



*Your Grief and Loss*  
Support for Loved Ones

 Health System



# Introduction

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## A message from our caring staff

The staff and Bereavement Care Team of Huntsville Hospital Health System extend our deepest sympathies to you and your family upon the death of your loved one. Whether your loss has been sudden or expected, we know it is a difficult time. We have developed this resource to provide you with useful information about grief, loss and the healing process. Also included in this brochure is contact information that may be helpful in regard to decisions and issues related to the loss of your loved one.

## Our program

The Huntsville Hospital Health System Bereavement Program offers grief support to family members served by our Palliative Care and Bereavement Programs. We would like to keep in touch with you throughout the next year to offer supportive information and various helpful resources for coping with grief. We cared for you and your loved one while they were in the hospital, but our care follows you home in the coming days and months. It was our commitment to serve you when you needed us, and it is our commitment to continue to serve our community.

# *Our response to loss*

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## **The bereavement experience**

The death of a loved one is one of the most difficult human experiences. The thoughts and feelings of grief associated with death are usually very intense and sometimes difficult to understand.

## **What emotions will I experience?**

The deep emotions of sadness, anger, guilt and relief may have you feeling numb or in shock. It is common to have these feelings immediately after a death, as it serves as a way to protect you from intense emotions. There may also be a period of longing for the loved one to return, profound sadness, confusion, anxiety and angry feelings. Some who are grieving find they want to withdraw and isolate themselves from loved ones and usual activities. They may actually feel that this is a “bad dream,” they are “losing their mind” or doubt their spiritual beliefs. Guilt is a common emotion, even when others say it is not true. Anxiety may lead to fear and worry. Anger may lead to resentment toward the loved one or blaming others for what has happened. Grieving may also include physical reactions such as difficulties sleeping, loss of appetite and difficulty concentrating. Please know that these feelings are expected at this time.

It is important that you have support to express your feelings and help you through the process of grieving your loss. It is not something we “get over,” but a process that changes your life forever.

## How long is the grief process?

Grieving is a very personal and highly individualized experience. There is no specific timetable, nor any required steps to successfully complete the grieving process. The truth is that healing may be a process that takes weeks, months or even longer. The significance of the relationship, the circumstances surrounding the death and the relationship with survivors may affect the depth and duration of the grieving process. Crying is a normal expression of feelings — it is not a sign of weakness — but it also is not a steadfast rule that everyone must cry. It is important to be patient with yourself and allow the grieving process to naturally occur.

## *Family experience of coping with grief*

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### Getting help through grief and loss

It is important to share feelings of sadness and grief with others, even for those who do not typically discuss feelings. It is a time to let supportive friends, family and clergy reach out to comfort and assist during this time of grieving and healing. There may be a time in the future when coping with the loss of a loved one may result in joining a support group or contacting a physician or counselor.

### Talking to children about the death

Children are also affected by the death of a loved one and need loving support of parents and family. It is best if they are told the truth, but in a way they can understand for their age. Use the word "die" in the explanation because when "gone away" or "gone to sleep" is used, it establishes a false hope that they will return.

## How children grieve

Children may be sad one minute and then play normally the next. Respond to their questions and provide them with a sense of security and safety that might be threatened at this time. They react to the emotion of the adults they see around them, so if they see adults very upset they are more likely to express fear and protectiveness of the adult. It may be challenging to guide a child in this process, but children are very resilient and learn valuable life lessons during this time.

## *What to do before you leave the hospital*

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- Contact other family members to notify them of the death and tell them if they should come to the hospital. Contact your choice of minister to notify them of the death and if they should come to the hospital.
- Hospital staff will speak with you about organ donation. If you are interested, the staff will contact the Alabama Organ Center.  
*(800) 252-3677 • [alabamaorgancenter.org](http://alabamaorgancenter.org)*
- In some situations, an autopsy is required by law. Talk to the doctor about whether an autopsy should be performed and ask about the expense to the family requesting the autopsy.
- Select a funeral home and sign the form provided by our staff so your loved one can be released to the funeral home.
- Collect your loved one's personal belongings from the hospital, which may include retrieving valuables from Security. The staff will contact Security and any valuables will be brought to you, or you may contact the Security office at a later time. *Huntsville Hospital Security Office • (256) 265-8012*

- You may choose to ask someone to serve as your contact person to update friends and relatives regarding arrangements.

## *The next step — The funeral home*

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There are many things to consider and decisions to be made when planning arrangements and caring for your loved one. The following list may be helpful in your planning:

- Make an appointment with the funeral home and bring a friend or family member with you for assistance.
- Bring with you any burial policies, military discharge papers (if appropriate), information for the newspaper obituary, a photograph for the obituary and service program and clothes for your loved one.

At the funeral home, you will be assisted with the following:

- Type of arrangements (open or closed casket), burial or cremation
  - Choosing a casket and vault or an urn for ashes
  - Making arrangements for gravesite
  - Deciding on the date, time and type of service
  - Selecting flowers and a florist
  - Obtaining a flag and grave footstone marker for all honorably discharged veterans
  - Ordering copies of the death certificate
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- Select an organization to designate any donations that would be meaningful to you and your family. You might consider supporting a specific program at Huntsville Hospital Health System through the Foundation.

*Huntsville Hospital Health System Foundation • (256) 265-8077*

*[huntsvillehospital.org/foundation](http://huntsvillehospital.org/foundation)*

## When you get home

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- Contact family, friends and your employer with arrangement details. You may designate someone close to you to help you with this task.
- Ask someone to spend the first few days and nights with you. They can help you keep a list of callers, visitors and gifts of kindness.
- Be sure someone stays at your house while you are attending any services.
- Consider having someone with you when you decide to go through your loved one's belongings.
- Contact your family attorney, financial advisor and accountant regarding the death of your loved one.
- If your loved one lived at another residence, contact the post office to have their mail forwarded to your address, so you can attend to any immediate personal business.
- If your loved one was a caregiver for another person or pet, make arrangements for someone to take over their responsibilities.

## Other practical matters

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- Death certificates may take up to several weeks to obtain. There is a cost for the initial certificate and a lower cost for subsequent copies. The funeral home will obtain the initial death certificates for you. Death certificates at a later date can be requested from the Huntsville-Madison County Department of Public Health. 301 Max Luther Drive • Huntsville, AL 35811 (256) 539-3711 • [madisoncountyal.gov/services/otherag/HealthDept.shtml](http://madisoncountyal.gov/services/otherag/HealthDept.shtml)

- Check with the Social Security Administration about eligibility for possible benefits. If your loved one receives a monthly benefit check after they died, return uncashed checks to the Social Security Administration.

(800) 772-1213 • [ssa.gov](http://ssa.gov)

- Check with all past employers for any insurance and/or pension plans.

- Veterans' benefits may be available to dependent children and/or surviving spouses. *Department of Veterans' Affairs* • 115-B Washington Street

Huntsville, AL 35801 • (256) 532-1662 • [va.gov](http://va.gov)

- Contact your attorney for direction regarding the will or probate proceedings.

- Check with banking and financial advisors about any investments and accounts for life insurance policies, as well as name changes on accounts.

- Others to inform of the death:

- Friends and family

- Neighbors

- Physicians

- Employer and co-workers

- Place of worship

- Bank

- Credit card companies

- Department of Motor Vehicles

- Mortgage and insurance companies

- Utility companies

- Landlord

- Internal Revenue Service

- Social service agencies  
(example - home health)

## *Suggested readings*

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- Joy Beyond Grief by Colena M. Anderson
- You and Your Grief by Edgar N. Jackson
- When Bad Things Happen to Good People by H.S. Kushner
- The Courage to Grieve by Judith Tatelbaum
- Coping with Widowhood by Frances Caldwell Durland
- Helping Children Grieve by Theresa Huntley



*Bereavement  
Care Team*



Huntsville Hospital • Huntsville Hospital for Women & Children • Madison Hospital