

Autism & Grief Project

Fact Sheet



Type of Death May Affect Grief

People die in different ways, such as after a serious illness, or suddenly from a heart attack or accident, or due to suicide or homicide. Everyone grieves in their own way, but the cause of someone's death may impact how you feel.

Below are just a few examples of how different types of death may impact your grief reaction.

Serious Illness

Serious illnesses, such as cancer, heart disease, and Alzheimer's disease, can result in death. When someone dies after a long illness, you may have been prepared for their death because you knew about their illness and you saw their health decline. You might have been told they would die from their illness. Even if you thought you were prepared, you might feel shocked after the person dies. If you provided care for the person during their illness, you may miss your role as a caregiver and that might feel like a loss.

People can also die from a short-term illness, like the flu, COVID-19, or pneumonia. When someone dies from this type of illness, it can feel shocking. You may have thought the person would get better only to learn they died, even if medical professionals did all they could to keep them alive.

Sudden Death

When someone special dies suddenly, from a heart attack or an accident, you might be shocked, surprised, or angry because you had no time to prepare for their death. You may also not know or understand how you are feeling. You could feel like there were many things that you wanted to do or say in the relationship but now you can't because the person is gone.

If someone you rely on dies suddenly, you may feel anxious or worried because you no longer have that person providing care and support for you. You might sense a loss of safety, security, and direction without your support person in your life.

It may take some time to accept that the person has died. You might need to have a friend or family member repeat it to you many times before you believe it really happened.

Suicide Death

Suicide means someone killed themselves. Often, we don't know what the person was thinking or feeling that caused them to die by suicide. The reasons for suicide are complex and do not have a single cause.

Suicide is a sudden death, so you might feel shocked, surprised, or confused about why someone you care about would die this way. You might be angry about the suicide or feel guilty that you didn't know this could happen. These feelings are expected, but it is important to remember that a person's suicide is not your fault or anyone else's fault.

If you have a reason to believe someone you know is thinking about suicide, or if you ever think about suicide, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-TALK (8255), or call 911 immediately. You can also text HOME to 741-741 to be connected to a trained counselor in your area.

Homicide Death

Homicide means that a person was killed by someone else. Sometimes the homicide victim knows the person who killed them. Other times, the person is the victim of an act of violence from someone they did not know. A homicide might make you feel shocked, angry, frustrated, and sad. It may also cause you to feel scared or worried that, if someone you know was killed, you could also be hurt or killed, too. Share how you are feeling with someone you trust or a professional and work together to create a plan to keep you feeling as safe as possible.

Sometimes when a person you know dies by homicide, a police officer may need to investigate the situation. If this happens, communicate with someone you trust about how to handle the situation.

Drug Overdose Death

Sometimes people have a kind of disease called substance use disorder that causes them to use too many or misuse legal or illegal drugs. The disease often makes the person become addicted to the drugs, which can make it very difficult for the person to stop taking them, even if they want to stop. When a person with a substance use disorder uses or misuses too many drugs at one time, they can die.

When someone you know dies from a substance use disorder, you could feel many emotions at the same time. Some people with a substance use disorder can get better with professional help. If you knew about their addiction, you may have tried to help them, or you might wish that you could have helped. If you didn't know about it, you could feel sad that you didn't know how sick they were. All these feelings are natural and experienced by many people after a drug overdose death.