

When Catastrophe Happens: Nurses Promoting Early Intervention for Survivors Guilt Following Sudden Traumatic Loss

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Sudden and violent death occurs on a daily basis globally, unexpectedly catapulting surviving family members into the trauma of loss. Frequently, hospital personnel have the responsibility of telling an already anxious family that one of their members has been seriously injured or has died as a result of traumatic circumstances. Notably, sudden loss and death are inherently traumatic in nature and it is immediately difficult for the surviving family members and friends to grasp the reality of the event. When there is significant injury, dismemberment or pre-death suffering or violence, there is a sense of impossible rescue that seems to consume surviving family members. Commonly, there are thoughts of how the loss may have been prevented, often resulting in self-blame. This phenomenon, known as survivors guilt, is not uncommon, but extremely disturbing. Defined as a uniquely deep sense of guilt, it is often combined with feelings of numbness and loss of interest in life, felt by those who have survived some catastrophic experience. Many survivors suffer from incredible feelings of guilt, despite the fact that in reality they are undeserved. Nurses are uniquely situated to promote adaptive coping with family members following the sudden traumatic loss of a loved one. Targeted interventions and referral can potentially prevent or lessen a trajectory of complicated bereavement.