

## Coping with the Sudden Death of a Child

### *John Travolta's Son's Unexpected Death is a Reminder of Tragic Loss*

A sudden loss can make coping with a child's death even more difficult. John Travolta's son, Jett's death is a reminder of how devastating a sudden death can be.

Coping with a sudden, unexpected death is challenging. A sudden death, by definition, is a death that occurs without any warning. Life is forever changed in an instant.

For parents there is no greater heartache or grief than the death of their child. When a child dies, all of the parents hopes and dreams for that child's future also die.

Shock, grief, guilt, sorrow and despair are likely to be the feelings faced by the Travolta-Preston family in struggling to cope with the unexpected loss of their teenage-son Jett.

### *How Sudden Death Differs from Normal Grief*

For the family left behind, coping with the loss of a child due to a sudden cause can be very difficult. The grief response following sudden loss is often intensified since there is no opportunity to prepare for the loss or say good-bye. The shock and grief following a sudden death can be overwhelming.

### *Coping with the Sudden Death of a Child*

The Compassionate Friends offer some helpful insights into understanding the emotional response that parents face following the sudden death of a child based on the early works of John Bowlby and Colin Murray Parkes:

*Shock* is frequently the initial response to a sudden bad news along with a numbness.

*Guilt and Anger* are emotions common for parents, particularly if they felt that there was something they could have done or someone else could have done to prevent the death.

*Accepting the Reality* may be very difficult for parents. They may experience intense yearning and longing for the child who has died. Finding ways to remember the child can be helpful.

*Reorganizing and Readjusting* involves living through the grief, reorganizing their lives, readjusting to a world without their child and finding a new normal.

### *Sudden Death is a Traumatic Death*

A sudden death is also regarded a traumatic death, because it is one that is unexpected and often viewed as preventable. The grieving process with traumatic grief is intensified and frequently complex, For the surviving parents coping with a sudden death can be even more demanding than a normal grief as parents are left asking "Why?"

### *The Unanswerable Whys*

Following a traumatic death or sudden loss, people are left wondering "Why?" It is often very difficult to find a good answer to this unanswerable question.

The thoughts of Rabbi Earl Grollman published in 2001 in the Journeys Newsletter are very helpful in coping with the "Why's?" of sudden death. He wrote in the Hospice Foundation of America's publication:

“Why must life be one of sorrow?” “Why?”

There is no satisfactory response for an unresolvable dilemma. Not all questions have complete answers. “Unanswered Why’s” are a part of life. The search may continue, but the real question might be “How [do I] pick up the pieces and go on living as meaningful as possible?”

### *Living Through the Grief and Finding a New Normal*

In the 1998 book *Johnny Cash: The Autobiography*, [Harper Paperbacks] Cash offered these words on coping with grief:

"There's no way around grief and loss: you can doge all you want, but sooner or later you just have to go into it, through it, and, hopefully come out the other side. The world you find there will never be the same as the world you left."

Bereaved parent and grief expert John Canine, Ed.D., Ph.D offered these words in an undated article on "The New Normal" for Tomorrow's Child website.

"No one should expect a surviving parent to return to normal, but everyone should expect over time that the surviving parent will, in the spirit of the child who has died, begin to live again. To be functional and to have purpose. This is the new normal."

### *When to Seek Additional Help*

Traumatic losses, especially ones due to violent losses are the ones that often require counseling and professional help from those knowledgeable in the field to help the grieving better cope with the loss.

Any parent who experiences severe overwhelming feelings of grief lasting daily for more than two weeks, is self-medicating with alcohol or drugs or has thoughts of harming him or herself needs to seek professional help to help manage the loss.

### *Surviving the Sudden Death of a Child*

Finding ways to cope with the sudden death of a child can be particularly difficult for grieving parents and family members. The death of a child is a pain that may never depart.

Coping with the sudden death of a child initially involves managing the shock, anger and guilt initially, then learning how to accept the reality of the loss before finally reorganizing and readjusting and creating a new reality and keeping the memory of the child alive.

*Kirsti A. Dyer*

Read more at Suite101: [Coping with the Sudden Death of a Child: John Travolta's Son's Unexpected Death is a Reminder of Tragic Loss](http://www.suite101.com/content/how-to-cope-with-the-sudden-death-of-a-child-a88237#ixzz1GC1LH3bn) <http://www.suite101.com/content/how-to-cope-with-the-sudden-death-of-a-child-a88237#ixzz1GC1LH3bn>

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