

When A Loved One Dies A Guide For Coping With The Loss



*Within our hearts, the ones we love are never really gone.
In spirit and memory, they live on.
May the support of your family, friends and the
members of your health care team bring you comfort,
and may loving memories heal your heart.*



Dear Family,

Please accept our deepest condolences on the death of your loved one. Losing a family member or friend is one of life's most difficult experiences. Yet, even during the emotional confusion that follows someone's death, there are important decisions to make. Some of these decisions must be made in a very short time.

Whether you are the spouse of the person who has died—or the deceased's parent, child, sibling, partner or close friend—there are certain things you must take care of. The Department of Spiritual Care and Chaplaincy has created this booklet to guide you through this process and help you cope with your loss.

We hope this time of grieving will be blessed with love, support and a sense that you are not alone.

Johns Hopkins Health System Chaplains and Staff

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As You Anticipate Death

Notify immediate family members and the close personal friends you want to have with you at the bedside. The staff will give you privacy to stay with your loved one for a short period of time to say your farewells. There may be visitation limitations so please work with the team about your particular needs.

Call your clergy person. A hospital chaplain or social worker can give additional support.

Take care of your immediate personal responsibilities. Are there children who need to be picked up? Are you a personal caregiver to someone who is dependent? Do you have medications that you need to take? Do arrangements need to be made for any pets at home? Do you have a safe ride home? Let your family and friends help you with some of these immediate needs.

Let the nurse know as soon as possible if your loved one is an organ or tissue donor. If you have questions about organ and tissue donation, ask to speak to the program coordinator for organ and tissue donation.

Gather your loved one's personal belongings. Ask a nurse to check if any valuable items were sent to security for safekeeping.

Please note that you do not have to choose a funeral home before you leave the hospital today. A funeral home must be selected within 72 hours (3 days) of your loved ones passing. Once you choose a funeral home this must be shared with the hospital.



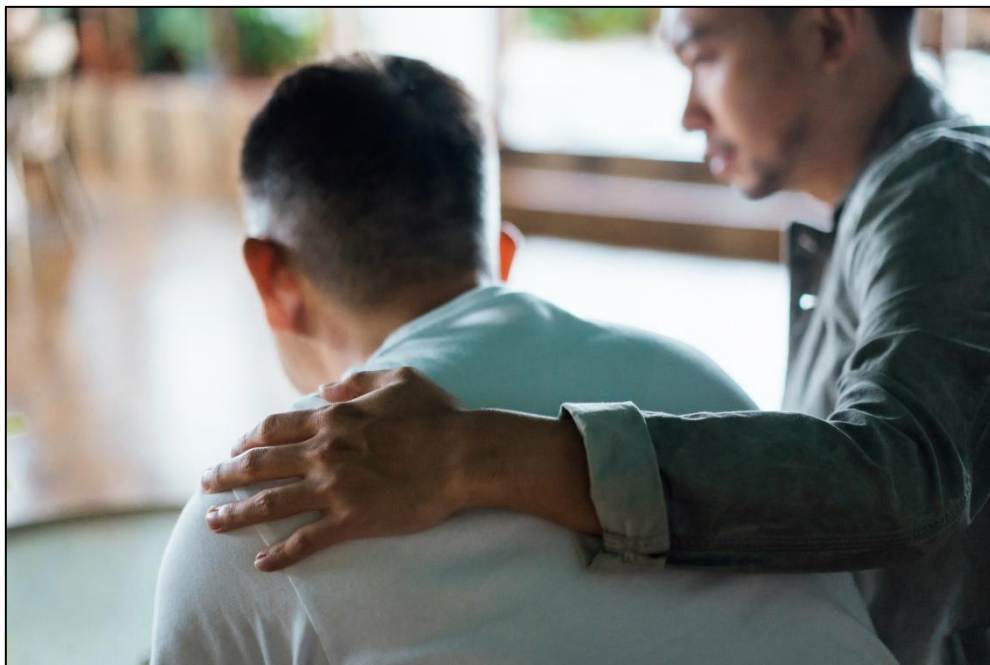
Give the name of the funeral home to the nurse. Once a funeral home is chosen, the funeral home or service will contact the nursing office to plan for the transfer of the body—even out of state.

Talk with the physician about an autopsy, if necessary. Some families find peace of mind in knowing more about why their loved one died. Others are interested in learning more about a disease that might run in the family. Some deaths must be reported to the state medical examiner and an autopsy may be required. If this is the case, the autopsy may not be performed at The Johns Hopkins Hospital. It would be done at the medical examiner's office. All hospital autopsies are performed at either The Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore or All Children's Hospital in Tampa Bay, Florida. Your physician will have more information.

When an autopsy is requested, you will be asked to sign an Autopsy Consent form. To receive a copy of the report, include your mailing address on the autopsy consent form. If you decide at a later time that you want a copy of the report, call the Autopsy Office at 410-955-2490. Reports are usually finalized within 30 to 60 days. In some cases it can take longer.

Inform the funeral home that you requested an autopsy. Although the procedure will take about three hours, it may delay the release of your loved one until the next day. Be assured that no visible scars will be seen on viewing.

If you have any questions after you leave the hospital, call the nursing unit, and talk to the charge nurse or physician at your hospital.



Funeral and Burial Options

There are many options for creating a funeral and burial plan that is meaningful to your family. The cost of the services will vary depending on what is provided. Talk openly with your family and the funeral director about the kind of services you would like.

If you do not have a funeral home in mind, contact the Maryland State Funeral Directors Association at Funeral Home Finder – Maryland State Funeral Directors Association at <https://msfda.net/funeral-home-finder/> or use your phone to scan the following QR Code.



If you live outside of Maryland or would like another option please try Remembering life at <https://www.rememberingalife.com/pages/find-a-funeral-home>



The funeral director will play an active role in helping you choose options that meet the needs of your family. When you meet with him or her, have the following with you:

- the name of a clergy person or someone who will lead the funeral/memorial service (The funeral director can help with this.)
- the name of a charity or organization for donations in your loved one's name. This is only if you choose to do so.
- the clothing your loved one will be buried in
- information for the obituary

Arrangements for cremations can be made through the funeral home.

Memorial Service - A memorial service can be held in your community or your place of worship.

Should Your Child Attend the Funeral? Adults often want to protect children from painful events. Toddlers may not benefit from attending the funeral service. If they want to attend the funeral and services, they should be allowed to go. No child should be forced to attend a funeral or to view the body, even if he or she attends the service. Allow children to change their minds at the last minute. If your child attends the service, make sure you have someone there who knows your child. This person can take the child away from the funeral if he or she wants to leave.

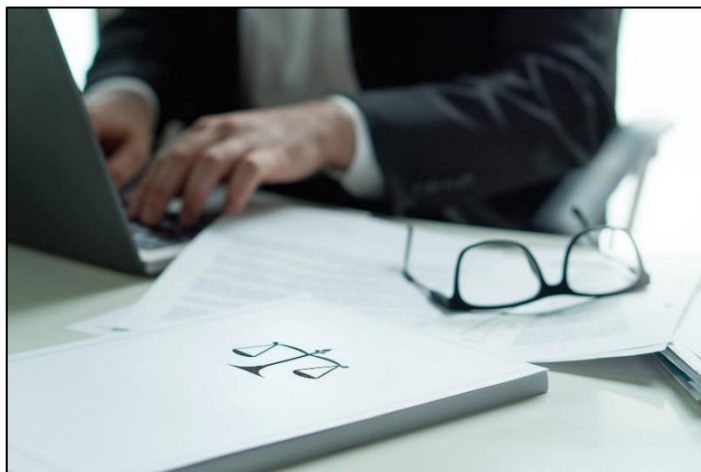
You may want to discuss some of the following before the funeral:

- What he or she will see, such as what the funeral home will look like, how big or small the room will be, and if the casket will be open or closed
- Who will be at the funeral home and that people might be sad
- Who will speak and what they will talk about
- What will happen at the cemetery

Practical Matters

Many decisions need to be made and actions taken in the first few weeks after the death of a loved one. Below are some documents that need to be assembled and reviewed:

- **Wills and trusts.** These may include your loved one's instructions for funeral services and choice of burial or cremation. Obtain these from the deceased's lawyer or wherever personal papers are filed.
- **Insurance policies.** Documents for automobile, home, group, Medicare, life, and health can be found among personal papers. You can also get these from an insurance agent or company. You will need the policy numbers and a death certificate to file a claim for life insurance.
- **Death certificate** (10 to 20 copies). These should be requested from the funeral director. It may be required to give official notice and apply for benefits.
- **Social Security number.** You will need to contact the Social Security Administration (SSA) to check on availability of benefits for surviving spouses or children under 18. Call 1-800-772-1213 or visit ssa.gov.
- **Marriage license.** Surviving spouses should contact the office of the county clerk where the license was issued, if a copy is needed. This license may be required to demonstrate eligibility for some benefits.
- **Birth certificates of children.** Copies can be obtained from the state or county public health offices where they were born.
- **Complete list of assets.** These include IRAs, pensions, stocks, bonds, real estate deeds and titles to property, all bank statements, etc. Ownership of automobiles, real estate, credit cards, bank accounts and other assets will need to be officially transferred to your loved one's heirs.
- **Recent income tax forms and W-2 forms.** Contact your loved one's employer for information about any benefits or wages that may apply. Ask about continued coverage for dependents or others covered on the health insurance policy. You also may want to seek the advice of a professional about filing the deceased's tax return for the year in which he or she died.



- **Military personnel records.** You can request these records online, by mail or fax.

Mail: National Personnel Records Center
Military Personnel Records
9700 Page Boulevard
St. Louis, MO 63132-5100

Online: vetrecs.archives.gov

Fax: 314-801-9195

Survivors should also contact the Department of Veterans Affairs at 1-800-827-1000 or va.gov to see if benefits are available for the funeral and burial plot.



Understanding Grief

Grief is a normal response to the loss of a loved one. Everyone goes through grief in their own way and in their own time. The grief process can be long—weeks, months, even years. Some parts of grief seem to be common to all of us: shock, denial, anger, guilt, depression, acceptance and growth. These features are often described as “stages” of grief, but more often a person will feel many of these emotions at the same time.

Your first response may be shock, numbness and disbelief. These common emotions help protect you from feeling overwhelmed by the loss of someone so close. During this time you may have changing emotions or feelings of the following:

- **Physical:** pain, dizziness, loss of energy, difficulty sleeping, weakness, loss of appetite, empty feeling in the stomach and heaviness in the chest
- **Emotional:** guilt (especially if you have had to make difficult health care decisions for your loved one), anxiety, loneliness, restlessness, depression, resentment, despair, panic, abandonment, agitation, upsetting feelings about the new roles and responsibilities you may now have
- **Mental:** confusion, indecision, sense of unreality, fear of “losing your mind,” poor concentration, seeing things, searching for the one who has died
- **Social:** loss of warmth in relationships with others, angry or irritable responses, loss of interest in once pleasurable activities
- **Spiritual:** your faith may be weakened or strengthened; you may question all you have believed before

These are all-natural responses to the death of a loved one. Your own experience will be unique to you. There are no right or wrong feelings., There are things you can do to help yourself:

- **Allow yourself to cry.** Tears release the tension of grief and make space for healing.
- **Be kind and patient with yourself.** Express anger if you are feeling it.
- **Take care of yourself.** Eat balanced meals and exercise.
- **Keep a journal.** Sometimes it is easier to write about how you feel than it is to talk.
- **Avoid making big decisions or significant changes.** You will need some time to think about your situation before you make decisions.
- **Talk about your sorrow with family and friends.** You may want to talk to a mental health professional or bereavement counselor.
- **Visit the cemetery or a place that reminds you of your loved one on a regular basis, if it comforts you.**

When to Seek Help

Accepting care and support from others can be difficult. A good support system can really help. Some people will have trouble working through the natural processes of grief. It may be helpful to work with a spiritual counselor, minister or chaplain, grief counseling or certified bereavement coach. A psychologist or other professionals trained in dealing with grief can be helpful too. It may be important to seek help if:

- Your grief feels overwhelming or too much to bear. You feel like you are going “crazy” or having an emotional breakdown.
- You are having difficulty functioning at work, in relationships or other areas of your life.
- You are feeling so sad that it interferes with the tasks of daily living.
- You have prolonged physical symptoms such as body aches, stomach problems, difficulty sleeping, etc.
- Your anger is out of control. You unfairly lash out at others or behave violently.
- You use or have an urge to use alcohol or drugs to mask or escape from your feelings.
- You engage in risky behaviors.
- You have thoughts of suicide. (Call 911 or a crisis hotline.)



Helping a Grieving Child After A Loved One Dies

When a family member dies, children react differently from adults. It is important for parents and other adults involved in the child's life to understand a child's response to a death in the family. This includes both normal responses and those that are not normal.

Though there is no easy way to discuss death with a child, it is important to be honest. By talking with your child, you can learn his or her fears, worries or misunderstandings about the death. Children may need to hear about and discuss the death often. A child's feelings are more likely to be known as they accept the death. The child may have these feelings over a long time, and they can return years later.

Some children may have questions about death, while others may never mention death. It is okay to admit to children that you do not know the answer to their question. Children need sympathetic and non-judgmental responses from adults.

Try to keep as many of your normal routines as possible. These can include visits to friends, sports or other activities that will help give a sense of normalcy and will help kids cope with their loss. Children may cry or feel sad at any time of the day, then go out and seem to forget the death ever happened. This depends on a child's age. This is normal behavior and should not be a cause for worry. Children take their cues from the adults they live with. When an adult is open about sharing feelings, sadness and tears, the children will know it is okay for them to do the same.



A Child's Acceptance and Understanding of Death

Children may return to behaviors that they had when they were younger. This could be bed wetting, thumb sucking or tantrums.

- **Infants** - Infants do not understand death. They may notice or sense changes in the family. Infants older than 6 months of age may be able to understand that a loved one is gone and may react to it as a separation.
- **Toddlers (1-3 years)** - Toddlers are confused about death. They tend to believe that death is temporary and will change back. Looking for a parent who has died is normal behavior. Toddlers' needs are great during this time. They may need extra support for their physical and emotional well-being.
- **Pre-schoolers (3-6 years)** - A preschooler's understanding of death is limited. Children at this age may believe they caused the death by something they did or thought. Children need to be reassured that this is not true. Children need support and encouragement. They need to know they will be taken care of and loved by the surviving family.
- **Young School-Aged Children (6-8 years)** - Children in this age group will still have difficulty understanding death. They will feel set apart from their classmates. Their friends may ask questions about the death. Let the child decide if and when to open up and share information. Children may be more upset during holidays and special events. They may be angry at other adults for causing the death. Some children may think constantly about death and dying. Others may think the loved one will return or that they caused the death. Respond with patience, comfort and reassurance.
- **Pre-adolescent (8-12 years)** - Most children in this age group have mature concepts of death. Some behavior common to younger age groups may be present. These children may feel helpless and may try to fill the role of the missing parent or loved one. This should be gently discouraged. Children should be encouraged to play and continue their activities with friends.
- **Teenagers** - Death is frightening for teenagers. Most teens may hide their feelings, even if they are intense. Some may seek help outside the family to deal with death. Others may feel separated from friends. Teenagers may have role confusion, thinking they should step into the loved one's role. This should be discouraged in a way that does not cause feelings of guilt or failure.

Warning Signs That Your Grieving Child May Need Professional Help

- An extended period of deep sadness
- Not able to sleep, loss of appetite or a fear of being alone that lasts a long time
- Acting much younger for a long amount of time
- Spends time imitating the person who died
- Repeated statements about wanting to be with the person who died
- Withdrawal from friends
- Sharp drop in school performance or refusal to go to school

Resources on the Web

aarp.org/griefandloss/ - The AARP Grief and Loss program includes online articles, publications, support groups and discussion boards on coping with the loss of a family member.

[afsp.org/ive-lost-someone-](http://afsp.org/ive-lost-someone/) The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention offers resources for persons surviving a suicide loss.

bereavementmag.com - *Bereavement Magazine* is a good resource for those dealing with all types of grief experiences.

cancer.org - The American Cancer Society offers articles, resources and other information about grief and loss.

cancercare.org - This site offers information on counseling, support groups and education for those affected by cancer.

compassionatefriends.org - Compassionate Friends is an international organization that offers support to parents and caregivers grieving the death of a child.

Sesamestreetincommunities.org/topics/grief - Helping Kids Grieve by Sesame Street offers videos, activities, and printable materials to support children and the whole family.

suicidology.org - The American Association of Suicidology offers resources for those grieving a death by suicide.

Recommended Reading

Grieving: How to Go on Living When Someone You Love Dies
Theresa Rando, Ph.D.

Healing Your Grieving Heart for Teens: 100 Practical Ideas
Alan D. Wolfelt

The Grief Recovery Handbook
James John and Frand Cherry

Remembering with Love: Messages of Hope for the First Year of Grieving and Beyond
Elizabeth LeVang and Sherokee Ilse

Suicide. Why?
Adina Wroblewski.

When Bad Things Happen To Good People
Harold S. Kushner

*Grief never ends... But it changes.
It's a passage, not a place to stay.
Grief is not a sign of weakness,
nor a lack of faith...
It is the price of love.*

Author Unknown