Why Is Death Traumatic?

Death is a trauma to you and your family because you might not expect it or because of how it happened. The death of a loved one may be caused by an accident, attack or injury. Why or how the person died may also put you in danger. Death for any reason makes you sad and that makes it a traumatic event for you.

What happens after it is over?

How, why and when the death happens causes lots of feelings that you have to deal with. You might be so busy dealing with what is going on that you will not have time to feel anything. You may find yourself feeling and acting in ways that are not normal for you. You may even seem to be out of control.

Death as a trauma to you or your family can cause any or all of the following at any time:

- Bad dreams or sad memories about the person or event that caused the death
- Reliving the event
- Being scared of or staying away from anything that reminds you of the death
- Feeling good one minute and bad the next
- Feeling like you are to blame
- Feeling a loss of interest in things you liked
- Feeling mad, sad or even unable to offer help
- Feeling alone, even if there are other people around you
- Feeling numb
- Can’t eat or eating too much
- Having chest pain or shortness of breath
- Sleeping too much, can’t fall asleep or waking up a lot during the night
**WHAT TO DO FIRST**

*Call family and friends.* You can make local calls from the hospital. If you need to make a long distance call, ask hospital staff for help. You may want to wait to make these calls from home.

*See the body.* If your loved one died from a sickness or accident, you will be able to see the body at the hospital. If your loved one died of a murder or suicide, you will not be able to see the body because the police and medical examiner’s office will be gathering evidence. You will be able to see your loved one’s body at the funeral home. If you have any questions, please talk to your doctor, nurse, social worker, chaplain or funeral director.

*Autopsy.* An autopsy is a surgery which tries to find out the cause of death. All emergency room deaths must be reported to the medical examiner. In some deaths such as a murder, the medical examiner must do an autopsy. The examiner’s office will try to respect your religious preferences but you still have to follow the law. You may ask for an autopsy at no cost to you by talking with your doctor or nurse.

*Organ and tissue donation.* One donor can help more than a hundred different people. If you would like more information or would like to donate your loved one’s organs or tissues, talk to your doctor, nurse, social worker or chaplain. A person with special training will talk with you about the donation.

*Personal belongings.* Contact hospital security or the nursing unit for personal belongings of your loved one. If your loved one has died from a murder or suicide, many of their belongings will be taken as evidence. Contact the police at 816-234-5000 to find out if the belongings will be returned to you.

*Funeral arrangements.* You will need to select a funeral home. You can also think about a willed body program. A willed body program may accept a body for medical study and science. On weekdays, please contact Health Information Management (Medical Records) at 816-404-5236 to make plans to have your loved one’s body released to a funeral home. For evenings or weekends, call 816-404-1000 and ask for the Director of Shift Operations. If your loved one’s body is at the medical examiner’s office, call 816-881-6600 to tell them the name of the funeral home.
DURING THE FIRST WEEK

Plan for a funeral or memorial service. Your funeral director can give you choices and help you make decisions about the kind of service you want. Remember funeral services do not have to cost a lot to show your love and respect. If you have concerns about paying for the funeral, speak with the chaplain, social worker or funeral director.

Find key papers. Papers may include bank books, stock certificates, birth certificates, social security card, military discharge papers, tax forms, marriage certificates, and life insurance. If it is too painful to go through your loved one’s things, ask someone you trust to help you. Do not throw anything away until you had the chance to go through them.

Get money in order. If you shared a bank account, the account may have been “frozen” when your loved one died. Ask the bank to release the money to you and set up your own account.

Get copies of the original death certificate. The funeral home will help you with this. Most agencies will not accept a photocopy – it must be an original.

Life insurance. If your loved one had life insurance, call the life insurance company to file a claim along with a copy of the original death certificate.

Social Security or Veterans Administration. Call these agencies if you are eligible for benefits.

Call your loved one’s boss. Tell your loved one’s boss about the death. If your loved one belonged to clubs, groups or organizations, you may want to tell them about the death. Ask for help from a friend if these calls upset you.

If your loved one owed money. If your loved one owed money on a car loan, mortgage, credit card, you need to call the creditor (bank) and let them know about the death. You need to check if the loan can be cancelled or if you will have to keep paying.

Talk to a lawyer. If you have any questions about your legal rights or need help with money concerns, talk to a lawyer. You can call your own lawyer, ask family and friends about a lawyer or call the Kansas City Bar Association at 816-474-4322.
THE FUNERAL SERVICES

How much will a funeral cost? The cost of a funeral depends on the services and items you choose. Many funeral homes have “packages” which may cost less than buying items one by one. Your funeral director can help you with these decisions. Don’t buy “packages” that have services or items you do not want or need.

Which funeral home should I use? Talk with family and friends who may have used a funeral home in the past. Call funeral homes until you find the one that works for you. Check the website https://funeralskc.org (Funeral Consumers Alliance of Greater Kansas City) for additional information. University Health does not approve or suggest any funeral homes or directors.

Where can I find help with funeral costs?

Pre-Paid Funeral Plans – plans bought before death. Check important papers or talk to your loved one’s lawyer to see if your loved one had a plan.

Life Insurance – talk to your loved one’s boss or lawyer and check important papers to see if your loved one had life insurance. The funeral director can help you file a claim.

Crime Victim’s Compensation – If your loved one died because of someone else’s crime and you as a family member are paying the cost of the funeral, you may be able to get help from the Missouri’s Crime Victims’ Compensation program, 800-347-6881. The Crime Victim’s Compensation program is based on regions where the crime took place. For crimes in Jackson County ask for Region 4 and for Clay, Platte, Johnson or Lafayette County ask for Region 1.

Social Security – If your loved one was eligible for Social Security or if you are the child or surviving spouse, you may be eligible for a one-time benefit. Check with your local Security office or a funeral director for more information.

Salvation Army – The Salvation Army receives gifts of burial plots that they will offer to people in need as these plots are open. Call 816-756-1455.

Jackson County Funds – Jackson County may pay for the cost of a cremation. You will need proof of income, resources and residency. Call the County Counselor’s Mental Health Investigator at 816-881-3333 or UH Health Information Management (Medical Records) at 816-404-3125 for help.
TIPS FOR GRIEVING AND HEALING

Let yourself cry and grieve in your own time and in your own way. It is not a sign of weakness to cry and share your thoughts and feelings. There are many things that make grief harder such as the age of the person who died, your tie with that person, how many other deaths you had in a very short period of time, how your loved one died and even if you were able to see the body or not.

Talk about your loved one and share memories with others.

Allow others to help you. If someone asks “What can I do to help?” – have a list ready (e.g. grocery shopping, errands, mowing the yard).

Take care of yourself. Get plenty of rest, eat healthy foods and exercise. As part of grief, some people can get headaches, sleep problems, eating too much or too little, no energy – be sure to keep your regular doctor visits.

Get back to your regular activities. Routines help give you a sense of control in your life. Find new ways to help yourself like writing in a journal, going to a support group, exercising or reading books on grief.

Get counseling if you feel “stuck” in your grief, mainly if you are not able to go to work or do your regular activities. Many people feel fine after the death (numbing) but then have different feelings after the funeral is over and friends/family leave – this is normal grief. Strong feelings of sadness, being alone, anger or guilt can all be a part of grief and again are normal. It is also normal to see changes in your social, work and family life. If you are not able to deal with these changes, get help. It doesn’t mean there is something wrong with you. It just means you need a little help to get you through a very hard time.

Take control of your life. Make your own decisions when you can, but choose someone you trust to help you if you are having problems with bigger decisions. Your life has changed because of your loved one’s death and you cannot go back to the “way things were.” It is a part of grief to make a new “normal” for you.

Don’t use alcohol or other drugs to run away from your feelings or decisions. Alcohol and drugs may seem to help in the short-term but make things worse in the long-term.

Be patient and gentle with yourself and loved ones. Your spiritual life can be tested as you try to find meaning in your loved one’s death.
HELPING CHILDREN GRIEVE

Children, teenagers and adults do not always grieve in the same ways. Very young children may not know that death is real and lasting. They may think the person who died is just away and will come back. Teens may deal with death like a child or like an adult. It is helpful to know what normal grief is and when a child or teen may need help.

Usual grieving in children/teenagers:

- They come to believe that death is real and lasting. (For very young children, the death may not seem real and lasting until they are 6 or 7 years old. At that time, they may feel very sad when they know the person who died is not coming back).

- They are able to deal with their feelings and changes in their life. They find safe ways to deal with strong feelings like sadness, anger or guilt that are a part of grief.

- They stay connected to their family and friends and able to make new friends.

- They keep a healthy connection to the loved one who died and are able to share funny, sad, happy or other memories.

- They find meaning in the death, with time.

- They act like children and teenagers, not like adults who take care of brothers, sisters or parents.

- They may not want to see friends, go to school, take part in usual activities, or study, for short periods of time.

- They may act like the loved one who died because it makes them feel closer to the loved one.

- They may have sleep or eating problems, be afraid to be left alone, have headaches or stomachaches, or be worried about their health or the health of other family members. Many times, with support, these problems get better after a month or so.

Traumatic death – usual grieving in children and teens:
When a child or teen has lived through a traumatic death of a loved one, many of their feelings will be the same as usual grief. But, the traumatic death can cause stronger feelings and different actions. It is helpful for adults to know what is normal about a child or teen's reactions to a traumatic death such as:

- They can’t stop thinking about what they saw
- They have strong feelings of shock, fear, anger or guilt
- They may have severe nightmares
- They may have no energy for doing their usual activities or they may do more activity than normal
- They may be forgetful or be more confused
- They may feel numb or shock for a longer time
- They may stay away from anything that had to do with the death
- They may seem more worried, nervous or fearful

**Signs that a child or teen may need professional help:**

- Bad dreams, feeling at fault, and other thoughts are taking over their life for a long periods of time
- Acting as if they are not upset by the death or staying away from people, places for long periods of time
- Having headaches, stomachaches or other sickness that are not getting better over long periods of time
- Having thoughts of hurting themselves or others
- Never wanting to talk about the person who died or about the death itself
- Big changes in how they act – Being more careless or wild, putting themselves in danger
- Sadness is not getting any better with time
What you can do to help children and teens:

**Talking.** Children and teenagers need to feel they can talk about their worries. Talking with your children helps them with their feelings about the death and lets them grieve.

**Honesty.** Be honest with children and teenagers about the death of a loved one. Answer their questions about the death as clearly as you can. Children are often scared by what is not talked about or explained. Ask a nurse or counselor if you have questions about what to say or how to say it.

**Remember the loved one.** Spend one day each year to honor the life of the loved one. You can take a trip to the cemetery, do something the loved one enjoyed, give time to a cause they valued, or share stories and talk. Give the child or teenager something small that belonged to the loved one. They can keep it to remind them and stay connected to the memory of their loved one.

**Listen.** Be sure to listen to what your child or teenager is saying. Allow them to feel safe when talking about their fears and pain. Give hope that with support and time their pain and fears will decrease.

**Family Patterns.** Keep the family routines as close to the same as you can. Small children don't deal well with big, sudden changes. If you have to change some routines then try to do it as slowly as you can. Encourage children and teens to use their strengths to help each other.

**Empathy.** Let your children know how you are doing with your grief and that you believe their pain. It is helpful for children to know they are not grieving alone.

**Understand.** Some children act out, get angry or act younger than their age as ways to deal with their grief. You may need to talk about the loss now and as time passes and the children grow older.

**Support.** Get help from family and friends for yourself so you in turn can help your children. Healing from grief and trauma takes energy, so try to get rest every day. If you or your child's grief shows signs of being a problem, talk to a counselor.
RESOURCE LIST

Aging Resources
Division of Senior and Disability Services 816-889-3100
Mid-America Regional Council 816-474-4240
Missouri Adult Abuse/Neglect Hotline 800-392-0210

Children’s Resources
Solace House 913-341-0318
(support for grieving children and their families)
Missouri Child Abuse/Neglect Hotline 800-392-3738

Crime Victims/Survivors
Aim4Peace, 24 hour hotline
(reduce violence in the community) 816-352-3069
Crime Victims Compensation 800-347-6881
Crime Victim Advocate 816-234-5205
Crime Stoppers/TIPS Hotline 816-474-8477
Jackson County Prosecutor’s Office 816-881-3555
Domestic Violence Hotline 816-468-5463
Rose Brooks Center – Domestic Violence Hotline 816-545-4700
Hope House 816-461-4673
Sexual Assault Crisis Line (MOCSA) 816-531-0233

Crisis Lines
Mental Health Crisis Line 888-279-8188
Runaway Hotline 800-RUNAWAY or 800-786-2929

Emergency & Financial Assistance
Salvation Army Information & Referral 816-756-2769
United Way Information Line (211) 816-474-5112
Metropolitan Lutheran Ministries 816-931-0027
Social Security Administration 800-772-1213
Missouri Family Support Division 816-889-2000
(Medicaid, Food Stamps, Cash Assistance)
Mental Health

UH Behavioral Health Network 816-404-5700
Swope Health Behavioral Health Center 816-923-5800
ReDiscover Mental Health Services 816-966-0900
Comprehensive Mental Health Services 816-254-3652
The Family Conservancy 913-742-4357
Mattie Rhodes Counseling Center 816-471-2536
(Spanish available)
Samuel Rodgers Health Clinic 816-889-4610
Tri-County Mental Health Center 816-468-0400
Veterans Administration Medical Center 816-861-4700

Organ/Tissue Donation

Midwest Transplant Network 913-262-1668

Willed Body Programs

Kansas City University of Medical & Biosciences 816-283-2242
University of Kansas Medical Center Anatomy &
        Cell Biology 913-588-2735
Kirkville College of Osteopathic Medicine 660-626-2468
Logan College of Chiropractic 636-227-2100 or
        800-782-3344
University of Missouri-Columbia 573-882-2288
St. Louis University 314-977-8027
Washington University – St. Louis 314-362-3597

Shelter/Hotel

Hotline for the Homeless 816-474-4599
American Red Cross (fire related) 816-931-8400
Ronald McDonald House 816-842-8321
(for parents of hospitalized children)
Salvation Army Children’s Shelter 816-756-2769
(for children whose parents are hospitalized)
Hotel – can request a list from UH Social Work Services Department

Substance Abuse Treatment

UH Recovery Health Services 816-404-5850
UH Lakewood Detox Addiction Recovery Program 816-404-8047
National Drug Abuse Crisis Line 800-662-4357
Heartland Center for Behavioral Change 816-421-6670
Alcoholics Anonymous 816-471-7229
First Call 816-361-5900
Support Numbers

Medical Examiner’s Office 816-881-6600
UHTMC* Morgue – Call Security 816-404-1911
UHLMC* Morgue – Call Security 816-404-7911
UH – Corporate Health Information 816-404-3125
Jackson County Burial Assistance 816-881-3333
UHTMC* Birth/Death Certificates 816-404-5236
UHLMC* Birth/Death Certificates 816-404-8245
Kansas City Bar Association 816-474-4322
UHTMC* main phone number 816-404-1000
UHLMC* main phone number 816-404-7000
KCMO Police Department 816-234-5000
UH Social Work Services 816-404-3200
UH HSD and Lakewood Spiritual Care 816-404-3400
UH Trauma Services 816-404-1380

*UHTMC is the downtown campus. UHLMC is the Eastern Jackson County campus.

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