

How to Help a Loved One Through Sudden Loss

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Over the past several years, the husbands of three of my friends died suddenly at the age of 50. These experiences helped educate me on how to be supportive in the face of an unexpected loss. I couldn't imagine that I would ever be on the receiving end of such support. But that happened when I lost my son, Garrett, to suicide in September 2017.

Since Garrett's passing, I have been amazed at the generosity of my community. One friend paid to have my home's gutters cleaned and windows washed. Our family's veterinarian refused to let us pay for her pet care services for a year. Another friend gave us keys to her lake house to use when we needed to get away. Each spring, we find a hanging plant on our porch from parents of a friend of Garrett's. As brutally hard as it's been to walk this new path without my son, these actions have provided a glimmer of positivity amid my despair.

While people have stepped up to help after our loss, such generosity is not always a given in the wake of a sudden death — an outcome that many families are experiencing with the coronavirus pandemic, which has killed more than 800,000 people in the United States alone.

"Many bereaved people experience another secondary loss when friends and family run away after a loss due to their own discomfort," said Sherry Cormier, a psychologist and certified bereavement trauma specialist. Being present with a friend's grief in this situation can stir up anxiety about death, she said. "They think, 'That could happen to me.'"

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