

HURRICANE KATRINA: SURVIVING SUDDEN LOSS

The death of a loved one is painful enough but when death is sudden and combined with the loss of home, community and security, as during a natural disaster like Hurricane Katrina, it doubles our pain and intensifies the grief. Mourning and recovery are more difficult for surviving family members, regardless of their age. Many survivors will be in denial of the tragedy, some for a very long time.

Children's Response to Loss

In general, losing a parent, sibling, relative or friend will mean losing a sense of security for a child. While pre-schoolers have difficulty understanding that death is not temporary, older children, between the ages of five and nine, begin to experience and express their grief.

Children express grief in a variety of ways, including appearing to be unaffected. But, no matter how a child appears on the outside, there may be grief beneath the surface. Here are some common ways children respond to a death and loss:

- anxiety or panic
- unexplained anger
- boisterous play
- crying often and easily
- trouble concentrating
- sleeplessness
- loss of appetite or other eating disruption
- increased physical complaints or illnesses
- acting younger, possibly reverting to bed wetting, thumb sucking or baby talk
- fear of being alone
- sharp drop in school performance or refusal to attend school

Helping Children Cope with a Loss

- **Be patient when responding.** It can take them a long time to recover from a loss. Expect strong reminders, such as the holidays or the anniversary of a death, to bring back grief.
- **Keep children's routines as regular as possible.** Children grieve not only for the person but also for changes in the household and environment of family and friends.

- **Offer children choices, when possible, in what they do or don't do to express their feelings about the death.** Help the child plant a tree or dedicate a place in memory of the person who died.
- **Give children a chance to talk about their feelings, but don't push them to talk.** Children, like adults, need time to grieve and be upset. Let them know you are ready to listen and provide reassurance when they express their feelings. To lessen confusion, avoid expressions such as "passed on" or "went to sleep." Answer their questions about death simply and honestly, but, only offer details they can absorb. Don't overload them with information.
- **In the case of natural disasters like hurricanes and floods, expect children to become fearful, or re-experience their grief and sense of loss.**

Adults' Response to Loss

Some common ways that adults respond to a death and loss include:

- Feeling numb, emotionless or lost
- Feeling cheated
- Feeling guilt over failure to protect their loved one
- Feeling frustration, anger, fear or uncertainty
- Having problems concentrating and making decisions
- Overworking
- Forgetting things
- Having trouble with changes in routine
- Calling in sick frequently

Helping Yourself and Others with Loss

The more sudden and unexpected the death or loss, the harder it is for people to express support. Often, the fear of saying or doing something "wrong" keeps people from offering support. Remember, the more tragic and unexpected the event, the greater the need for support.

Here are some ways to help yourself:

- **Do your mourning now.** Being brave is important but don't miss an opportunity to cry. It's not self indulgent, but a sensible and honest way to deal with your emotions.
- **Hiding your feelings do not make them go away or ease your pain.** Express your feelings.
- **Remember that people do recover from sudden loss** and that you too can move through this terrible pain and begin to heal.
- **Bear in mind that emotional pain isn't constant.** We will love forever but we don't need to grieve forever to honor that love.

- **Get support from others** – counselors, support groups, bereavement groups, compassionate friends, or other sudden loss survivors. You may find them through a hospice, place of worship, or community or social agency.

Here are ways to help others:

- **Acknowledge the loss in some way.** Send a card. Help to plan a memorial service. Observe a moment of silence at a community event.
- **Offer help to the family** by making a meal, providing transportation or babysitting a child.
- **Offer words of sympathy.** Speak from the heart, but be mindful of the different ways in which people mourn.

If your stress doesn't begin to subside or is so strong it interferes with your ability to function in daily life, talk with a trusted relative, friend, doctor or clergy. You may want to make an appointment with a mental health professional. This could be especially important for people who had existing mental health problems or those who've survived past trauma. Don't try to go it alone. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness.

For more information, contact your local Mental Health Association or the National Mental Health Association at (800) 969-NMHA or visit www.nmha.org.

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