



ST VINCENT'S  
HOSPITAL  
SYDNEY

## WHEN SOMEONE YOU CARE ABOUT DIES IN HOSPITAL

We extend to you our sympathy for your loss.

We offer the following to assist you at this difficult time

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# WHEN SOMEONE YOU CARE ABOUT DIES IN HOSPITAL

## WHAT TO DO

When a patient dies in hospital you do not have to do anything straight away. The deceased will be taken to the hospital mortuary (unless a coroner's report is required) and you may ask to see them in the mortuary prior to contacting a funeral director. You will be able to discuss preparation of the deceased for burial or cremation with the funeral director in accordance with your wishes or those of the deceased if known.

## THE FUNERAL

A funeral ceremony or memorial service gives you the opportunity to reflect on the life of your loved one. Making arrangements for a funeral may initially seem to be overwhelming and difficult, but it often gives the bereaved something to focus on. The first step is to find a funeral provider you are comfortable or familiar with. You can find a list of funeral directors in the yellow pages, or go to [www.afda.org.au](http://www.afda.org.au) for the Australian Funeral Directors Association for further listings and information. You have the right to choose a funeral director who is able to provide a funeral according to your specific needs, including religious requirements. In accordance with your directions, the funeral director will arrange for the deceased to be transported from the hospital and make all the necessary arrangements for the funeral.

## **DEATH CERTIFICATE**

The Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages is responsible for issuing death certificates. The funeral director notifies the Registrar of the death and you will be able to apply for a Death Certificate from the Registrar a few weeks after the death. They are contactable on Ph: 13 77 88 or [www.bdm.nsw.gov.au](http://www.bdm.nsw.gov.au).

## **THE WILL**

The will is a legal document that outlines how an individual wanted their belongings distributed after their death. The executor of the will is responsible for the distribution of the deceased's belongings and assets to those who are named in the will as beneficiaries. If there is no will then you will need to seek advice from the State Trustee, Public Trustee, Legal Aid Commission or a private solicitor. You do not have to pay any debts accrued by the person who has died unless the debt is in a joint name. Debts can be paid for out of the estate.

## **COSTS**

The person who approaches the funeral director and orders a funeral is legally responsible for the cost of the funeral. Costs and method of payment should be discussed with the funeral director. In case of financial hardship please arrange a meeting with the hospital social worker as you may be eligible for financial assistance during this period. You can give notification of the death by calling Centrelink on 132 850 and find out what sort of financial assistance you may be eligible for.

If your spouse was receiving payment from the Department of Veteran's Affairs, you may be eligible for assistance with the funeral. They provide a number of services and can be contacted on 133254 or 1800 555 254.

If the deceased was paying into private health insurance, life insurance, Superannuation, sickness and accident insurance, or if they were a member of a trade union, they might be entitled to payments that will help cover the cost of the funeral. Contact their particular fund to ascertain if assistance is available.

# UNDERSTANDING YOUR GRIEF

The death of a loved one is a profound and painful experience that can affect every aspect of your life. Recognizing grief as a reaction to this type of loss is the first step. Responses to different types of losses can vary in nature. Extreme grief responses can occur when one loses a close and meaningful relationship. Also, because of death's finality you may be confronted with your own mortality.

## FEELINGS AND REACTIONS

### SHOCK / DISBELIEF

One of the first reactions people have after a loved one dies is shock. You may feel numb or detached from your surroundings. Often associated with this numbness is a sense of the situation not being real, 'No, it can't be true', or 'It must be a mistake'. This is a natural defence mechanism in an attempt to push away reality and protect you from the trauma.

### SHOCK / BEWILDERMENT

You may feel dazed, confused, disoriented not knowing what to do. Your sense of time may become distorted as days and nights seem to pass in a blur. You may feel like everything is in slow motion. You may still have difficulty believing that this painful event has really happened. It is very common to experience denial during shock.

### SELF-BLAME/ POWERLESSNESS

You may take on the responsibility for the death. You may feel regrets, such as, 'If only I'd done something differently', and, 'I should have been able to stop this from happening'. Imagining doing things differently allows us

another opportunity to express our love – another way of saying ‘there isn’t anything I wouldn’t have done to keep this person alive’. Try to recognize and acknowledge that you were powerless in preventing the death.

## GRIEF

Grief is a type of deep sadness that many bereaved people often experience. Grief is normal, natural and necessary. It is a personal experience that is unique to each person and presents itself differently each time one goes through it. In an acute grief response, you may experience a flooding of intense emotions. All these different emotions are common reactions to the loss and allow yourself to feel whatever you are experiencing. An understanding and supportive environment is important during this time. Accept support as it is offered and try to reach out to friends, family and others.

## ANGER

As the reality of your situation starts to unfold, irritability and anger may set in. You may become angry at this time even if it does not seem logical. Some individuals may outwardly express their anger during this time and others may not. As anger is openly expressed in a safe and accepting environment, it will gradually decrease in its intensity.

## PHYSICAL REACTIONS

Grief affects virtually every bodily system and you may experience distress in any part of your body. Some complaints include:

- Mild gastro-intestinal disturbance, nausea, vomiting, constipation

- Loss of appetite, increased appetite, not eating
- Sleep disruption and/or disturbance, not sleeping, increased sleeping
- Migraine, tight and/or tense muscles, backache
- Heart palpitations, shortness of breath, anxiety/panic attacks, chest pain
- Lack of energy and feeling exhausted

## POINTS TO REMEMBER

It is normal, natural and necessary to express intense and painful emotions associated with your loss. Give yourself permission to grieve.

Painful feelings will diminish with time. If they remain intense and prolonged, then professional help may be required.

You may never 'get over' the death but you learn to live with the absence of the person you love.

One's grief response is unique to that individual. Grieve as you need to grieve, in your own way in your own time.

“He who lacks time to mourn  
lacks time to mend.”

- William Shakespeare



# MANNER OF DEATH

## **SUDDEN OR UNEXPECTED DEATH**

(Information from [www.grieflink.asn.au/suddendeath.html](http://www.grieflink.asn.au/suddendeath.html))

Most people have an idea of what sudden death is. However it is important to acknowledge that even if the deceased person has been sick for some time, their death can still be sudden and a shock to their friends and family.

A sudden or unexpected death can often raise many complex issues. The death may test what resources you have on hand for coping. You may be shocked and confused initially. This may be made worse because sudden, unexpected deaths are often linked with more traumatic ways of dying. This may make it more difficult to view the body and hold the funeral.

Large organizations may also be involved with the death, such as police, the Coroner, the court and legal system, media and insurance companies. Instead of being able to move through your journey of grief, you may feel torn by what others want from you.

The grief process associated with a sudden, unexpected death, while not necessarily more difficult, may be more complex immediately following the death.

## **ACCIDENTAL OR TRAUMATIC DEATH**

Death that has occurred as a result of a traumatic accident can be especially distressing. The accident or trauma may dominate your thoughts, rather than thoughts of the deceased person themselves. Horror and fear are common emotions that are especially difficult emotions to deal with after a traumatic death. Due to this, the grieving process may be disrupted.

Thoughts and memories of the accident can be very difficult for persons who may have survived the accident themselves. Feelings of ‘survivor guilt’ may dominate your thoughts, and questions of ‘why am I still alive when my loved one is dead?’ are a common reaction to this kind of trauma.

Some bereaved persons may react to a traumatic death by becoming ‘numb’ and avoid talking about the event. It is important to work through your grief in your own way, however if you or someone close to you is feeling high levels of anxiety and distress several months after the death, it may be helpful to engage the help of a professional counsellor or doctor.

## **DEATH AFTER A PROLONGED ILLNESS**

A feeling of relief may be experienced after a loved one dies after a prolonged illness. Although you may have initial feelings of relief, you may still feel any or all of the emotions common after a loss. Your grief response can be compounded by emotional and physical exhaustion and painful memories from the long ordeal.

# HOW TO CARE FOR YOURSELF

- Spend time with people who care about you and are supportive and allow you to openly express your thoughts and feelings. Ask friends for help and accept it when offered.
- Have someone assist you with practical things such as telephone calls, transport, or organising minor details.

Be mindful of intake of alcohol, sedatives or sleeping pills as they may numb the pain for a short while but they will not allow you to deal with your feelings properly.

- Try to stick to a regular daily routine, nurture yourself by eating well and getting adequate sleep.
- Find an activity that works for you such as reading, journaling, listening to music, gardening, artwork, exercising, meditation, massage as it is helpful to use up energy to help reduce anxiety and tension.
- After a few days you may be asked to organise the funeral. If it helps, ask for the process to be slowed so that you can acknowledge the reality of the death before having to attend the funeral.
- A Medical review at this time with your usual doctor can be in the interests of your health.

# CHILDREN / TEENS AND GRIEF

## CHILDREN AND GRIEF

It is common for adults to want to shield children from death and grief, believing that it will be too distressing for them. However, it is important to discuss death with children in an open and honest manner that will allow them to express their feelings in a safe and supportive environment.

Grief for children often comes in bursts. It may be necessary to explain the death to a child a number of times. Attempt to answer their questions honestly and in an age appropriate manner. Be patient and provide clear, consistent answers the child will understand. Encourage them to talk about the deceased person and let them share happy memories they may have.

Children express their grief differently. How children express their grief is also dependent on the relationship they had with the deceased and also their stage of development. The following are some common behavioural, physical and emotional reactions you may observe in children.

**Behavioural** - playing out the loss or death with toys, anger or aggression towards parents, friends or toys, temper tantrums, bed wetting, thumb sucking, acting like a younger child, acting more like an adult, not wanting to go to school, running away, problems with school work, crying or giggling for no obvious reason and playing the same thing repetitively.

**Physical** - stomach aches or headaches, sleeping difficulties, nightmares, loss of appetite and difficulty concentrating.

**Emotional** - easily upset, feelings of low self-esteem and an increase in clingy behaviour.

As previously mentioned, these behavioural, physical and emotional reactions are common ways for children to deal with their grief. Try to reassure the child that their basic needs will be met. Try to maintain routines and standards of discipline as much as possible as this will help create a sense of safety and predictability for the child. If you feel the child's behavioural, physical or emotional responses are unusual or persist for an extended amount of time, seek professional help.

Play is especially important for children, and they will often express themselves through play and other forms of visual expression. Talk to the child's school so that they can also assist in helping the child through their grief. This may involve the school being more flexible with the child's behaviour and increasing support for the child.

The creating of a memory box is a valuable activity for children. They can decorate their box and place special items inside e.g. stories, pictures and videos that remind them of their loved one. They will be able to access their memory box whenever they wish, add items to the memory box and keep it for as long as they need.

Children will learn from the adults in their lives about grieving. Try to model healthy expressions of grief so that children understand that it's okay for them to do the same. It is okay for a child to see adults cry as it lets them know they are safe to express their feelings of sadness. Most importantly, include children in the funeral ceremony and family events after the death. It will help them understand what happens when someone dies and acknowledges their own relationship with the deceased person.

## TEENAGERS AND GRIEF

It is not unusual for teenagers to become withdrawn and 'shut down' when they are experiencing grief. A teenager may become increasingly aggressive, lose interest in school or hobbies, avoid contact with friends or alternatively spend all their time with their friends. Even if a teenager is acting in these ways, they will benefit from adults reaching out to them and talking openly about the person who died by recalling memories and including them in the grieving process.

Older children and teenagers need to be treated as adults. They will usually experience similar emotions to everyone around them. They may not necessarily say much about how they feel but it is important they be included in any plans or family discussion.

Encourage them to talk about their feelings, but also allow them to retreat if they need to. Teenagers rely heavily on their peer friendships, and these friendships often provide vital support during this time.

However, if a teenager is experiencing feelings of wanting to withdraw or 'disappear' for a long period of time, there are professionals who can help. It is important to keep talking to a bereaved teenager, even if it seems like they don't want you to.

It may be necessary to notify the school of the death, in which case they can also be sensitive and certain teachers that have a good rapport with the teenager will be a valuable source of support and comfort over the coming months.

# WHO TO NOTIFY

Medicare 132 011

Private Health Fund

Bank/ Building Society/ Mortgage Provider

Local Council

Australian Tax Office (sometimes a final Tax assessment is made) 132 861

Superannuation Fund

Centrelink: Social Work Services (follow prompts with customer reference number on hand) 132 850

Insurance Company

Public Utilities (e.g. Gas, Electricity,

Water) School/TAFE/University

General Practitioner

Solicitor

Electoral Office 132 326

The Roads and Traffic Authority (RTA) 132 213

Housing NSW 1300 468 746

Department of Veterans Affairs 133 254 (Sydney) or  
1800 555 254 (Regional callers, outside NSW)

Real estate/ Landlord

Employer

# GRIEF SUPPORT SERVICES – Useful Numbers

## Sacred Heart / St Vincent's Bereavement Service

02 8382 9594

Free service for people living locally.  
Free service following the death of  
someone at St Vincent's Hospital  
Campus

## Bereavement Care Centre

1300 654 556 (Eastwood)

Fee Involved

## Calvary Hospital Bereavement Services Department

02 9553 3025 (Kogarah)

## Jewish Care

1300 133 660

Bereavement counselling by trained  
volunteers, no charge for members of  
the Jewish community

## Compassionate Friends

02 9290 2355

[tcfnsw.org.au](http://tcfnsw.org.au)

Parents and siblings who are  
bereaved working as volunteers.  
Provides free group support.

## Coroners Court

02 8584 7800 (Glebe)

02 4922 3700 (Newcastle)

## Grief Support

02 9489 6644

Telephone support and  
referrals

## Interrelate (relationship counselling, including grief and loss)

[Interrelate.org.au](http://Interrelate.org.au)

02 8882 7850 (Bella Vista)

Fee Involved



### Kids Help Line

1800 551 800

24 hr- 7 day telephone support

### Parentline

13 22 89 24 hr. telephone support

### Lifeline

13 11 14

24hr- 7 day telephone counselling

### Solace

02 9519 2820

[solace.org.au](http://solace.org.au)

Peer support group for bereaved partners, 24 hr phone.

### Beyond Blue

1300 224 636

24 hr- 7 day telephone support

[beyondblue.org.au](http://beyondblue.org.au)

### Carers NSW

1800 246 636

# RECOMMENDED READING

## GENERAL READING:

[Coping with Grief,](#)

Mal McKissock, ABC, Australia (1985)

[The Grief of Our Children,](#)

Diane McKissock, ABC Australia (1998)

[Getting Back to Life When Grief Won't Heal,](#)

Phyllis Kosminsky, McGraw-Hill (2006)

[How to go on Living When Someone You Love Dies,](#)

Therese A. Rando Bantam (1991)

[An Exact Replica of a Figment of My Imagination,](#)

Elizabeth McCracken, Back Bay Books Reprint edition (2010)

[The Year of Magical Thinking,](#)

Joan Didion, Random House (2005)

[Unattended Sorrow,](#)

Stephen Levine, Rodale (2005)

[Staring at the Sun,](#)

Irvin Yalom, Scribe (2008)

# RECOMMENDED READING

## FOR PARENTS AND CARE GIVERS:

Bereaved Children and Teens: A Support Guide for Parents and Professionals,

Earl Grollman, Beacon Press (1996)

Talking About Death,

Earl Grollman, Beacon Press (2011)

Helping Children Cope with the Loss of a Loved One: a Guide for Grown Ups,

William Kroen, Free Spirit (1996)

## FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

The Grief Book: Strategies for Young People,

Elizabeth Vercoe and Kerry Abramowski, Black Dog Books (2004)

Something I've Never Felt Before: How Teenagers Cope with Grief,

Doris Zagdanski, Michelle Anderson Publishing (1994)

Straight Talk About Death for Teenagers: How to Cope with Losing Someone You Love,

Earl Grollman, Beacon Press (1993)

# RECOMMENDED READING

## **INTERACTIVE AND ACTIVITY BOOKS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE:**

Help Me Say Goodbye: Activities for Helping Kids Cope  
When a Special Person Dies,  
Janis Silverman, Fairview (19998)

What's Dead Mean?  
Doris Zagdanski, Hill of Content (2005)

When Someone Very Special Dies: Children Can Learn to  
Cope with Grief,  
Margaret Heegaard, Woodland Press (1996)

When Tough Stuff Happens: an Activity Book for Tough  
Times for 7-12 year olds,  
Tricia Irving, Skylight (2001)

# RECOMMENDED READING

## PICTURE BOOKS FOR CHILDREN ABOUT GRIEF, LOSS, CHANGE AND FEELINGS:

Dan's Grandpa,

Sally Morgan, Freemantle Press (2015)

Lifetimes: Beginnings and Endings with Lifetimes in  
Between,

Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen, Penguin (2005)

Waterbugs and Dragonflies,

Doris Stickney, Pilgrim Press (1995)

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Australian Funeral Directors Association (2004) 'Commonly Asked Questions About Grief' at [www.afda.org.au](http://www.afda.org.au), N.S.W.

Children's Hospital Westmead Social Work Department (2003) 'When a Child Dies: An information booklet for families', N.S.W.

Clark, S.J., Hillman, S.D. & Ministerial Council for Suicide Prevention (2001) 'Information and Support Pack: for those bereaved by suicide or other sudden death', Perth W.A.

Grieflink (2003) 'Coping with Grief', 'Grief Reactions Associated with Accidental or Traumatic Death' & 'Grief Reactions Associated with Sudden or Unexpected Death' at [www.grieflink.asn.au](http://www.grieflink.asn.au) (developed on behalf of the National Association for Loss and Grief), N.S.W.

N.S.W. Attorney General's Department (2003) 'The Coroner's Court' (Pamphlet), N.S.W.

McKissock, M & D. 'Coping with Grief' (1994).

Sacred Heart/ St Vincent's Bereavement Service Package (2003) 'Bereavement Services', N.S.W.

Stanton, R. (1999) *When Your Partner Dies: Stories of Women who have lost their Husbands*, Allen & Unwin, N.S.W.

Weizman, S.G. & Kamm, P. (1985) *About Mourning: Support and Guidance for the Bereaved*, Human Sciences Press, New York.

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