

Help Starts Here.

Help is available for those dealing with Sudden Death

The death of a family member or close friend may be one of the most painful events in a person's life. When the death occurs unexpectedly, or is the result of homicide or some other traumatic event, the degree of distress is compounded.

Sudden loss of a loved one may have wide-ranging consequences—not only intense emotional effects but also physical symptoms and financial hardship. The practical, legal, and financial matters that need to be sorted out after the death of a loved one can be overwhelming at a time when one is least equipped to deal with them. When a person dies suddenly or unexpectedly, these matters may be much more complex.

If you are dealing with the sudden death of someone you were close to or you know someone who is, **help is available.**

How family and close friends may be affected

The sudden loss of a loved one is often a life-transforming event but specific reactions to sudden death are extremely varied and unique to each person who had a relationship with the person who died. There are some common, natural reactions:

- tremendous shock
- emotional numbness
- physically tired, weak or cold
- stress, anxiety, fear
- changes in sleeping or eating habits
- sadness, depression
- denial
- loneliness
- anger, irritability
- a sense of grief, perhaps inability to express the grief
- confusion, forgetfulness, unable to concentrate
- a loss of trust

In criminal cases, family and friends may experience prolonged grieving because of the time and stress associated with the case going to court. In some cases, the grieving process becomes very public with family and friends under a media spotlight.

While children experience grief and have similar reactions as adults do, they express emotions differently and may have different ideas about death. If they are unable to express their feelings in words, they may express them in actions or display symptoms such as nightmares, bedwetting, or trouble eating or sleeping. Some children may become quiet and withdrawn while others become demanding and aggressive.

There are services available to help

Victim Services

Victim service workers, located in community agencies or police stations, provide emotional support, justice system information, safety planning, referrals to counselling and other services, help in accessing crime victim assistance benefits, and support during court attendance. You can get more information or be connected to a victim service program in your area by calling **VictimLINK** (a toll-free, 24-hour, multilingual 1-800-563-0808 line).



Coroners Service

The Coroners Service is responsible for the investigation of all unnatural, sudden, and unexpected, unexplained, or unattended deaths. Notification of a death generally comes from police, hospitals, or physicians; however anyone can and should report a death under these circumstances.

The Coroners Service ascertains the facts surrounding a death in accordance with the *Coroners Act*. The coroner must determine the identity of the deceased and how, when, where and by what means they died for the public record. In some cases an autopsy is required to assist the coroner in making these determinations. Autopsies are ordered on a case-by-case basis; when one is needed it is ordered. Coroners' investigations are concluded either by way of a coroner's judgement or by inquest; a quasi-judicial, public process.

When a child dies in B.C., the Child Death Review Unit of the Coroners Service undertakes a comprehensive review to better understand how and why children die, and to use those findings to take action to prevent other deaths and improve the health, safety and well being of all children in British Columbia.

Police

Police often respond to emergency situations involving serious injury or death. They investigate the circumstances surrounding accidental or violent death to determine if a criminal offence has occurred. Police also provide information about other agencies that may be able to help.

Other services

Healthcare services:

The attending physician (or coroner) pronounces death and fills out a medical certification of death. Where organ donation is possible, health care personnel discuss this with the family. If the person who died did not register for organ donation, consent of the next of kin is required. Staff at the healthcare facility will contact the family if there are personal belongings to pick up. The next of kin will be advised when the remains may be released for transfer.

Vital Statistics Agency:

Vital Statistics registers deaths and provides death certificates as ordered (usually by the funeral director after receiving a medical certification of death and basic information about the person who died). This agency also conducts the search for a Wills Notice (part of the probate process).

Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance:

When a person dies and there are no resources for funeral expenses through either the individual's estate or family, the ministry may help with these costs. The person who died need not have been receiving ministry assistance.

The Public Guardian and Trustee (PGT):

When a person dies and there is no named executor of the estate, or there is no one willing or able to administer the estate, the PGT may administer the estate. In certain circumstances, the PGT also has a role in protecting the legal and financial interests of children (under 19) and adults with mental disabilities.



Grief/bereavement organizations:

Griefworks BC (604) 875-2741 or toll free 1-877-234-3322 and the BC Bereavement Helpline ((604) 738-9950 or toll free 1-877-779-2223) provide useful resources for persons dealing with the loss of a loved one.

VictimLINK:

A toll-free, 24-hour, multilingual (1-800-563-0808) helpline that connects callers to a network of community and government resources, including social, health, and justice resources such as victim services and counselling resources.

*Contact information for specific services is provided in the **Resources** section at the end of this information sheet.*

How to get immediate assistance and ongoing support

- If immediate police or medical assistance is needed, call 911.
- Call someone to be with you. If a neighbour, friend, or family member can provide emotional support or help you in practical ways, ask for help.
- Call VictimLINK (toll-free 1-800-563-0808) – victim services may help you directly and can also refer you to other community agencies. If the death resulted from a crime, a victim service worker can provide you with information about the criminal justice system, the status of the case, and your rights. A victim service worker can support you throughout the criminal justice process.
- See your doctor or a counsellor to obtain any other help or support you or your family members need to assist you through the grieving process.

Victims of crime are protected under B.C.'s *Victims of Crime Act*. The Act protects the victims' right to be treated with dignity and respect and to obtain information about the criminal justice system and their case.

Taking care of practical matters

Taking care of all the practical matters after a sudden death can be overwhelming. It may help to make a checklist of specific tasks. And, if you have the help of others, assign them tasks. The following things may help in getting started on your checklist:

- Consider the practical needs of the household, such as groceries, meals, childcare, laundry, transportation, appointments, etc.
- Make a list of family, friends, and others (e.g., people at work or school) who should be notified, and notify them. Keep track of all calls that need to be made or returned.
- If the death has come to the attention of the media, decide how to handle media enquiries and who will do this. If you or your family chooses to share information with the media, decide ahead of time what information will and will not be shared.
- Contact the funeral home and any religious organization that will be involved. Decide on the type of funeral or other memorial service, and the time and place it will be held. (If your loved one made a will, it may include his or her wishes for burial or cremation and funeral service.)
- Find out what tasks the funeral director will undertake (e.g., sending the obituary to newspapers, getting copies of the death certificate). Ask the funeral director for advice on tasks you need to undertake (e.g., writing the obituary, selecting pallbearers, organizing the reception). The Funeral Service Association of BC has helpful information on planning a funeral and related matters.
- Contact the lawyer of the person who died or the executor of the estate. If there is no will or named executor, determine who will be the legal representative of the person who died and who will administer the estate. If there is no appropriate person to administer the estate, contact the Public Guardian and Trustee.



- Check to see if there are sources of funding for funeral expenses, and apply for these as well as any other types of benefits available (e.g., private insurance or employment-related benefits, Canada Pension Plan survivor benefits, B.C. Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance benefits, B.C. Crime Victim Assistance Program benefits).
- Determine how many copies of the death certificate will likely be needed, and obtain them from the funeral director or the Vital Statistics Agency.

Resources

BC Bereavement Helpline

- Phone: (604) 738-9950 or toll free 1-877-779-2223
- E-mail: bcbh@telus.net
- Website: www.bcbereavementhelpline.com

BC Coroners Service

Phone through Enquiry BC at:

- Phone: (604) 660-2421 in Vancouver, (250) 387-6121 in Victoria, or toll free 1-800-663-7867
- TDD (Telephone Device for the Deaf): (604) 775-0303 in Vancouver or toll free 1-800-661-8773
- E-mail: BC.CorSer@gov.bc.ca
- Website: www.pssg.gov.bc.ca/coroners/index.htm

Crime Victim Assistance Program

- Phone: toll free 1-866-660-3888
- E-mail: SGCrimeVictimAssistanceProgram@gov.bc.ca
- Website: www.pssg.gov.bc.ca/victim_services/cva/index.htm

Funeral Service Association of British Columbia

- Phone: (250) 592-3213 or toll free 1-800-665-3899
- Website: www.bcfunerals.com

Griefworks BC

- Phone: (604) 875-2741 or toll free 1-877-234-3322
- E-mail: person@griefworksbc.com
- Website: www.griefworksbc.com

Public Guardian and Trustee of British Columbia—Estate and Personal Trust Services

Phone: (604) 660-0963, or through Enquiry BC at:

- Phone: (604) 660-2421 in Vancouver, (250) 387-6121 in Victoria, or toll free 1-800-663-7867
- TDD (Telephone Device for the Deaf): (604) 775-0303 in Vancouver or toll free 1-800-661-8773
- E-mail: estates@trustee.bc.ca
- Website: www.trustee.bc.ca/services/estate

VictimLINK (Victim Services Information and Referrals)

- Phone: toll free 1-800-563-0808, 24 hours every day
- TTY (Teletypewriter): through Information Services Vancouver TTY service at (604) 875-0885 (collect calls accepted)
- Multi-lingual

Vital Statistics Agency

Phone: (604) 660-2937 in Vancouver, (250) 952-2681 in Victoria, or through Enquiry BC at:

- Phone: (604) 660-2421 in Vancouver, (250) 387-6121 in Victoria, or toll free 1-800-663-7867
- TDD (Telephone Device for the Deaf): (604) 775-0303 in Vancouver or toll free 1-800-661-8773
- E-mail: via the “Contacts” page of the website
- Website: www.vs.gov.bc.ca

Please note: *This document provides general information only. It is not intended to provide legal information or advice.*

