

Exploring "If Only" Statements and "What If" Questions When Someone Dies

What to Know

When someone you love dies, it's common to have questions. Those questions might start with, "What if...?" where you imagine what might happen or what might have happened if something was done differently. "If only" statements are also common because you may wish the person that died was still alive, so your mind searches for reasons or solutions.

Here are two examples.

Keisha's grandmother recently passed away. Her grandmother had cancer, and Keisha asks her parents these questions: "What if Grandma had gone to a different doctor? What if the doctor caught the cancer earlier?" Keisha can't stop thinking about what might have happened if things had been a little different for her grandmother.

Joseph's brother Matthew died in a motorcycle accident. Joseph can't sleep at night because he keeps thinking, "What if it hadn't been raining the night of the accident? If only Matthew had taken a different route! If only he had just stayed home and hung out with me..." Joseph lies awake every night thinking these upsetting thoughts.

Exploring "what if" questions and "if only" statements can be an important way to process grief. It's better for you to voice these questions to release the emotions around them. Once you explore them, you can start to understand you cannot change what happened.

What to Do

On the next page are three circles. In the first circle, write all your "what if" questions. In the second circle, write down "if only" statements. In the rectangle, write down all the thoughts, body sensations, and emotions you would like to release. Include ideas for answering your questions, and who can help you.

What If?

If Only...

Write down thoughts, body sensations, and emotions you want to release. Include ideas for managing your distress and discomfort, and who can help you.