

# Uncharted Journey

*Navigating Grief After an Unexpected Loss*



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## *Navigating Grief After an Unexpected Loss*

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The words of the emergency room doctor echoed like a slamming door: “I’m very sorry; we have done everything we could. The injuries were just too severe...” Suddenly, Richard’s whole world seemed to collapse around him. Just a few hours earlier, they were talking about their hopes and dreams, the places they would visit, the people with whom they wanted to spend time. “How could this be happening now?” he wondered aloud.

Now, instead of planning next summer’s holiday, Richard was faced with planning a funeral. Instead of a fabulous trip, Richard grappled with beginning a completely unplanned journey – a journey through the depths of sadness called grief. As you travel this uncharted journey, the following ideas may help.

### Take care of yourself

Grief always takes a toll on our physical well-being but grief after an unexpected death can be particularly challenging. Commonly, people who have suffered an unexpected loss report nightmares or “flashbacks” to the event, sometimes replaying the episode over and over in their minds. Many people tend to want to avoid the place where the accident occurred or where their loved one died. And you might even find yourself feeling particularly vigilant, such as driving more carefully, fearful about your own safety or being obsessed with your physical health.

These experiences, related to the traumatic or unexpected nature of the loss, usually subside in a few weeks. Nevertheless, sleep disruption can leave one feeling exhausted. Healthy eating and adequate exercise can help immeasurably in managing the physical effects of grief. Your doctor can advise you on appropriate nutrition, rest and exercise that is right for you, so make sure to get a thorough physical examination and work to take care of your health.

### Embrace emotions

After an unexpected death the usual emotions of grief like sadness, anger and guilt can be quite intense. You might find yourself intensely angry at the person who caused the death, a doctor, God or even your loved one. Thoughts like: *What could I have done differently? ...If only I had driven her home from that party... If he would have just told me he wasn’t feeling well... or I regret having that argument...* often flood our hearts and minds. Keeping a journal of your thoughts and feelings can be very helpful, perhaps starting a page with words like, *Today, I missed you the most when... or I wish... or I regret...*

### Accept unanswered questions

When a death is unexpected, frequently there are many unanswered questions. Perhaps the cause of death will not be definitely known for several months. You might feel overwhelmed at thinking about your loved one’s last days, hours and minutes; and some questions may never be completely answered. Telling yourself that it is okay to not know everything is helpful.

## Participate in ceremonies

When we learn that someone we love has died suddenly, everything in us wants to believe that the words are not true. Some people even have the mistaken notion that the funeral – seeing the body, hearing favourite music and gathering with family and friends – will make the pain worse. As a matter of fact even though the rituals after a sudden death are difficult, the pain becomes a means to healing.

Participating in the funeral or memorial service helps confirm the reality of the death and helps us remember the relationship that we have enjoyed. It helps us reaffirm our basic beliefs and it provides a means to say goodbye. Through attendance and participation in the services we actually begin the process of allowing our lives to be transformed by our grief.

As grief is healed, gradually we find renewal and hope for the future.

## Involve children

Being honest with children about what happened is one of the most supportive gifts you can give to younger members of the family. They might exhibit unexpected behaviour – regressing in toilet training for example, exhibiting angry outbursts, or having difficulty concentrating at school.

Make sure that the other caregivers in the child's life know what has happened. Don't be afraid to let the children attend and participate in the funeral ceremonies since what they think happened, or imagine what their loved one looks like, is often far worse than the reality. For example, when a child asks for specific information about the death, try asking, "What is it you would like to know?"

## Anticipate holidays

Holidays, anniversaries and special events can be especially difficult after an unexpected death. Finding a birthday gift that your loved one had hidden away, for example, or deciding how to decorate and celebrate are little details that require great energy.

Talk with family and supportive friends about how you dread the special day. Most importantly, find ways to observe the day that acknowledge its importance but that seem right for you and your family.

## Stay connected

After traumatic losses some people want to hide away. Even if you fear what others think or are worried about crying in public, resist the urge to withdraw. Everyone needs some time alone but you also need supportive people.

Find supportive people in your family, neighbourhood or faith community. Occasionally accept the invitation from others to join them for lunch and try not to worry about how you will "hold up". Reach out and stay connected, even when you think you would rather withdraw.

## Join a support group

The grief journey is best made with others and bereavement support groups provide great gathering places to exchange ideas and find support. Your funeral director, a member of the clergy, or a healthcare professional can recommend resources designed especially for people who have suffered an unexpected death.

## Explore your faith

Unexpected losses raise big questions about the value and meaning of life, the reason for suffering and the role of faith in life. You can explore the meanings you derive from your faith, read scripture or other literature, pray, talk with a clergyperson or join with a congregation for worship.

While an unexpected death might raise big questions or even challenge your beliefs, take time to contemplate and draw support from your faith traditions.

## Seek extra help

Unexpected losses can complicate grief. Consider seeking the counsel of a doctor, member of the clergy or mental health professional. The objectivity and “listening ear” such a person provides can help you immeasurably, especially as you work through the unusual difficulties following an unexpected death.

*Like Richard, you certainly did not plan for this journey in grief. The unexpected death of a loved one leaves us feeling vulnerable and uncertain about the future. However, surrounding yourself with supportive people – friends, family and professionals – will help you navigate the difficult, uncharted journey you now face.*

*William G. Hoy*



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STEVENAGE • 01438 316623

HITCHIN • 01462 438422

KNEBWORTH • 01438 812365

BUNTINGFORD • 01763 274111

WELWYN GARDEN CITY • 01707 390018

WELWYN • 01438 714686

HERTFORD • 01992 582052

WARE • 01920 468551