identify who will be there to listen to you when you need to talk, help with the funeral arrangements, organize food and chores, and be a spokesperson for the family.

2. Family and friends will want to help, but may need direction about what is "helpful" to you. Let people know your limits - what you want done for you, and how much.

3. Immediately after the notification of the death, select one person to make telephone calls to notify others of the death. Remember that there may be some people who need to be notified in person rather than by telephone.

4. If the death of your loved one is considered "high profile," you may be contacted by the media. You may want to select someone in your support system to deal with the media. Consider carefully how you want to deal with their questions, if at all. Decide whether or not you want to watch the news coverage of the death of your loved one. You may want someone to tape the news stories so you can watch them later.

5. Remember that nothing affects you emotionally that doesn't also affect you physically. You have no choice about this death happening, but you do have a choice about how you take care of yourself. Do those things you know are good for you.

➤ Get as much rest as possible. Lie down and close your eyes even if you can't sleep.

➤ Eat something small several times a day rather than trying to sit down to a large meal three times a day.

➤ Get out of the house and away from people, telephone calls, and memories for a while. Make sure you take someone with you, especially if you drive. If you do drive, remember that it is normal to become confused and disoriented, so pay close attention to your driving.

➤ Get a physical check-up as soon as possible. If possible avoid taking medications to cover your grief. It will only prolong dealing with your emotions.

6. Take a close friend or family member when making funeral arrangement. Limit the number of people you take with you, but consider the ideas of those who do not attend the arrangement meeting. Include children in the arrangement decisions - they are grieving too. Let the funeral home know your wishes regarding the presence of the media.

7. Many times in a traumatic death, law enforcement is involved. Try to be as cooperative as possible with them. You may be assigned a victim's advocate to work with you and guide you through the court process. Select someone close to you to be with you as you work with the authorities.

8. During the first few weeks and months, there will be many practical matters to attend to. Sit down with a friend or family member and make a list of all the things you feel you need to do. Having someone else do this with you helps ensure some things are not forgotten. Go through each item and decide whether it needs immediate attention or is something that can wait. Making a list is a good way of clarifying the "must do" from the "ought to do".

9. Experiencing the traumatic death of a loved one often leaves close family and friends also in a state of trauma. Trauma is different than grief and must be dealt with before dealing with grief. The signs of trauma and grief sometimes intermingle. It is helpful to talk to someone who has experienced a traumatic death or read something about *it*.

10. When the numbness and shock begin to fade, emotions begin to surface. It may be weeks or even months after the death. This is a time when you may need more support, but family

Adapted from: *What to do When the Police Leave: A Guide to the First Days of Traumatic Loss*, Bill Jenkins, 1999, WBJ Press, Richmond, VA

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