

Finding your way past bereavement

If you lose a loved one to a violent or unexpected death, you likely will experience what professionals call "traumatic bereavement": strong reactions of shock, pain, deep sadness, confusion, guilt and anger. Here's what may happen and how to deal with it:

- Any major loss from violence will affect family members and friends differently. Remember, relationships have distinctive features and losses are unique. Expect that these relationships may change in unanticipated ways.
- Insist on your right to be yourself and do what you need to do to deal with what has happened. Don't let others impose their paths or timetables for bereavement; it is your loss and your grief.
- It may be difficult to believe that such a terrible thing could have happened and extremely hard to fit that event and its implications within the assumptions that you have held about the world, society or God.
- When criminal or civil proceedings complicate bereavement, seek help from individuals and organizations skilled in victim advocacy. They can help you find ways to stay informed and involved, while preparing you for the inevitable frustrations of dealing with the legal system.
- Be patient with yourself and others as you mourn. Especially at first, be content with just getting through a minute, then an hour, then part of a day.
- Try to be tolerant of others who withdraw from you, who don't know how to help you or what to say, or who are afraid of the intensity and duration of your grief. You might have behaved in similar ways before this happened to you.
- Share your needs with others. Ask them for help and give them specific things to do.
- You may discover the most comforting support and most helpful guidance will come from those who have experienced similar losses.
- Don't neglect yourself. Eat nourishing meals, drink plenty of fluids, but not much alcohol, and get the rest and exercise you need.
- Traumatic bereavement leads some people to think they are losing their mind or going crazy; remember that it may take time and effort to develop new "normals."
- You can move from being a victim to being a survivor. It is unlikely you will ever feel the same and you may experience surges of grief from time to time, but you will feel better eventually.

For more resources and contacts about end-of-life issues, go to www.findingourway.net.