

# What To Do When A Loved One Dies

In 1971, my mother died in my arms. It wasn't inspirational; it was terrifying. I felt completely helpless, sick physically and emotionally.

Being with a loved one at the time of death may not have been right for you—it may have been impossible. But looking back I wouldn't trade that time for any of the holidays, celebrations, or successes I've had. I'm very glad I was there. It was right for me. I no longer grieve for my mother, but I still miss her and miss other family members who have died, the close friends who are no longer here, and the loss of family dogs with whom I relaxed, shared secrets, and took long walks. The shock and grief for those who are no longer in my life have turned to memories. If someone you loved has just died that might sound preposterous, but it will happen with time.

After working months and months on a book about what to do when a loved one dies, what strikes so profoundly is not death but the miracle of life. Now I stare at babies and see precious, perfect human beings bawling to make their tiny selves heard. At children running and screaming and jumping and making noise. At young people strutting their stuff like tropical birds. At people “my age” with a deepening sense of value, acting as if they've suddenly found all the answers. And at old people—those well up in their eighties—wrinkled with lines of life. Once again, for the millionth time, I realize that this is the reality of life, the cycle of death, and the scheme in which we're all involved. As journalist Jack Anderson said, “I look at the universe and I know there's an architect.” This is what writing a book about death has meant to me.

Intellectually, we know death is all around. However, when death comes close, over time, we forget it, ignore it, deny it. Perhaps like you, when I started to write this book, my own death and the death of those whom I love rarely entered my mind.

If someone you loved has recently died, you know it's not possible to prepare for the death. Yet with this book and the information within these pages, you should be able to handle the situation. In a difficult time, this book can help.

Within the pages we'll talk about how to manage during situations that are uncomfortable, new, and often heartbreaking. We'll discuss options for funerals and memorial services, what to do should the death become a media event, and the procedures when death occurs out of the state or country. We'll cover costs, discuss how to get your “house” in order, explain wills, hospice, and grief, and explore the issues of suicide, stillbirth, and AIDS. At various intervals throughout the book are sections called “Where to Get Help.” These sections recommend self-help books and detail how to contact support groups or organizations that can be of assistance during this difficult time. Sometimes the help you need is as close as calling in a neighbor immediately after the death of a loved one, as recommended in chapter 1, Immediate Action. In another circumstance, you may need to call a representative of the United States Department of State, for example, if a loved one has died while traveling overseas.

Often after a loved one has died, survivors begin to understand the need to inform the public regarding the specifics of the death. While it might not seem remotely possible that you will want to bring a message on the circumstances of your loved one's death or be able to fathom how it might be presented to television newspeople, journalists, or a room crowded with men and women, this often happens. That's what Candy Lightner thought after the drunk driver killed her daughter. And yet from this horrendous event came the birth of Mother's Against Drunk Driving (MADD), which has become an international movement saving countless lives. Because survivors often become activists against the cause which has snatched the lives of loved ones, we've included a section on how to prepare for and give interviews.

Some of those who contributed to the book take a warm, caring attitude toward the transition that we call death. Others look it squarely in the eye and refuse to mince words, as illustrated with interviews with an American Baptist minister, Rev. Diana Cole Veazey, and Rabbi Maurice Lamm.

When reading the interviews and essays, you'll find a full range of expressions and euphemisms others prefer instead of the word death. Some of the terms sound more like a commercial for Kodak film or Hallmark: "She's with the angels" or "We lost him last year." However, within the text, we'll talk about death in plain terms. This is not done to be heartless, but so that you can understand clearly what has happened. If words such as death, dead, and dying offend you or you cringe with the term deceased, feel free to substitute words that you are more relaxed using. Personally, I like the euphemism of "passing on." It mirrors my personal philosophy of my loved ones moving from this dimension into another.

Throughout the book we will be talking about and referring to "family." Family in this context includes anyone who loved the person who died. One does not have to be related by blood or marriage to accept this term. While I have a small blood-related family, perhaps like you, I'm also "family" to dear friends, and often feel closer to many of these men, women, and children in my immediate circle than the distant relations I haven't kept up with in years. We have also attempted to avoid any sexist references. If there is anything you find offensive, it is unintentional.

With this revision, the contact information you'll find throughout the pages for self-help groups and other resources has been verified. It was decided that web addresses (also called URLs) would not be included since they change, as do telephone numbers and addresses. Most self-help groups have websites and you can contact the organization for newsletters and other materials that can help in a time of need.

Reading and applying the material can help you get through the experience of death and perhaps make the road a little smoother. With the information you can get a "handle" on the pain, but any death hurts, including that of a cherished family pet as we'll discuss in chapter 10. Additionally, my hope is that this book can help you understand what's going on "inside," as well as how to cope with and work with the external changes brought on by the death of someone you loved.

Let this book be your guide. It tells you What To Do When A Loved One Dies.