

Facing sudden death

by Judy Tatelbaum, MSW

Of all the experiences we confront in life, the toughest to face is the sudden, unexpected loss of someone we love. Loss in itself is painful enough, but sudden loss is shocking. The shock doubles our pain and intensifies our grief.

Even if on some level we understand that no one lives forever, actually losing people we love is unimaginable. When we know someone we love has a fatal disease or when we have nursed a loved one who is very ill, we have a chance to begin to prepare for their loss -- at least a little. However, the unexpected death of a loved one - regardless of how that loved one dies - can leave us stunned, lost, and overwhelmed with pain. We may not know where to begin to cope.

Sudden loss gives us no chance to prepare. It is not unusual that we feel cheated by a sudden death, cheated of a chance to say the last words we would have liked to say or to do some last act that would have had meaning to us-like a hug, a kiss, a walk hand in hand. Missing out from having a way of saying some kind of good-bye can leave us feeling especially bereft for weeks or even months. Feeling cheated in this way can add to our grief, anguish and despair.

Besides our feeling cheated by it, sudden loss can make the world feel shaky or less safe. This is a natural response to any unexpected and traumatic event. When we feel as if someone we love is suddenly "yanked" out of our lives, we are left feeling that the world isn't a safe place. We may then become fearful and uncertain, or angry and frustrated. This loss can negatively color our view of life, but hopefully only temporarily.

When we face a sudden loss, all at once we have three overwhelming tasks to deal with: Our grief over the loss of our loved one, the absence of this special person from our daily lives, and the changes in our lives that are caused by this loss. Each is a big task to take on, and each will become a part of our mourning and healing process.

Although it may be hard to imagine at the moment, we must remember that people do recover from sudden losses, and that we too can ultimately move through this terrible pain and begin to heal.

It helps to bear in mind that emotional pain isn't constant, and that we don't have to grieve forever. We will love forever, whether our loved ones are with us in body or not, but we do not need to grieve to honor that love. We can just love.

In talking to many people who have suffered sudden loss, I have learned that there are several important, possibly universal, ways to help yourself heal:

Love yourself and take special care of yourself through your grief.

Do your mourning now. Being strong and brave is important, but I always tell those I counsel to never miss an opportunity to cry. That is not self-indulgent, but simply sensible and honest in dealing with your emotions.

Expressing your feelings will help you heal, as feelings expressed disappear. Feelings repressed don't. So give vent to your feelings.

Get support from other people-counselors and support groups like widow's groups, bereavement groups, compassionate friends, or suicide survivors. You may find them through a hospice, your church, or a community or social service agency.

You will not only help yourself, but you may also help another and that can be a great source of strength, joy and recovery.

And, most of all, trust that the person you loved and lost would want you to recover from losing them, and would want you to remember and honor them by living a fulfilling life.

This article originally appeared in the April 1996 issue of *Journeys*, HFA's bereavement newsletter. For more information see *Journeys*.