

INQUESTS – AN INFORMATION PACK FOR FAMILIES, FRIENDS AND ADVISORS

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COPING WITH A DEATH AND AN INQUEST

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Dealing with the sudden death of someone close as well as an inquest is a particularly difficult experience. Feelings of grief are compounded by having to deal with the legal issues surrounding the death and the inquest.

Grieving after the death of someone close

The death of someone close affects people at every level: thoughts, feelings, physical health, thoughts and feelings about others and their responses.

Grieving is the expression of feelings about the death and loss. Grief is often interrupted by the inquest, held back until it is over; or the inquest causes extra pain and anguish to deal with.

This section of the pack describes what it may feel like after a sudden death, the way the inquest may affect you and how you can get help.

Grieving

How people grieve depends mostly on four things:

1. the sort of person they are;
2. the relationship they had with the person who died;
3. the circumstances of the death;
4. the support they receive after the death.

1. The kind of person you are

Bereavement involves all aspects of yourself: your personality, your beliefs, your thoughts and feelings about yourself and others – the sum of your experience of life.

Previous experiences of other losses, however big or small, will also affect how you grieve.

2. Your relationship with the person who died

This depends partly on who that person was: maybe your child, friend or partner. For example you are likely to feel protective towards a son or daughter, even when they

have grown up, while expecting a parent, or older friend to be a support to you.

Your feelings will also depend on the kind of relationship you had with the person. It is completely usual to have mixed feelings about the people you are close to, and relationships change as the years pass by and you go through different experiences.

If your relationship was basically loving and secure you will probably feel that the death is a loss without measure. However, the experience of your relationship with the person who has died is likely to be one of the strengths that will help you to keep going.

Many people have more complicated relationships with their family members – there may have been unspoken hostility between you, there may be feelings of regret or guilt about the relationship and what you or they could have done – and you are then likely to have very mixed emotions after the death. There may also be different experiences of grief among different family members that can lead to divisions and disputes.

3. The circumstances of the death

For many people reading this pack this will be the most important factor in their grief. It is obvious that you are affected by how, when and where the person died. For example you are likely to feel very different about an elderly parent dying gently but unexpectedly while dozing in a favourite chair than how you might feel if they collapsed when shopping on their own, or were killed by a car when crossing the road. You are also likely to feel very different about the death of an elderly parent than about the death of a son or daughter who you thought would outlive you. This can be one of the most painful experiences for many of the families we work with.

If the death was as a result of what you believe was carelessness, negligence, violence or an accident caused by themselves or someone else this will also affect you very strongly. This sort of death also tends to make

people question the value of life and way we think the world ought to be. It will also be even more difficult if the person died in custody or in hospital while you thought they were in the care of other people. If someone's loved one dies in custody they can also feel shame and embarrassment about where they died and overwhelmed by the media saying all sorts of things about the person that are not true or not the whole picture of who they were. Your son, brother or father will have been many things in life other than someone who died in prison or in police custody. This can also be true for people whose loved ones died in other controversial circumstances and is something that can cause great anxiety and fear before the inquest. At the inquest many things may be said about your family or the person who died, which paint a very particular picture of who they were.

What is grief?

These are the common aspects of grief which people experience, the thoughts and feelings; the psychological and physical reactions; some of the social and practical consequences of dealing with the death of someone close.

These aspects of grief are listed in the order in which people are likely to experience them most strongly.

- Shock;
- Searching and denial;
- Sadness and despair;
- Anger;
- Guilt;
- Anxiety, fear and panic attacks;
- Loss of confidence and feeling powerless;
- Poor physical health;
- Loss of hope for the future;
- Isolation;
- Depression.

In your grief you may feel some or all of these in this order or in a muddle. You will probably find you go through the feelings and other experiences described here, and others which are not described, again and again. You may experience the strongest emotion you have ever known and feel you will never get

through it all and think that the pain will never end. You may experience aspects of yourself and others which you have never experienced before.

What usually happens is that as time goes by the feelings are less acutely painful and there will be longer periods during which you can get on with life fairly well – but the experience will always be with you. How long it takes to get on with life depends on who you are and your individual circumstances. If you are at all worried about how you are getting on, or are worried about someone else, do talk to one of the people or organisations listed at the end of the pack.

The effect of an inquest

This adds an additional stress to people on top of the loss of someone they love. Waiting for an inquest can put the grieving process on hold and the many official procedures are likely to upset you in many ways creating extra difficulties to cope with.

Ensuring that the inquest is as full an inquiry as possible can help in the grieving process. We hope that this pack will give you some information that will help.

Many bereaved people with whom we have worked have described feeling some of the following:

- It can be difficult to accept the death if: you do not view the body; there is a delay before you are told the cause of death because of the length of time to get post mortem reports and other medical tests completed and in holding the inquest; there is a delay in releasing the body for the funeral because of the post mortem.
- Evidence presented at the inquest, or reports in the media (see Section 7 on the media) reawaken feelings that you thought you had overcome.
- You feel that everyone else, the coroner, the police, the doctors, the prison officers or anyone else involved in the death, knows more about what happened than you.
- You feel the body has been taken over by the post mortem process and that you are the

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last person to be considered in all these official procedures.

- Grieving can be delayed, held up at certain stages or blocked altogether if your emotional energies are focused on someone or something other than your loss. This often happens if you feel hurt or angry about some aspect of a post mortem or inquest. For example:

- there may be long delays in medical or legal procedures;
- you are not told about the procedures and what part you can play in them;
- the cause of death given as a result of a post mortem does not tie in with your view of the cause of death;
- the inquest leaves you with more questions than answers about how someone died;
- the inquest does not establish what caused the death;
- the inquest verdict does not reflect what you thought had happened after you had heard all the evidence;
- the inquest is held weeks, months or years after the death;
- the inquest returns a verdict of unlawful killing and yet no one is brought to trial;
- someone is charged with an offence relating to the death but it is months or even years before they come to trial;
- the person charged is found to be responsible but in your view is given an inadequate sentence;
- the charges are dropped or are lesser than you think they should be;
- you see the person/s you believe to be responsible at the inquest;
- you are upset by statements made about the person who has died because they do not reflect the true picture of who they were;
- you are distressed by the way the death or inquest is reported in the media;
- you are distressed by the way the media deal with you, your family or your friends.

Getting involved in campaigns or trying to stop things like this happening to others can be a help to some people. Getting in contact with others who have been through a similar

experience can also be an immense support and helping others through a similar experience can help you too. But even then there may come a time when you want to move on and let the loss go, which is okay too.

4. Support

Everyone needs support after the death of someone close. Support can come from family, friends, religious or community groups and people with experience of bereavement. Some people find it helpful to read books and leaflets on coping with death which may be available from your local library, health centre or the organisations listed below.

Cruse Bereavement Care;

Compassionate Friends;

Survivors of Bereavement after Suicide.

If you experience severe and ongoing symptoms you should go to your GP.