



The Moments After a Death

By: [CVH Team](#)

When an expected death occurs after a long illness, it can seem unbelievable. The whole situation may feel unreal, and difficult to grasp what has actually happened. Even if you think you have prepared yourself – at least intellectually – for the death, it is normal to feel intense emotions when someone close has died.

Emotional reactions

Sometimes people worry about how they will react at the time of death. They fear that they might lose control, or that they may not be strong enough to handle the situation. Remember, we are human beings and when we are hurting we express our pain in whatever way fits for us.

Unfortunately, our society places a high value on holding ourselves together and being “strong.” Expressing feelings is not a sign of weakness. Similarly, not showing emotion does not necessarily mean we don’t have feelings. People who don’t show emotion may be feeling overwhelmed or even stunned that the death has actually happened. We do what we need to do when and how we need to do it!

Sometimes no one is present at the precise moment of a family member’s death. Family and friends may have stepped out of the room only for a few minutes, and in that time the death occurred. You may feel regret and guilt that the person died alone, but it is common for people to hang on to life as long as others are present. Some people feel that the dying person has some control over the time of death and chooses to be alone, perhaps to spare family members from the moment of death.

Preparing for body changes

After someone has died, changes will happen to the body. These changes may be upsetting for people who aren’t expecting them, but be reassured they are entirely normal.

The body may release stool from the rectum, urine from the bladder, or saliva from the mouth. This happens as the body’s muscles relax. Rigor mortis, a stiffening of the body muscles, will develop in the hours after death. If possible, position the person’s body on the back soon after death, as changing positions will become more difficult if more than an hour has gone by.

If health care providers are present, they may ask the family to leave the room for a few minutes so they can tend to the person’s body and tidy the environment. Most people feel the person’s eyes should be closed after death. If the eyes are open, they may be gently closed with a hand. If the person’s mouth is open, a tightly rolled towel can be placed under the chin, gently pushing the chin up and closing the mouth.

The body will become cool to the touch and the color of the body will change as time passes.

Taking time to let go

After someone has died, family and friends may want to take time to reflect, say a few words, touch

the person's body, or say some final good-byes. It is important to try to provide the time and space for everyone according to their needs. Some people may want to touch the body and others may not. Some may cry loudly and some may be silent. Some may need to leave the room while others need to spend time with the body of the deceased.

People often feel a sense of relief when someone dies and usually there are accompanying guilt feelings. It is normal to have wanted the loved one to finally be free from the illness, and to want to begin to think about getting some order back into day-to-day life. There is no right or wrong way for people to respond or feel, as long as they do not harm themselves or others.

There is no rush to let health care providers or funeral home staff have access to the person's body. It is realistic to spend an hour or even a few hours with the deceased person. Depending on where the person has died, families may wish to wash the body and replace clothing. There may be religious, spiritual or cultural rituals that need to be observed at this time also.

Sometimes people want to place special articles or mementos with the person's body. It may be best to bring these remembrances to the funeral home to avoid losing these items when the body is transported. If cremation is going to occur, family members who want to say goodbye should be given the opportunity to view the body before it is moved.

For more information about providing care after a death, see [Module 9](#) of the Caregiver Series.

For more information about loss and grief or how you can support others in their grief, visit MyGrief.ca.

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