

Information Guide for Survivors of Crash Victims

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To The Family of a Crash Victim

There is nothing to compare with the impact and profound shock of losing a loved one to a sudden, unexpected and traumatic death.

Grieving is an important and difficult process. It can be emotionally draining, confusing and sometimes frightening because we usually do not have much experience with it. No two people ever grieve the same way, with the same intensity or for the same duration.

Perhaps most important is the fact that it really helps to know what kind of feelings and experiences are normal and natural for a grieving person to have. Many have found their feelings so intense and their behavior so unlike their usual pattern that they have begun to doubt their own sanity. Give yourself time to heal slowly.

Many survivors may experience a variety of "trigger events." "Trigger events" often remind the survivor of the trauma. They may include:

- Sensing (seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, tasting) something similar to something that one was acutely aware of during the trauma
- "Anniversaries" of the event
- The proximity of holidays or significant "life events"
- Hearings, trial, appeals or other critical phases if there is a criminal justice proceeding
- Media articles about similar events

It is natural to be angry, guilty, afraid and sad. It is natural to feel confused, to have trouble remembering things, to get lost or forget what you are doing. It is natural to wonder if life is worth living and even to think of suicide. It is natural for there to be weeks and months of depression and apathy, for your body to rebel and for you to have difficulty sleeping, and illnesses. It is natural also to feel that the pain will never ease. These are all "normal" reactions to an "abnormal circumstance."

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Coping Skills

You have experienced a devastating loss and will never again be the same person you were before. To deny the pain of this is to shore up serious physical and emotional problems for the future. It takes time to recover from grief, a lot of time, but it also takes a willingness to face the hurt, to work through it and eventually let it go.

Here are some helpful suggestions:

- Express your feelings. When you are feeling grief you need to cry, to get angry, and to share your guilty and unacceptable feelings with someone you trust. The important thing is to seek and find the outlet, which helps you. Feelings are not right or wrong. They simply are. Your feelings are your feelings with no "shoulds" attached.
- Accept help from those who offer it. Understanding and support can make difficult moments easier.
- Ask for help when you need it. Relatives and friends want to help but often do not know quite what to do until you make your needs known to them. Professional help is also available.
- Be kind and patient with yourself. Some days will be more difficult than others.
- Get plenty of rest, eat right, and exercise.
- Seek support from the SD Highway Patrol Crash Assistance Program.
- Be aware of increased grief responses associated with holidays, the anniversary of your loved one's death, birthdays, etc.
- Keep social contacts.

It is important to remember that there is no way of escaping the pain of losing someone you love. It cannot be masked by drugs, alcohol or by pretending it doesn't exist. Trying to avoid the pain only delays and extends it.

Helping Children with Grief

- Be careful about explaining death in half-truths to younger children. They need honest, concrete explanations of what has happened. If the child hears, "Your sister/brother has gone away for a long time," he or she may feel that their sibling has deserted them. The child may then go on to interpret the desertion as a punishment and have strong feelings of guilt. "Your brother has gone to heaven," is in itself impossible for a young child to understand, especially when they learn that the body is buried in the cemetery. "To die is to go to sleep," can be understood by the child as a very real reason for refusing to go to sleep. "Your sister went to the hospital and died," can cause a young child to become extremely fearful of any kind of illness.
- Explain to children that dying is not because someone is good or bad but something that "is just that way." Keeping things simple with children will help, such as a discussion about how everyone dies. "Some people get to live until they are very old, like (insert name), while others live for just a little bit, like _____."

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- To allow you to help kids process their feelings, shift the focus to a "What If" dialog and ask questions like these. When consistent with your beliefs; these also provide an avenue for teaching children how to pray when they are hurt, sad or scared.
 - What if you really missed _____?
 - What if there was something you really wanted _____ to know?
 - What if you felt very sad about what happened to _____?
 - What if you wanted to talk about _____?
- Spend time in play with younger children who may not have adequate communication skills to talk about their feelings.
- Help the child express their feelings by being willing to express yours, and asking the child questions. If he or she is reluctant, phrase questions as if they were someone else's, "What would you say to Jimmy if he asked you what happened to your brother?"
- Remember that most children grieve intermittently rather than chronically. Therefore, do not be upset because your child has periods when the death of a loved one seems unimportant.
- Children may find it easier than parents to clear out personal possessions. They may also find it easier to "put their grief aside" and find normalcy in school or play. If it was a child who died, his friends may be pleased to be given something that belonged to the child.
- Protect young children from witnessing an emotional collapse, but otherwise share as much of the grieving as possible.
- During the early days of grieving and during the service, it is helpful for grieving children to have a personal "ally" to provide stability and understanding. This person calms the anxious child and relieves the parents of total responsibility.
- Children aged six or seven or older should be given all the facts about the death as they become known. Being "left out" or not being told the truth only enhances a growing sense of being unimportant in the family.
- If you see another person who reminds you of the deceased, point this out to the children and explain the grief spasm it has caused. Mysterious behavior on the part of the parent only enhances the child's fear of being left out or of not being loved as much as the deceased.
- Share your grief with your children, but do not depend on them to take care of you in your grieving. Understand that adolescent children may not want to grieve with you.
- Do not ask children to "be strong" for you or for anyone else. That is too great a burden to carry.
- If your child died, talk with surviving brothers and sisters both about pleasant memories of the child who was killed as well as unpleasant memories. This will help them to understand that the child who died was not perfect. Placing the dead child on a pedestal can cause great insecurity for the surviving siblings.
- Explain to siblings that no one can replace the child who is dead, and you love them for just who they are.
- As children get older and move to the next developmental stage, they may need to revisit the death and their feelings, in order to accommodate it to their new maturity.

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Practical Matters Needing Attention

At such a difficult and painful time, it is very hard to focus on the practical yet essential matters that must be dealt with. We hope this information will assist you in getting through this traumatic time.

*Medical Examiner and Funeral Arrangements

Because of the nature of your loved ones death, it may be necessary for an autopsy to be performed in order to determine the actual cause of death. This will be conducted at the Medical Examiner's Office. In order for you to make the necessary arrangements you should be aware of the following:

- Call the funeral home of your choice to inform them of the death and your desire to use their services. The funeral home will call the Medical Examiner's Office directly to arrange transportation of your loved one back to the funeral home.
- The Medical Examiner may normally take up to 48 hours to complete his procedure and will call your funeral home when the examination has been completed and they will arrange for transporting your loved one to the funeral home.
- Your funeral home will make an appointment with you to come into their office to make the funeral arrangements.

*Important Papers You Will Need to Locate

- **Prearranged Funeral Policies** – If there has been a prearranged agreement, you will need to locate it immediately so that funeral arrangements can be completed.
- **Cemetery Lot Deeds** – If one is not already purchased, this will have to be done in most cases. Cemetery lots are handled by the cemetery, separate from the funeral home.
- **Wills** – If there is a will, try to think where it is kept, security deposit box, attorney's office, home? If there is no will, contact your attorney to see if the estate must go through probate. You may also call the Probate Court for assistance.
- **Insurance Policies (life, disability, health, travel)** – These documents may be kept in the same place as the will. Don't forget, some organizations such as the National Rifle Association and some gas company travel clubs automatically cover the member with some type of insurance.
- **Bank Checking and/or Savings Accounts** – If the accounts are in the two names, the survivor will have access. If the account is in the deceased's name only, money cannot be taken from the account until an executor is appointed. An attorney can help you draw up the appropriate forms for the bank.
- **Stocks and Bonds** – Joint ownership goes to the survivor. Single ownership goes into the estate for probate.
- **Annuity Payments** – If the deceased was receiving annuity checks, you must notify the company of the death. Do not cash any checks dated after the date of death. Return them to the company. If there is a beneficiary, the checks will go to them as soon as the requirements are met to certify the death.

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- **Mortgages** – Sometimes, if insurance coverage was purchased, the mortgagee will be paid off at the time of death. Check your papers. The insurance premium is usually paid in the mortgage payment.
- **Marriage Certificate and Birth Certificates of Surviving Children** – These will be necessary for survivor benefits with Social Security. Children may receive benefits up to certain ages (older if still in school). The widow or widower may be eligible for benefits as well. Contact your Social Security office for assistance.
- **Military Papers or VA Claim** – If the deceased was a veteran, you may be eligible for veteran's burial allowance, widow's pension and/or VA insurance. Contact your VA regional office for assistance.
- **Death Certificate** – You can get a certified copy of the death certificate from your funeral home. Survivors will need copies of the death certificate for social security, insurance company, banks or other matters that could come up later where proof of death is needed, so you may wish to order several copies.

*Precautions to Block Identity Theft

- Immediately send death certificate copies to the three main credit reporting bureaus. Request that a “deceased alert” be placed on the credit report.
- Mail copies as soon as possible to banks, insurers and other financial firms requesting account closure or change of joint ownership.
- Report the death to the Social Security Administration at 800.772.1213 and the IRS at 800.829.1040. Also notify the DMV. The funeral home may report the person's death to Social Security. However accomplished, you will want to ensure Social Security is notified.
- In obituaries, don't include the deceased's birth date, place of birth, last address or job.
- Starting a month after the death, check the departed's credit report at annualcreditreport.com for suspicious activity.

Victim's Rights and the Media

Crash Assistance Program staff will do their best to notify the family of the crash victim of information being released about the crash. It is important to the South Dakota Highway Patrol that you know what information is being released about your loved one and the crash. Please understand that sometimes the media will acquire information before we have been given the authority to release it to the family, and the situation is beyond our control.

The media can be resourceful and will often talk to anyone and everyone they can to get a story. At times people who did not know the victim well or any of the circumstances surrounding his/her death will make exaggerated statements that are incorrect, based on rumors. This is very frustrating and painful for the family of the victim.

- You have the right to grieve in privacy.
- You have the right to say "no" to an interview. Never feel that because you have unwillingly been involved in an incident of public interest that you must personally share the details and/or your feelings with the general public.

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- You have the right to select the spokesperson or Crash Assistance Program personnel of your choice. You have the right to expect the media to respect your selection.
- Should you decide to share information with the media; you have the right to select the time and location for media interviews. Remember, the media is governed by deadlines. However, nobody should be subjected to a reporter arriving unannounced at the home of the crash victim's family.
- You have the right to request a specific reporter. Don't hesitate to request the reporter you feel will provide accurate and fair coverage of your story.
- You have the right to refuse an interview with a specific reporter even though you have granted interviews to other reporters. You may feel that certain reporters are callous, insensitive, uncaring or judgmental. It is your right to avoid these journalists at all costs. However, be aware that the reporter may write the story regardless of your participation.
- You have the right to say "no" to an interview even though you have previously granted interviews. It is important to remember that survivors of crash victims often ride an "emotional roller coaster." You may be able to talk one day and then physically and emotionally unable the next day. You should never feel "obliged" to grant interviews under any circumstances.
- You have the right to release a written statement through a spokesperson.
- You have the right to refrain from answering any questions with which you are uncomfortable or that you feel are inappropriate.
- You have the right to demand a retraction when inaccurate information is reported. All news mediums have methods of correcting inaccurate reporting or errors in stories.
- You have the right to file a formal complaint against a reporter. A reporter's superior would appreciate knowing when her or his employee's behavior is unethical, inappropriate or abusive.
- You have the right at all times to be treated with dignity and respect by the media.
- From time to time, survivors may be given information about the crash, which should not be released immediately. Please respect the confidentiality of any information you receive in such circumstances.

When Asked: "Is There Anything I Can Do To Help?"

Yes, there is much that you can do to help. This guide suggests the kinds of attitudes, words and acts, which are truly helpful.

Perhaps you do not feel qualified to help. You may feel uncomfortable and awkward. Such feelings are normal; don't let them keep you away. The simple communication of the feeling of caring is probably the most important and helpful thing anyone can do. The guidelines, which follow, show how to communicate that you care.

1. Get in touch by telephone. Let your genuine concern and caring show. Even if much time has passed, it's never too late to express your concern. In fact, your presence usually will be more welcome in the months following the funeral when fewer people call.
2. Say little on an early visit. In the initial period, your brief embrace, your press of the hand, your few words of affection and feeling may be all that is needed.

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3. Avoid clichés and easy answers. "He had a good life," "It's God's will," and "Aren't you lucky that..." are not likely to help. A simple "I'm sorry" is better. Do not attempt to minimize the loss.
4. Be yourself. Show your own natural concern and sorrow in your own way and in your own words.
5. Don't be afraid to mention their loved one's name. They have not forgotten it, and by avoiding it, tension and uncomfortable feelings are created. Survivors need to talk about their loved one and the circumstances surrounding his/her death, sometimes over and over.
6. Keep in touch. Be available. Phone calls and notes are tremendously important to the survivor especially in the months following the death. Many survivors are just beginning to deal with their grief 3-6 months after the death. This is when they really need the support and care from friends and family. They need to be reminded that they are not forgotten.
7. Help attend to practical matters. Help answering the phone, addressing thank you cards, preparing meals, care of the children and house. This kind of help lifts burdens and creates a bond.
8. Accept silence. If the survivor doesn't feel like talking, don't force conversation. Silence is better than aimless chatter.
9. Be a good listener. Accept whatever feelings are expressed. Listen nonjudgmentally. Do not change the subject. Be as understanding as you can be.
10. Do not attempt to tell the bereaved how s/he feels. Never tell a survivor that you understand how they feel. Unless you have lost a loved one in a crash, you don't!
11. Do not probe for details about the death. If the survivor offers information, listen with understanding. At times survivors may not be able to share any details of the death because of on-going investigation. Be respectful of this.
12. Comfort children in the family. Do not assume that a seemingly calm child is not grieving. If you can, be a friend to whom the child(ren) can confide feelings and with whom tears can be shed. Children should not be shielded from the grieving of others.
13. Have patience. Emotions will go up and down. Often times family and friends are the ones who must endure the anger the survivor is feeling. Survivors often inappropriately direct their anger at those closest to them. It is a safe outlet for the survivor and family and friends should not take it personally.
14. Give the survivor permission not to grieve. The survivor needs to know that it is okay not to grieve.
15. Help the survivor to find a life-enhancing way of honoring the memory of their loved one. A donation to a charity, church, museum, school or a scholarship program in the name of the loved one. Lighting a candle or planting a tree or flowers on the anniversary of the loved one's death.

When a loved one dies unexpectedly, friends and families are often at a loss for words because they too are in shock. It will mean so much more to the survivors if you tell them how you feel rather than say nothing. An example: "I'm at a total loss for words. I don't know the right thing to say or do because I don't believe it myself. But I couldn't *not* come. If you ever feel like talking, I'll listen and if you would rather change the subject we can talk about it another time."

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Resources regarding information included in this handout are:

- No Time for Good-byes by Janice Harris Lord
- Victim's Rights and the Media by National Victim Center
- What If by Hollie Strand
- NH Attorney General's Victim Assistance Unit
- Here's How to Block ID Theft, by AARP
- Office for Victims of Crime www.ovc.gov

Have an experience that has been meaningful or a resource that has been helpful to you? Please feel free to suggest sharing it in this guide with the South Dakota Highway Patrol Crash Assistance Program (CAP): cap@state.sd.us