

# When Someone Dies...



*Information for Family and Friends  
of a person who has died within  
hospital, home or a care facility.*

We know this is a difficult time for you. All the people who helped care for your relative or friend wish to offer their sympathy.

If you find you have questions in the days ahead, please call:

\_\_\_\_\_

at \_\_\_\_\_

The Hospital Unit/Facility/Health Unit which cared for your relative or friend is:

\_\_\_\_\_

These are the names of the health care members who spoke with you:

Nurse: \_\_\_\_\_

Doctor: \_\_\_\_\_

Chaplain: \_\_\_\_\_

Social Worker: \_\_\_\_\_

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Primary contact: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone number: \_\_\_\_\_

The death of a relative or friend is one of the most stressful things that happens in life. If death was sudden or unexpected, your feeling of shock can be overwhelming. Even when the person was ill and death was expected, it is still hard to be prepared.

As you try to deal with your grief, it can be difficult to remember what the nurse, doctor or social worker said to you. It can be even more difficult to think of what you need to do next.

We hope this booklet will answer some of your questions, and help you as you make the necessary arrangements. It is important at this time to remember to look after yourself. This booklet explains about some of the feelings you may have and suggests ways of caring for yourself. There are many people and organizations that can help you; we've included a list of some of these in this booklet.

## *Table of Contents*

---

### **Questions you may have..... 6**

- What happens immediately after the death?
- What about organ donation?
- What is a Coroner's Case?
- What is an autopsy?
- What is a death certificate?
- Who makes the funeral arrangements?
- What happens to clothing and valuables?
- Making the decisions that have to be made next

### **What do you do now?..... 9**

- What to do first
- Who to notify
- Planning the funeral
- Special situations
- Survivor benefits

### **Caring for yourself ..... 22**

- Grief
- Children
- Your own well-being

### **Resources ..... 26**

- Recommended readings

## Questions you may have

---

### What happens immediately after the death?

A doctor or nurse pronounces that death has occurred.\* In hospital, whenever possible, the body is left for a short time on the nursing unit so that if you wish, you can spend some time there. Then the body is taken to the hospital morgue until arrangements are made for release to a funeral home. If your religious or cultural traditions or the family's personal wishes require direct transfer to the funeral home, this can usually be arranged (unless the death is a "coroner's case"). In these situations, it is possible to have the funeral home come directly to the unit and pick up your relative or friend. Please advise the unit in advance if this is your wish. Delays may occur in coroner's cases.

In facilities or at home, the family needs to contact the funeral home of choice. The body is then picked up and taken directly to the funeral home.

### What about organ donation?

There are provincial laws about organ donation. The hospital is expected to ensure that the wishes of people who have died are respected in regard to donating their organs. The hospital is responsible to approach families of potential donors to seek confirmation of what the patient may have documented or discuss what he or she would have wanted. Organ donation may not be possible, depending on the person's age, type of illness and where the person has died, if outside the hospital. Eyes are the most common organ donated. Please let nurses or doctors know if the person wished to be a donor or if you want more information about organ donation. You can also visit the BC Transplant website, [www.transplant.bc.ca](http://www.transplant.bc.ca).

*\*Expected/planned deaths in the home may not require pronouncement if appropriate prior arrangements have been made with the family physician and funeral home. For more information refer to the Joint Protocol for Expected/Planned Home Deaths at [www.health.gov.bc.ca/hcc/pdf/expected\\_home\\_death.pdf](http://www.health.gov.bc.ca/hcc/pdf/expected_home_death.pdf).*

### What is a Coroner's Case?

Sometimes the law requires that death must be reported to the coroner. This happens when a sudden or unexpected death occurs, and in other cases specified by law or by facility/hospital policy. The coroner discusses what has happened with the family doctor and any specialists who were involved. The coroner then decides whether or not an autopsy is needed. If an autopsy is needed, this may mean that the body cannot be released immediately. If so, the coroner will notify the next-of-kin. The coroner's office will try to accommodate your religious and cultural traditions concerning death.

### What is an autopsy?

An autopsy is surgery that is done after a person dies to find out what caused the death. Only a few people will need an autopsy. Sometimes the doctor may ask the next-of-kin to sign a consent form giving permission for an autopsy. The autopsy findings are sent to the deceased's family doctor. The family can learn of the results through the family physician.

### What is a death certificate?

At the time of death, the doctor completes the Medical Certification of Death. This form is needed by the Department of Vital Statistics to issue the Death Certificate (which is not the Medical Certification of Death).

The death certificate is a legal document that is needed to settle the deceased's affairs. Family can get the Death Certificate from the Funeral Director. **You may need several copies of this certificate.**

## Who makes the funeral arrangements?

It is up to you to choose a funeral home or memorial society. Your religious advisor can help. Social Workers can also assist. When you have made your choice, the funeral director will ask you to sign a release form so they can bring the body to the funeral home. (More about planning the funeral on page 14.)

## What happens to personal belongings?

In hospital, if you did not take your relative's or friend's valuables with you when you left the hospital, call the hospital cashier's office to make arrangements to get them. It is important to phone before coming. Either the Executor of the estate named in the will, or the next-of-kin on the hospital registration can pick up belongings.

<b>VGH:</b> 604-875-4068 Monday to Friday 8:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.	<b>LGH:</b> 604-984-5862 Monday to Friday 8:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.
<b>UBCH:</b> 604-822-7555 Monday to Friday 10:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.	<b>Richmond:</b> 604-278-9711 Check with Switchboard

**St. Paul's Hospital:** 604-682-2344

Clothing is usually kept on the nursing unit for 48 hours. Please call the unit before coming to get it.

In care facilities, personal belongings, furniture, and equipment are removed from the resident's room and stored if the family is unable to take them away at the time of death. These items are usually picked up within a few days of the death.

If the person died at home, families often wonder about disposal of medications which are left over. Although these medications cannot be re-used, families can return these medications to the Pharmacy.

## Making the decisions that have to be made next...

When you get home, there will be many things that need to be done. Remember that whether the death was sudden or expected, it is always a very stressful time.

Try not to make decisions too quickly. Try to take care of your own physical and emotional needs. Let others help you.

## *What do you do now?*

---

### What to do first ...

When someone dies, there are many personal and legal things that need to be done. It can be confusing and worrisome to try to remember all the details. You might use the blank pages of this book to make lists and keep notes. Friends and family usually want to help. You might let them deal with the daily household activities or phone calls while you make the funeral arrangements.

### Here are some things you will need to do:

- Make a list of relatives and friends who need to be notified. Find out if people who live out- of-town want to come to the funeral or memorial service. This may make a difference as to when you decide to hold the service.
- Contact the funeral home or memorial society and arrange a meeting to discuss the funeral arrangements. Further on in this booklet you will find some information about planning the funeral. Your health care worker will be able to provide some information pamphlets as well.



## Who to notify ...

### The following should be notified of the death:

- The deceased's employer.
- Life insurance companies. Survivor benefits should be applied for as soon as possible. Remember that the deceased may have had a life insurance policy with the employer as well as with private companies.
- Health care insurance plans covering the deceased.
- Automobile insurance company, and the nearest motor vehicle office.
- Banks where the deceased had accounts.
- Credit card companies and other creditors. (Some debts may be covered by insurance clauses that cancel all debt.)
- Pension authorities: Old Age Security (OAS), Canada Pension Plan (CPP), company pension, and any others. The phone number for OAS/ CPP is **1-800-277-9914**.
- Union, Legion and any clubs or organizations of which the deceased was a member.
- Remember to notify the deceased's landlord, cancel utilities, newspaper and magazine subscriptions. If the deceased lived alone, notify the post office and tell them where to send any mail.
- If the deceased is a Status Indian, contact Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, BC Region Estates Unit, 1-888-917-9977 or consult the website [www.ainc-inac.gc.ca](http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca). Click on Benefits & Rights, then Estates.

## Notes

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Planning the funeral ...

(also see Special Situations, page 17)

Whether you have experienced the death of someone close to you before, or this is the first time you have had to make funeral arrangements, the shock and grief you are feeling can leave you confused about what to do.

We hope the following will be helpful as you make your plans. Above all, take time to consider your decisions. Don't be rushed. For expected/planned deaths, some of the arrangements can be made in advance of the death.

- Whatever you decide - whether it is a religious or secular service (or celebration of life), private or public, elaborate or simple, burial or cremation - it can be healing to mark the death of a loved one with a service or ritual that has meaning for the people involved.
- When you are deciding on the date for the service, remember that distant relatives and friends will need time for travel. Remember, too, that if the death is a coroner's case or an autopsy is needed, there may be a delay before the body is released to the funeral home.
- Some airlines offer discounted rates (called compassionate fares) for travel to a funeral. You must ask the airline when making travel arrangements.
- The deceased may have left written instructions about the funeral in or along with a will. Check with the deceased's lawyer or executor before making funeral plans.
- If you have a religious/spiritual affiliation, call the leader of your religious/spiritual community who will meet with you and your family to discuss what kind of funeral or memorial service will be appropriate. Keep in mind any wishes that the deceased may have expressed.
- If you have no religious affiliation, a discussion with family or friends can help you decide what kind of funeral or memorial service to have. Tell the funeral home your wishes - they will help you find the appropriate person to conduct the service. Funeral celebrants are available to officiate services. Again, keep in mind the wishes of the deceased.
- You may already know which funeral home or memorial society you wish to use. If not, ask friends, your religious advisor, cultural or ethnic leaders. Some funeral homes specialize in providing services for particular religious or ethnic groups. Funeral homes all have 24-hour phone service.
- The cost of funeral services vary greatly so compare costs. There are a variety of packages; some can be more elaborate and more expensive than you may be able to afford.
- When you go to the funeral home to arrange the funeral, it always helps to take a trusted friend or relative with you to help with the decisions.
- Be sure to consider what can be reasonably afforded and discuss this openly with the funeral director. Before you sign the contract for the funeral, be sure that the total cost of the services is clear to you, and that you agree with it.
- If not already done, the funeral home or memorial society will make arrangements to move the deceased's body from the hospital. Funeral homes can also assist with arrangements to transport the body home if the person died away from home.
- The website [www.bcfunerals.com](http://www.bcfunerals.com) has helpful information including a membership directory of funeral homes in BC.



- The funeral home will help you write an obituary notice and place it in the newspaper, and will help you get copies of the Death Certificate. **Ask for several copies as you may need them to settle the deceased's affairs.** Please note that each copy of the Death Certificate may cost at least \$27. In certain cases, where the deceased has had a long relationship with the bank, the bank may notarize copies of the Death Certificate free of charge. When using the notarized copy, you may be asked to also show an original of the Death Certificate.
- The funeral director will need to know the names of pallbearers if you plan to have them. Be sure to check with the relatives or friends you have chosen to be sure they will be able to perform this service.
- Decide about flowers. Some people prefer to suggest donations to a charitable organization. This should be mentioned in the obituary notice.

## Special Situations ...

- You may wish to have your relative or friend buried or cremated in another city. If the funeral will be elsewhere in BC, another province or country, you will need to make arrangements with a funeral home in that community, province or country. They will contact the people in Vancouver to transfer the deceased's body. The funeral director will then make the arrangements you want. Be sure to confirm the costs of a transfer.
- **If money is a problem:**
  - You might be eligible for help from a union, society, lodge or other association to which the deceased belonged. Contact the appropriate organization before you make any arrangements.
  - Veterans with limited financial means may qualify for a burial provided by the Last Post Fund. Contact the local Legion office.
  - The Ministry of Social Development provides funeral arrangements for those who are on social assistance or who have no ability to pay.  
*Next-of-kin must contact the Ministry before making any arrangements (604-660-1156).*
  - If the deceased has no relatives or friends able to provide the funeral, the Office of the Public Trustee will do so **(604-660-4444)** or refer to the website: [www.trustee.bc.ca](http://www.trustee.bc.ca).





# *Caring for yourself*

---

## **Grief**

The way we grieve may be shaped by our personality, our culture, our religious or spiritual beliefs, and by the way the person died. Each person feels grief in a very individual way. Some people react with silence, others with an outpouring of feelings.

In your grief, you may feel some or all of the following emotions: fear, anger, anxiety, exhaustion, frustration, loss of control, mistrust, and guilt. Or you may simply feel numb.

These are all normal emotions that can happen when someone has lost a person close to them. They are natural parts of grief.

## **Your grief process may include the following:**

### **Shock and disbelief**

This is usually the first thing people feel at the news of the death of a loved relative or friend. Numbness or denial are responses that protect you when reality is too much to accept.

### **Anguish and despair**

With awareness of the death, a person feels the pain of the loss. The realization often causes extreme anxiety, and feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. The intensity of your feelings can be frightening. It is normal to feel that the pain will never end. You may cry and have sleeping difficulties. Crying is a healthy way of releasing emotion.

You may find yourself painfully searching and pining for the person who has been lost, and preoccupied with thoughts of the dead person. Some people may feel a need to do things which seem strange to others. Some people who have lost their spouse have a need to wear a piece of their spouse's clothing, carry around a personal item that belonged to the deceased person, or have conversations with him or her to "talk things out".

## **Anger**

You may feel irritable and bitter towards friends, family and those you may feel are responsible for the person's death. But what surprises people the most is the anger you may feel towards the person who has died. These feelings of anger are normal. They are not unhealthy unless they are expressed inappropriately, or are harmful to yourself or others.

## **Guilt**

There is a tendency to go over and over the events of the death. Many people blame themselves for things they said or did when the person was alive, and things they didn't say or do. You may find that you are afraid the person who has died will not forgive you, and you feel you will never forgive yourself. Again, those feelings are normal.

## **Acceptance**

The distress caused by a death will change over time. Pangs of grief come from time to time, followed by periods of relative calm. The sense of loss is sometimes revived by an unexpected memory or a significant occasion such as a birthday or anniversary. You will find your own ways to deal with the pain of grief. You may review your loss over and over, saying goodbye each time. Grief is a long and difficult process. No one can say how long it will take, but for most people the first year is the most difficult.

Feelings of distress and sadness will become less intense and less frequent over time. It is important to note that grieving is a process of recovery. Like any recovery process, one day you may feel better prepared to get on with your life. The next day the pain of the grief may again feel fresh and you begin to wonder what is wrong with you.

All of these experiences are a normal part of the grief recovery process. If you feel your reactions are harmful to your health or well-being, visit your family doctor or a counsellor.

## **Children**

As difficult as it is for you, the death of a loved one may be even more difficult and frightening for children. Share your feelings of sadness and loss with children in the family.

Their questions need to be answered honestly and their fears about the unknown must be addressed. Children grieve according to their development stage, so it will look different from adult grief. More references about children and grief are included at the end of this booklet.

Children need to be reassured that they are not responsible for the death. Encourage children to express their feelings. They should be allowed to participate in any funeral or memorial services and family gatherings.

## **Your own well-being**

During this time, it is important to take care of yourself. Try to get your rest, physical exercise and to eat properly. It can help to treat yourself each week to something special, such as dinner out with a close friend. Remember that your friends, family and spiritual advisor are there to help you. Don't be afraid to ask; friends and family want to help and may not know what you need.

We recommend that during this time you see your doctor for help with your own health and well-being. A list of people and organizations who can help you deal with your grief is included with this booklet.

Your doctor, spiritual advisor, or social worker may know of resources in your community. Please don't hesitate to contact them. They are there to help.

## Resources

---

- BC Bereavement Helpline 604-738-9950  
[www.bcbereavementhelpline.com](http://www.bcbereavementhelpline.com) provides helpful information on how to seek help to assist with grief and has brochures about grief in many languages.
- Local churches, family service organizations, hospice groups and health units may offer bereavement counselling or programs
- Living Through Loss Counselling Society of B.C.  
604-873-5013 or [www.ltlc.bc.ca](http://www.ltlc.bc.ca).
- Victoria Hospice has brochures on their website  
<http://www.victoriahospice.org/>. Click on Publications.
- The hospital or care facility may offer resources or have a memorial service to celebrate the lives of individuals who have died in their care.

## Recommended readings ...

### Suggested books on bereavement for Adults:

- Being a Widow: A Helpful Guide to the Problems of Being a Widow \*(VPL)  
Lynn Caine, 1988  
Draws on her own personal experience and the difficult emotions she felt when her husband died. Author does talks and workshops for widows. Valuable self-help book.
- Don't Take my Grief Away: What to Do when You Lose a Loved One.  
Doug Manning, 1984  
The book's basic theme is that it takes time to pass through grief. Practical direct advice.
- Good Grief Rituals: Tools for Healing: A Healing Companion \*(VPL)  
Elaine Childs-Gowell, 1992  
A small book, offering activities and ideas for expressing feelings of grief, from letter writing to meditations. Helps with learning how to deal with difficult emotions.
- Grieving: How to go on Living when Someone You Love Dies \*(VPL)  
Therese A. Rando, 1988  
Emphasis on differences in personalities and situations of death - includes death of spouse, adult loss of parent, adult loss of sibling.
- Healing Your Grieving Heart - 100 Practical Ideas for Families, Friends and Caregivers  
Alan D. Wolfelt, 2001

\*(VPL) available from the Vancouver Public Library

- **Healing Your Grieving Heart : 100 Practical Ideas \*(VPL)**  
Alan D. Wolfelt, 1998  
With sensitivity and insight, this book offers 100 practical and down to earth suggestions for healing activities that can help survivors learn to express their grief and mourn naturally.
- **Living With Grief: After Sudden Loss Suicide, Homicide, Accident, Heart Attack, Stroke \*(VPL)**  
Kenneth J. Doka, ed., Hospice Foundation of America, 1996.  
This volume examines the subject of abrupt, unexpected death and its effects and implications for the survivors left behind.
- **Tear Soup : A Recipe For Healing After Loss \*(VPL)**  
Pat Schweibert and Chuck DeKlyen, 1999, 2005  
A beautifully illustrated children's book for adults written about a woman who has suffered a loss and cooks up a special batch of "tear soup".
- **The Wilderness of Grief: Finding Your Way**  
Alan D. Wolfelt, 2007  
This book takes an inspirational approach by presenting the idea of wilderness as a sustained metaphor for grief.
- **Living with Grief: Loss in Later Life**  
Kenneth J. Doka, ed., Hospice Foundation of America, 2001.  
This book address the struggles, concerns and issues faced by the bereaved, and those who care for them.
- **Living When a Loved One has Died \*(VPL)**  
Earl A. Grollman, 1995  
A small book of short reflections, dealing with just a little bit of grief at a time. Easily read by someone in the midst of grief, when it is difficult to concentrate.
- **Men and Grief: A Guide for Men Surviving the Death of a Loved One \*(VPL)**  
Carol Staudacher, 1991  
Helpful expert advice for grieving men and professionals in bereavement counselling.
- **The Journey through Grief: Reflections on Healing**  
Alan D. Wolfelt, 1997  
A small book, easy to read in times of emotional stress. Short reflective notes, step-by-step through the mourning process. Practical at the same time as being spiritual.
- **When Bad Things Happen to Good People \*(VPL)**  
Harold S. Kushner, 1981, 1989  
Inspired by the death of his 14-year-old son, Rabbi Kushner tells how to deal spiritually with an unfair loss or tragedy and writes about the eternal question to God, "Why me?"

\*(VPL) available from the Vancouver Public Library

## Suggested books on bereavement for Children and Parents:

- Penny Bear's Gift of Love: A Story of Friendship Between a Grieving Young Boy and a Magical Little Bear.  
Penny Wigglesworth, 2004.
- Healing a Child's Grieving Heart - 100 Practical Ideas for Families, Friends and Caregivers \*(VPL)  
Alan D. Wolfelt, 2001  
The author provides helpful advice when family and friends often find it tough to know how to react to a grieving child.
- Help for the Hard Times: Getting Through Loss  
Earl Hipp, 1995  
For Teenagers. An informal presentation - combining lots of information, suggestions and resources - makes this book very appealing to teens.
- How it Feels when a Parent Dies \*(VPL)  
Jill Krementz, editor, 1981  
8 years old to teenagers. Eighteen young people ranging in age from seven to seventeen discuss the questions, fears, and bereavement they experienced when a parent died
- Learning to Say Goodbye when a Parent Dies \*(VPL)  
Eda LeShan, 1976  
For the whole family, adults and children. Written in simple direct language, to help open communication about questions, fears and stages of mourning.
- Straight Talk about Death for Teenagers: How to Cope with the Death of Someone You Love  
Earl Grollman, 1993  
For teenagers. Just a few incisive lines on each page. Speaks directly to teens. Includes a journal section for writing about memories and feelings.
- Talking about Death: A Dialogue between Parent and Child \*(VPL)  
Earl Grollman, 1990  
Preschool to age 10, with parents. Begins with children's illustrated read-along section, followed by a parent's guide to support talking about feelings. Includes lists of resources.
- The Grieving Child: A Parent's Guide \*(VPL)  
Helen Fitzgerald & Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, 1992  
For parents only. Explains how children of different ages deal with death and grief.
- The Three Birds: A Story for Children about the Loss of a Loved One (available at [chapter.ca](http://chapter.ca))  
Sandra Ireland Marinus van den Berg, 1994  
For preschool to age 7. A popular well illustrated book.
- When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death \*(VPL)  
Laurie Krasny Brown & Marc Brown, 1996  
Preschool to age 8. Addresses children's fears and curiosity directly. Answers children's very basic questions such as: "What does it mean to be dead?" Illustrated.



\*(VPL) available from the Vancouver Public Library



For more copies, go online at <http://vch.eduhealth.ca> or  
email [pchem@vch.ca](mailto:pchem@vch.ca) and quote Catalogue No. **GV.300.W574**  
© Vancouver Coastal Health, June 2016

The information in this document is intended solely for the  
person to whom it was given by the health care team.  
[www.vch.ca](http://www.vch.ca)