



*When a Loved
One Dies*

A GUIDE FOR FAMILIES

UAB MEDICINE

UNIT _____ TELEPHONE NUMBER _____



After the Death of a Loved One

The staff of University Hospital offers our sympathy to you and your family at this time of loss. Grief involves many emotions and can feel like the waves of the ocean—there are high points and low points, and your feelings ebb and flow like the tide. It's common to feel anger, sadness, relief, and guilt. Or perhaps you're numb and don't feel anything right now. All of these are very normal reactions when someone you love dies, be it from a long illness or a sudden tragedy.

We offer this guide to help you understand some of the emotional aspects of dealing with a loss and to provide some practical guidelines that may help you as you tend to the business details of death. Staff here can help you as you make decisions—a chaplain is available 24 hours a day and is always able to come guide you through the initial process. Other staff in the hospital can help you as well.

With your permission, we'd like to stay in touch with you and send out periodic mailings to you throughout the next year. We'll send you information on how to find support groups and other resources, as well as helping you find ways to cope with your grief.

Remember that you don't "get over" losing someone you love. Grief is a process that you'll move through slowly, with many steps backward and forward.



Understanding Normal Grief

Grief feels different for everyone. Much of what you're feeling depends on whom it was that died, your relationship to that person, and the way they died. The grief you feel after your loved one has endured a long illness is different from the grief of someone whose family member died suddenly as the result of an accident, suicide, or homicide. People grieve in different ways—some people cry a lot, and others don't cry at all. There is really no right or wrong way to grieve, as long as you aren't doing harm to yourself or others. Be gentle with yourself, and try to take good care of yourself physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

While most people think of grief as being all about your emotions, grief also affects you in other ways, including your physical health and the way you act. It's normal to feel sick to your stomach, to feel short of breath, or to feel like your heart is racing. Grief is stressful, and it's important to have these symptoms checked by your doctor to make sure you're in good physical health.

It's also normal to feel confused or "fuzzy-headed." It may be hard to concentrate, or you may have a hard time accepting that the death has happened. These, too, are normal feelings and should improve over time.

Remember, everyone is different, and everyone grieves differently. Try to accept that different members of your own family will behave differently than you; we all have to move through the grief process in a way that makes the most sense to us. Expect that things like a smell or a song on the radio may bring about fresh waves of grief.



Talking to Your Child About the Death of a Family Member

When do we tell our child?

Even young children know when something has happened; tell your child as soon as possible so that he or she will not feel left out. Remember that your child is strong and that each child's personality is different and will respond differently. It's best for you to tell your child the truth about the loved one's death; what the child is imagining may be much worse.

Who should tell our child?

It is better for you to tell your child in a calm, supportive, and reassuring way. If you can't, then a family member or friend that the child knows and trusts may give the news. It's okay to ask a member of the medical staff to do so. In either situation, it's helpful if the parent can be present.

What do we tell our child?

You may begin by telling your child you have upsetting and sad news. Gently remind your child of information he or she may already know. "You remember Grandpa hasn't been feeling well." "He hasn't felt well enough to visit us." "Remember, we told you that he has (name the disease), and the medicine couldn't make him well."

Use the word "die." Children can be confused when we substitute other words. Don't say, "Grandpa went to sleep and woke up in heaven" or "Mom has gone on a long journey;" this could lead to the child asking, "Why didn't she take me?" "God needed an angel in heaven" could again lead the child to wonder, "So, why didn't he take me?"

How will our child react to the news?

Normal reactions may be anger, sadness, withdrawal, or silence. Each child is unique. Your child's reaction will depend on how close he or she is to the person who died. Is it a grandfather the child only saw occasionally, or is it a grandfather with whom he or she spent a lot of time?

Your child's reaction will also depend on his or her age. It will depend on your child's experience with death. Has the child experienced the death of a family member or, perhaps, the death of a pet? How much does the child know about death? This knowledge will guide your conversation when talking to your child.

Children may sometimes respond in a way that seems selfish or uncaring. However, it's normal for children to worry about being cared for and to wonder if their normal routine will continue. This is why it's important for you to comfort and reassure your child. Listen attentively to what your child says so that you'll know what his or her concerns are.

Should I let my child attend the funeral?

Children should be given the choice of attending the funeral. There should be a warm and caring person with the child throughout the service. If the child chooses to attend the service, let him or her know what to expect and what will be expected of him or her. Children can help plan the service, choose flowers, or arrange a special tribute, and older children may even want to take part in the service.

How will my child grieve?

A lot depends on your child's age and how close he or she is to the person who died. Young children tend to have short attention spans; they may cry one minute and go outside to play the next. Some people believe that a child's grief changes with age and with understanding of death. Young children may think the deceased person will return; as the child becomes older, he or she begins to realize that death is permanent.

Signs of troubled grief that may call for professional help

- *Failing grades*
- *Trouble returning to everyday routines, such as going to school, interacting with friends, or taking part in appropriate activities*
- *Problems sleeping*
- *Significant decrease or increase in appetite resulting in weight loss or gain*
- *Delinquency*
- *Behavioral problems at school*
- *Changes in personality*
- *Persistent sadness*



Coping With the Loss of a Loved One From Violence

The process of grief becomes complicated when the death of a loved one occurs through violence. Keep in mind that coping with the death of a loved one under any circumstances is difficult; emotions experienced following the loss of a loved one through violence are unique. Below are some of the emotional experiences you may encounter on your journey through the difficult grief process.

Your sense of the world as a safe and secure place may be changed. Don't be surprised if your level of trust becomes compromised. Talk about your experience.

You may feel an extreme sense of guilt that you were not able to protect your loved one at the time of his or her death.

You may feel an overwhelming amount of rage and anger that someone caused the violent death of your loved one. You may have thoughts of revenge towards the individual(s) responsible for that death. It's important that you discuss your feelings with others, particularly those who have experienced the sudden or violent death of a loved one. Support groups can be valuable to help you through emotions that may be unfamiliar to you and to help you understand that these feelings are normal.

As you progress through your grief, you may want to become involved in activities that give a different meaning to the death of your loved one. Some individuals work through their grief by becoming involved in victim advocacy groups.

If the individuals responsible for the death of your loved aren't apprehended and justice rendered, it isn't unusual to feel anger toward the justice system or feel that things are unresolved. You may even feel that victim's rights aren't important. These feelings aren't unusual. Again, talk about your feelings, and maintain contact with the criminal justice system and law enforcement agencies to advocate for your loved one.

Resources

- *Alabama Crime Victims Compensation Commission*

(334) 242-4007, or, toll-free, (800) 541-9833

www.acvcc.state.al.us

This Web site offers valuable information to crime victims and their families. Information is provided on compensatory and legal information.

- *Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD)*

P.O. Box 241474

Montgomery, Alabama 36124-1474

(334) 277-8080

- *National Domestic Violence Hotline*

1-800-799-SAFE (7233)

- *Parents of Murdered Children*

www.pomc.com

- *VOCAL (Victims of Crime and Leniency)*

1-800-239-3219

This statewide organization provides emotional support and resources to families of homicide victims.



The Next Steps

Immediately following the death

- *Have someone call family members to notify them of your loved one's death and let them know if they should come to the hospital.*
- *Give staff the name of the funeral home you have chosen.*
- *Gather all the belongings of your loved one. Depending on circumstances, those belongings may be in the UAB Security Office. The staff can assist you with this.*

Autopsy

Talk to the doctor if you have concerns about whether an autopsy should be performed. Depending upon the circumstances of your loved one's death, an autopsy may be mandated by law.

Office of Decedent Affairs: (205) 934-9844

Organ donation

One person can help up to 100 people through the donation of organs and tissues. All hospital deaths are screened by the Alabama Organ Center for donation opportunities. If your loved one is eligible for donation, someone from the hospital or the Alabama Organ Center will contact you.

Alabama Organ Center

Phone: (800) 252-3677

Web site: www.alabamaorgancenter.org



Funeral considerations

- *Consider bringing a friend or family member with you when you plan the service.*
- *Decide on the type of funeral, such as burial or cremation.*
- *Be aware of cost and the types of payment arrangements accepted by the funeral home you've chosen.*
- *Be aware of state laws regarding embalming bodies (for example, burying the body out of state, length of time between death and burial, open casket, etc.).*
- *Check carefully for burial and life insurance policies.*
- *Decide on a service that is meaningful for you and your family.*
- *Write the obituary. Typical information includes age, place of birth, date of death, occupation, education, memberships held, military service, notable work, and a list of survivors in the immediate family.*
- *Choose an organization to receive donations, should you decide to forego flowers.*
- *Consider donating to the unit where your loved one received care. The donations are used to provide needy patients and families with a variety of necessities, such as meals, medications, and housing.*
- *For information on conducting a burial on private property, please contact the Registration Office of Vital Records in Montgomery at (334) 206-2714.*
- *An excellent Web site with complete information about funerals can be found at www.uaelderlaw.org/funerals.html.*



Special funeral considerations following the death of an infant or child

You may contact a funeral home to pick up your child's body, or you may transport your child's body to the funeral home yourself. UAB Social Services must be contacted to authorize a free casket for transport. Alternately, you may choose hospital cremation. This is a free service, but you do not receive any ashes to keep. If possible, a permit should be signed before you leave the hospital.



Practical and Financial Considerations

Death certificates

The process of securing a death certificate begins in the hospital and is completed by the funeral home. The first original copy will cost \$12, and additional copies can be ordered at the same time for \$4 each. The process of obtaining a death certificate can potentially take up to several weeks, depending on circumstances.

For babies beyond 20 weeks of gestation who had no heartbeat at birth, you may obtain a Fetal Report by contacting Alabama Vital Records. No documentation is issued for babies delivered at less than 20 weeks of gestation.

Alabama Vital Records

P.O. Box 5625, Montgomery, AL 36103

(334) 206-5418

Death certificates can also be obtained through the Jefferson County Department of Public Health.

Jefferson County Department of Public Health

1400 6th Ave. S.

Montgomery, AL 35233

(205) 930-1106

Web site to download application: <http://www.jcdh.org>

Social Security benefits

Spouses, dependent children, and dependent parents may be eligible to draw Social Security benefits. A onetime benefit of \$255 is paid to eligible surviving spouses. If your loved one continues to receive a monthly benefit check in and following the month in which they died, return the check(s) to the Social

Security Administration without cashing or depositing them. Contact Social Security Administration as soon as possible after the death.

Phone: (800) 772-1213

Web site: www.ssa.gov

Employee benefits

Check with all past employers for pension and/or insurance plans.

Veterans' benefits

All honorably discharged veterans are eligible for a flag and footstone for the grave. The funeral home generally helps you obtain the flag and footstone. Some veterans, depending on circumstances, may be eligible to receive a financial allowance towards the cost of the funeral and burial.

Dependent children and/or surviving spouses may be eligible for benefits; contact the Department of Veterans Affairs to determine eligibility.

Phone (Birmingham office): (205) 916-2700

Phone (national): (800) 827-1000

Web site: www.va.gov

Understanding debt responsibilities

The deceased's debts are the responsibility of his or her estate and are usually paid by the probate process. If there is a will, the executor will oversee this process; in the absence of a will, the court will appoint an executor.

Life insurance benefits are not considered part of an estate. Check your policy to see if any clauses cover debt. Know your rights, and don't hesitate to get advice when needed.

Legal Aid Society: (205) 251-3516

Office of Senior Citizens Affairs: (205) 325-1416

Legal Counsel for the Elderly: www.uaelderlaw.org

UAB Business Office: (205) 934-6400

Insurance policies

Check for insurance policies. The status of some policies may change after the death of your loved one, and some may provide benefits to offset funeral expenses.

- *Burial insurance*
- *Mortgage or loan insurance*
- *Life insurance*
- *Credit card insurance*
- *Auto insurance*

Telling others

Inform others of the death as soon as possible.

- *Family and friends*
- *Neighbors*
- *Employer and colleagues*
- *Sporting clubs*
- *Place of worship*
- *Bank*
- *Credit card companies*
- *Department of Motor Vehicles*
- *Mortgage and insurance companies*
- *Utility companies (gas, water, electricity, telephone)*
- *Landlord*
- *Passport office*
- *Social service agencies (Meals on Wheels, home health care, etc.)*

For more information related to grief and loss, call the UAB Pastoral Care Office at (205) 934-4254 or email chaplains@uab.edu.

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