

Homicide Survivors – Dealing with Grief

Prepared by the Canadian Resource Centre for Victims of Crime

Introduction

Losing a loved one through an act of violence is a very traumatic experience. No one can ever be prepared for such a loss. No amount of counselling, prayer, justice, restitution or compassion can ever bring a loved one back.

Those left behind to mourn the loss of their loved one are sometimes referred to as 'homicide survivors' and these people are victims of crime. There was a period of time when the Canadian justice system did not recognize next of kin as victims. This changed with the lobbying efforts of victims and their advocates. Today, those who work with homicide survivors, such as counselors, victim service providers, Crown Attorneys and police officers, must recognize that these victims face a unique set of emotions and circumstances, and that assistance must be delivered with this in mind.

Experiencing Loss

When someone is murdered, the death is sudden, violent, final and incomprehensible. The survivors' world is abruptly and forever changed. The awareness that your loved one's dreams will never be realized hits. Life has suddenly lost meaning and many survivors report that they cannot imagine ever being happy again.

Homicide survivors will each experience the death differently, as each person had a unique relationship with the victim. A survivor's own personal history of trauma will also affect the manner in which they experience the death. It is important to remember that no two people grieve the same way, with the same intensity or for the same duration.

Dealing with Grief

The founders of 'Parents of Murdered Children,' learned that "the grief caused by murder does not follow a predictable course. It does not neatly unfold in stages. When a person dies after a long illness, his or her family has time to prepare emotionally for the death, to feel anticipatory grief. When someone is murdered, the death usually comes without warning. A parent might have breakfast with a child on an ordinary morning – and then never see or hold or speak to that child again. The period of mourning after a natural death lasts, one, two, perhaps three years. The much more complicated mourning that follows a homicide may be prolonged by the legal system, the attitudes of society, the nature of the crime, and the final disposition of the case. A murder is an unnatural death; no ordinary rules apply. The intense grief experienced by survivors can last four years, five years, a decade, even a lifetime." (A Grief Like No Other, Eric Schlosser, 1997)

Dealing with the aftermath of a homicide is not something that can easily be overcome. It is a process, which affects each person differently. Be patient with yourself and be good to yourself. Homicide survivors must take time to feel the grief and experience the pain of the loss.

The grief process is often characterized as work because it is laborious and difficult. There is no timetable for this process. Losing a loved one causes survivors to adjust

their lives in order to compensate and cope. Grief can be a long, painful process, but it can be managed with assistance from friends, family, and/or outside support.

Grief may provoke intense stress reactions such as:

Emotional

- Shock
- Anger
- Grief spasms
- Despair
- Numbness
- Terror
- Guilt
- Anguish
- Grief
- Sadness
- Irritability
- Helplessness
- Loss of pleasure from regular activities
- Dissociation (i.e., experiences are “dreamlike,” “tunnel vision,” “spacey,” or on “automatic pilot”)
- Hypersensitivity
- Depression
- Emotional outbursts
- Empty or hollowness
- Overwhelming sense of loss and sorrow
- Symptoms of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Physical

- Fatigue
- Insomnia
- Sleep disturbance (nightmares)
- Hyper arousal / Hypervigilance (jumpiness)
- Lethargy
- Somatic complaints
- Muscle tension
- Chills
- Increased heart rate or blood pressure
- Nausea, diarrhea, cramps
- Fainting
- Dizziness
- Respiratory problems
- Impaired immune response
- Headaches
- Gastrointestinal problems
- Change in appetite
- Decreased libido
- Startled response / constant arousal

Cognitive

- Impaired concentration
- Impaired decision-making ability
- Difficulty setting priorities
- Memory Impairment
- Disbelief / Denial
- Confusion
- Distortion
- Decreased self-esteem
- Decreased self-efficacy
- Self-blame
- Reduced ability to express emotion
- Intrusive thoughts and memories / constant thoughts about the circumstances of the death
- Worry / Anxiety
- Vulnerability

Interpersonal

- Alienation / Isolation
- Social withdrawal
- Increased conflict in relationships
- Vocational Impairment
- School impairment
- A desire for revenge

Spiritual

- Faith in humanity may be shaken
- Feeling distant from God
- Suddenly turning to God
- Questioning one's basic beliefs

Do not be embarrassed or confused by these feelings. They are all natural reactions to an unnatural event like the murder of a loved one.

Denial

In order to process the shock of losing a loved one, many homicide survivors will immediately disbelieve that a loved one has died. Denial is a coping mechanism that is a normal grief reaction.

Not being able to view the body, either because they were not permitted to or felt unable to, may complicate and intensify denial for survivors. Accepting the reality of the loss becomes difficult. Survivors often report feeling that their loved one will return home one day. Others have reported a compelling feeling to follow someone who looks like their loved one. These feelings are often strongest when survivors have not been able to view the body.

Anger

The reality of facing life without a loved one may cause a survivor to feel intense anger or rage. In murder cases, it is normal for anger to be directed at the person or people responsible for the crime, as well as the entire criminal justice system. It is also normal for homicide survivors to devise elaborate revenge plans. Verbalizing these feelings,

perhaps within a support group setting, may help victims move past the anger toward healing.

Also, survivors might experience anger toward the victim for "being in the wrong place at the wrong time" or for living a lifestyle that may have increased their risk of victimization.

Guilt

Homicide survivors may experience feelings of guilt after their loved one's death. It is a normal grief reaction. They may believe that they could somehow have prevented the death. It is important for those grieving to express their feelings with others who knew the loved one and the circumstances of the death, so that they may help the survivor realistically evaluate feelings of guilt and responsibility.

Homicide survivors may also feel guilty about unresolved conflicts with the deceased, especially if bad feelings existed prior to the murder. Survivors often feel additional loss of hope in that they were unable to make amends before the victim's death.

Victim blaming is not uncommon and survivors may do so to help alleviate their own feelings of guilt by assuming that the victim was somehow responsible for his or her own death.

Anguish

Anguish may seem intense and, sometimes, overwhelming. Survivors may speak of physical pain, such as a 'pain in my heart' or a 'lump in my throat'.

Grief Spasms

Homicide survivors may experience 'grief spasms' many years after the murder. These spasms involve intense feelings of loss, even years after the loss of a loved one. They are sometimes triggered by scents, tastes, songs, people, places, and dates and may involve suddenly crying over the loss. As time passes, most survivors find that grief spasms lose their intensity and frequency, and are a normal part of processing the loss of a loved one. Many survivors have said that they know they are doing better when they begin to have more good days than bad.

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can occur in anyone who has experienced a severe and unusual physical or mental trauma. The severity of the disorder increases if the trauma was unanticipated, as with murder ("Anxiety Disorders," American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

Homicide survivors may be particularly at risk for developing Post-traumatic Stress Disorder because survivors may experience intense feelings of helplessness, fear and horror. The diagnosis of PTSD (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) is made when symptoms (listed below) last for at least one month; the disturbance adversely affects an important area of functioning, such as work or family relations; and criteria are met in the following categories:

1. Recurrent and intrusive re-experiencing of the traumatic event, such as dreams or "flashbacks";
2. Avoidance of places or events which serve as reminders of the murder; and

3. Ongoing feelings of increased arousal such as constant vigilance or an exaggerated startled reaction.

“People suffering from PTSD become stuck: they constantly relive the trauma in powerful detail and then organize their lives around avoiding anything that might provoke these terrible memories. They swing between vivid, almost lifelike re-creations of the trauma and total denial of it.” (A Grief Like No Other, Eric Schlosser, 1997)

“If a family member actually witnessed the murder, the nightmares and flashbacks often revolve around details of the killing. For other survivors, the moment when they first learned about the murder becomes the traumatic event, relived again and again. Hearing about the murder over the phone or through the media adds significantly to the trauma.” (A Grief Like No Other, Eric Schlosser, 1997)

Some events, such as news coverage, the approach of birthdays, holidays or the anniversary of the murder, may trigger the sensation in homicide survivors that they are re-experiencing stress reactions (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

Children suffering from PTSD are irritable, volatile and often have lower I.Q.'s. They re-enact trauma in play; what they do not have in language to describe is acted out in their behaviours. They have problems concentrating. They have a foreshortened sense of the future; they are devoid of aspirations and dreams. They have difficulty getting along with other children. They are misdiagnosed with ADD/ADHD, conduct disorder, learning disabilities and affective disorders. Because they are difficult, these children are vulnerable to further abuse in their homes and institutional settings. They are at great risk of being failed by the care taking system that is designed to protect them (“Fundamentals of Field Traumatology”, Traumatology Institute, 2000).

Isolation

It is not uncommon for homicide survivors to feel like outcasts from society. Someone who has not had a loved one murdered may feel and act awkwardly around survivors. It is often very difficult for the rest of society to understand what homicide survivors are going through.

Every day life after the murder may become surreal. Family and friends may avoid talking about the murder because they are unsure of what to say. Others stop asking how the survivor is doing or stop mentioning the victim's name. The silence may be hurtful to survivors. Some people do not understand that memories of the victim's life are often comforting, and so "living in the past" can often be a healing thing. Other people may pretend as though nothing has changed. Homicide survivors should be aware that people often search for ways to distance themselves from such tragedy.

Factors Influencing the Grieving Process

Homicide grief expert Lu Redmond (1989) has estimated that there are 7 to 10 close relatives (not including friends, neighbours, and co-workers) for each victim. He describes many factors that influence the grieving process for homicide survivors including:

- The ages of the survivor and the victim at the time of the homicide;
- The survivor's physical and emotional state before the murder;
- The survivor's prior history of trauma;

- The way in which their loved one died;
- Whether the survivor can make use of or has any social support systems;
- Cultural and social factors may also have a great impact on the grieving process.

Immediately After the Murder

"In the days and weeks right after a murder the victim's family is often in a state of shock, feeling numb, sometimes unable to cry. The murder of a loved one seems almost impossible to comprehend. Life seems unreal, like a dream. Survivors may need to go over the details of the crime again and again, discussing them endlessly, as though trying to put together the pieces of a puzzle, struggling to make sense of it all. They tell themselves, 'This can't be true.' After other kinds of crimes the victim lives to tell how it happened and to describe how it felt. A murder often forces the victim's family to reconstruct events. They ask, how did this take place? Why? Did my loved one suffer?" (A Grief Like No Other, Eric Schlosser, 1997)

A homicide creates unwanted and untimely demands on the family. The survivors may be faced with the task of identifying the victim's body, making funeral arrangements, handling medical bills, notifying other friends or family of the news, hosting friends or family in their home for the funeral, dealing with the media, and so on.

Homicide survivors may require help with funeral arrangements. This may include providing an escort to the morgue, providing them with information concerning their options for funeral homes, funeral services, burial services, and the like. If the victim was murdered in his or her own home, the survivors may also need assistance with clean-up services.

Survivors may need help organizing the personal belongings of the victim. Anxiety, fatigue, and depression may leave them unable to face such tasks. Urge them to consult with their loved ones before making any major decisions.

How to Grieve

Although there is no one way to grieve, the following list provides some important steps for healing.

- Be honest about your feelings
- Find a safe way to release your anger
- Admit that you may need help
- Allow yourself to cry
- Allow yourself time to recover
- Do not compare your grief with that of others, as everyone is unique
- Surround yourself with supportive people
- Do not blame yourself
- Treasure your memories and share them with others
- Write down your feelings if that helps
- Be patient and tolerant with yourself – recovery is not an overnight phenomenon

Impact on the Family

Each member of the family will grieve in a unique way, which may put them in conflict with other members of the family. It may be difficult for one person to comprehend why another is "dwelling on the murder" or involving themselves in the victims' rights movement. This may cause family members to withdraw from each other emotionally.

After the murder, family members may have to take on new responsibilities within the family unit. For example, a father may now have to assume child-rearing responsibilities while also being the wage earner. A woman may have been a wife and must now adjust to being a widow. Older siblings may have to help raise younger siblings.

If the victim was murdered by another family member, for example a spouse or brother, surviving family members may feel additional confusion, guilt, anger, blame, betrayal, and may take sides for or against the victim. This serves to split family ties and may ultimately result in the family being torn apart.

It may be that more than one family member is killed through violence, increasing the enormity of the loss. This sort of crime may also be more sensational in terms of media and community interest.

In some instances, the victim may have had a lifestyle, which was at odds with the family's values and beliefs. This information may surface following the murder, giving survivors additional feelings of confusion, anger or blame.

Victim blaming is not uncommon. Sometimes people who are grieving assume that the victim was somehow responsible for his or her own death. It sustains the belief that a person can control his/her own destiny.

The family is the most important support group for individuals and family members should be involved as much as possible in each other's recovery. Encouraging people to make time for family and friends is important. For people with limited support systems, support groups can be helpful, as they provide a sense of understanding and help to counter isolation. ("Fundamentals of Field Traumatology," Traumatology Institute, September 2000).

Parents

Parents may find that they re-experience feelings of loss many years after the murder, such as when they see friends of their murdered child graduate from high school, get married, start a family. Parents may also have great difficulty dealing with the loss of their child if they have believed that, in the natural order of life, the older generation should die first. Living with the fact that their young or grown children were killed while they themselves are still living is very difficult.

Some men and fathers may have difficulty grieving because they have been socialized to believe that 'real men' are cold and unemotional. These men generally keep their feelings to themselves because expressing them is seen as a weakness. It is important that ALL men be encouraged to discuss their feelings and express their grief openly.

Fathers might also feel an additional burden of responsibility for the murder, for failing in their role of protector. "The murder of a child looms as a profound failure of parental responsibility, regardless of whether or not that murder could have been prevented." ("A Grief Like No Other," Eric Schlosser, 1997)

"Anecdotal evidence suggests that the stresses of losing a child are responsible for an extremely high rate of divorce among grieving parents. Spouses may be unable to give each other support when it is needed most. One may be having a good day while the

other is feeling down. This discrepancy in moods often breeds resentment.” (“A Grief Like No Other,” Eric Schlosser, 1997)

Siblings

It is common for siblings to feel guilt when moving on with their lives, i.e., getting married or having children. Moving on with life can be especially difficult if the victim died before they could experience similar stages or if the murder occurred at a time when the victim had similar plans. Siblings are often very close and losing one's confidante or best friend leaves the survivor feeling very alone. Also, siblings of the victim may feel neglected by their parents or suddenly overprotected.

Children

Rachel Burrell, Director of Fernside, a centre for grieving children, believes that it is a myth that children bounce back from tragedies. Their grief is cyclical, coming and going amid intervals of play. Children whose parents have been murdered exhibit a wide range of behavioural and developmental problems. They may suffer from psychosomatic ailments, such as headaches, stomachaches, dizziness and uncontrollable trembling. They may be teased or avoided at school. Their self-esteem may plummet and also their trust in authority. There is also evidence to suggest that children who are directly exposed to violence are much more likely to commit violent acts as adults.

Children who are dealing with loss, especially the death of a family member, are likely lacking the emotional maturity and coping capabilities to work through the grief. The death of a family member is a confusing and frightening experience for anyone, particularly for young children.

Children may respond differently to death depending upon the developmental stage they are in. It is important for adults to be honest, to listen, to be supportive and to be there for children during this difficult time. This will help to facilitate a healthy process of grieving.

Birth to One Year:

Some professionals believe that infants do not respond to death, as their memory capacity for relationships has not yet developed. Others believe that infants may feel anxiety and tension, as the death may interfere with their basic needs, i.e. sleeping and eating schedules.

One to Two Years of Age:

Children at this age cannot yet attribute meaning to death. They may experience displeasure or depression following the loss of their primary caregiver. Environmental change can provoke both positive and negative reactions among young children. They may react to the emotions and grieving of those around them.

Preschool Children: Three to Five Years of Age

Preschool children have a limited understanding of death. They believe that death is temporary and can be reversed. They perceive a dead person as asleep, gone away or broken. There is no understanding of personal death.

School Age Children: Six to Nine Years of Age

Children in this age group have a clearer understanding of death although they may still believe that it will not happen to them. Children at this age may be interested in the physical and biological aspects of death. Dealing with grief is difficult as school age children alternately confront and deny their grief. They may also be unprepared for the length of the grieving process.

It is common for children in this age group to experience:

- Denial
- Difficulty expressing their strong feelings of loss
- Difficulty eating and sleeping
- Physical ailments such as stomachaches and headaches
- Fearfulness
- Decrease in school performance
- Inability to concentrate
- Anger directed towards teachers or classmates
- Inappropriate classroom behaviour

Pre-adolescent and Adolescent: 10 to 18 Years of Age

Children in this age category have a more mature understanding of death and mortality. They understand that it is irreversible. They also understand personal death, although they may view themselves as immortal. These children may experience guilt, confusion, depression, shock, crying, stomachaches, headaches, insomnia, exhaustion, dramatic reactions such as not sleeping or eating, decrease in school performance, change in peer group, possible drug use and/or sexual promiscuity.

Puberty further complicates reactions to loss and the grieving process. Children in this age category tend to be egocentric, and will thus concentrate on how the death has affected them - forgetting that others are also affected by the death. The loss of a parent at this age can be extremely overwhelming for a young person.

Dealing with Fear

Safety issues are of primary concern to homicide survivors, as they know all too well that bad things can and do happen to good people. The reality hits that no one is completely safe and that no one is immortal.

Homicide survivors may experience anxiousness and fear when another family member is late to return home or does not call when expected. They may be fearful to stay home alone or walk alone at night. If the assailant is unknown, survivors may be fearful that another family member will be harmed.

Anxiety is as much a part of life as eating and sleeping. Under the right circumstances, anxiety is beneficial. It heightens alertness and readies the body for action. Faced with an unfamiliar challenge, a person is often spurred by anxiety to prepare for the upcoming event. For example, many people practice speeches and study for tests as a result of mild anxiety. Likewise, anxiety or fear and the urge to flee are a protection from danger.

Fears are not normal, however, when they become overwhelming and interfere with daily living. If your fear has become disabling, you may have developed an anxiety disorder and should consult your family physician immediately. Do not be embarrassed, as many people suffer from anxiety disorders. They are highly treatable. ("Anxiety Disorders," American Psychiatric Association, 1994)

Dealing with the Violent Nature of the Crime

Dealing with the violent nature of the death is often a difficult task. Survivors may reflect upon the extent to which their loved one suffered. They may also feel guilt in that the death was preventable.

Dealing with homicide-related material - autopsy reports, crime scene photographs, repairing or cleaning up the crime scene, trying to obtain the victim's personal effects which may have been used as evidence - are potentially trauma-inducing events.

The need to determine or fix blame is a common human characteristic. It is not exceptional for survivors to blame the victim, either consciously or unconsciously, in the aftermath of the murder, especially if the victim had been involved in illegal or socially unacceptable activities.

Homicide survivors may also struggle with accepting the fact that their loved one's life was ended by the intentional violent act of another human being. Trying to comprehend the motivations of the murderer only adds to the pain.

Dealing with Friends and Relatives in the Aftermath

Even people with the utmost of good intentions can sometimes interfere with the healing process. Survivors should be prepared to deal with people's misguided attempts to be helpful, including comments such as,

- It's been a year – you should be over it by now;
- It's God's will;
- Time heals all wounds;
- It'll be all right;
- At least you can have other children; or
- At least you still have two other children.

People who have not experienced a similar trauma in their lives do not necessarily know how to respond to your situation and may inadvertently make inappropriate comments.

Pastors, priests, rabbi or other religious leaders may tell the survivor that they "must forgive the murderer" or that "the murder was somehow part of God's plan." These type of statements can be very distressing to people dealing with feelings of revenge and anger. They may also increase feelings of guilt among homicide survivors.

Dealing With Insensitivity

- Written by Survivors of Homicide Co-Vice President Shirley Bostrom

Ironically, what I need most is a smile, a hug and an, "I'm so sorry." However, our culture doesn't teach us how to approach someone who has suffered the devastating trauma caused by a homicide. Our natural tendency is to avoid dealing with us either out of fear of doing something wrong or being inadequate for the task.

The reality of what happened to us may pose a threat to your own family. If it can happen to us, it can happen to you so it is safer to cling to the myth that murder only happens to strangers. Murder is happening more and more to people like us, but it is not contagious. You can't catch murder from comforting the victims.

A thoughtful choice of words can prevent an awkward or senseless remark intended to give comfort from provoking more grief, guilt, or anger in the victim. People tell me: "I think about you all the time." Don't think about me. Call me. Write to me. Ask me to spend some time with you. Even if I refuse, you have told me you care. Don't tell me to call you. I'm much too tired to do that. Please call me. Don't tell me you will call, write or keep in touch if you can't do so. I expect you to keep your promise and feel betrayed when it doesn't happen.

"I don't know what to say." You don't have to say anything. Just being here is enough. Listening to me is even better.

"You're so strong." No, I'm not! I have shed more tears than I knew I had. I weep mostly in private, in my car, in the shower, in my bed at 2 a.m., with caring friends and while writing. Watching me cry may make you feel uncomfortable and inadequate. Remind yourself that I need this release if I am to heal. Expect me to be irrational. I'm not thinking clearly. I feel guilty when told I'm strong. I wonder if you are really telling me that I'm doing better than you could. Why? Do you think I didn't really love her? Did I? Of course I did. I could agree with the slightly different comment, "It must take all your strength to keep going."

"I don't know how you do it." Of course you don't. Neither do I. I do it because I have no real choice. Life is still precious. I have people I love and things I still want to do. Your thoughtfulness and prayers give me strength.

"You look so good." What? I feel guilty. My daughter's dead — I should look awful. Maybe, if you said, "I'm glad to see you are taking care of yourself. Margie would want you to." Then I'd feel validated.

"Having other children must make it easier to bear." You'd think so, but this doesn't feel easier. Siblings are often reluctant to discuss their pain and loss, but certainly, having other children to love and to love me is a comfort.

"Time heals all wounds." People really do say this! I'm not going to heal — at least, not without lots of scar tissue.

The most insensitive remark I've had to deal with was, "It has been three months. You must be over it by now." It is my daughter who is dead, not a friendly squirrel that lived in my yard. I'll never be over it.

The worst example of insensitivity that I have heard is the spiritual leader who actually tried to console the father of a murdered teenager by telling him, "At least now you won't have to worry about his behavior problems." Dealing with teenager behaviors is a natural part of life. Burying a child is not.

In a murder case, the wounds keep being reopened. There is no chance to heal or move on. A state of limbo exists. Lawyers, courts, judges and a live criminal blessed with civil rights control your life.

"You must be strong. Larry, your daughters and grandchildren need you now." "You need to support each other now," would be helpful.

“You need to take care of yourself.” Why do you think I eat, try to sleep, take showers, brush my teeth and get my haircut? I have to. I know even with all my strength I’m not going to deal well with my loss.

“How are you doing?” How do you think I’m doing? The best I can. My daughter was murdered by a man she loved enough to marry. She spent 11 years of her life with him and he stabbed her 16 times. Would you like to see how crazy a grieving mother can be? Or hear my primal scream?

“What can I do?” Be specific. If you are too general, I will tell you I need nothing or ask for what I really want — to bring her back.

“Did you know Mitch was capable of murder?” No. I feel terribly guilty and inadequate as a mother. I should have known and done something to keep her alive. I hate being a failure.

“I can’t think of anything more horrible than losing a child.” Well, I can. What if Mitch killed her and we couldn’t prove it because she just disappeared? If there were no body or its various parts, the uncertainty would gnaw at me. Or what if I lost more than one family member to brutality, Ruth, Kathy, Larry, or my grandchildren? Or what if I was responsible for a terrible accident that took the lives of those I love? How could I deal with the kidnapping or disappearance of a grandchild? — Not knowing if they were tortured and raped. It is a very violent world we live in. I know.

Margie’s death was horrendous, but I have learned not to ask how it could be any worse. I know it could be and ghastly things can still happen to those I love. Margie’s murder has not given us immunity from more such tragedies. It has forced me to acknowledge that my world isn’t safe anymore. When I see newspapers and television reports of other people’s tragedies, I comprehend their loss and pain. I experience the first sharp thrust of mine again. I know it can happen to my family, so I don’t ask why me, but why not me? And I wait.

Don’t avoid me. Being ignored hurts deeply. I know being around me is uncomfortable, but I’m doing the best I can. I need all the support you can give me. If you don’t feel strong enough to help, please tell me. I’ll accept that. I know what it is to feel weak. Holidays are difficult. Pray for us. Make plans to get together. Let us know you remember her birthday and the day she died — that she existed. We need to celebrate her life and acknowledge her death. Your call, card, or visit helps us through these tough times.

It is I who must work to heal. I cannot escape the pain. I must acknowledge it and decide to live the rest of my life with purpose and meaning. Caring friends make that a possibility. The people who have chosen to be my friends are special. They want to be here for me. Please keep trying. Sincere effort counts the most.

How to help a friend who has lost a loved one to homicide

- ? Listen – be a good listener. Do not offer “psychological” assessments.
- ? Be non-judgmental – do not be shocked if survivors express anger and feelings of revenge.
- ? Help find resources – it may be helpful for you to gather information about community resources such as support groups for the survivors.

- ? Help out with daily chores – people in grief may not have the energy or focus to take care of daily living tasks.
- ? Be wary of suicidal thoughts – it is important for people who may be having suicidal impulses to seek professional counselling with a therapist trained in trauma counselling.
- ? Do not tell the survivors that you know how they feel.
- ? Do not blame the victim or the survivors.
- ? Encourage the survivors to express their feelings if they are feeling up to it.
- ? Let the victims heal at their own pace – do not rush them.

Dealing with the Media

Homicide survivors may have both positive and negative experiences with the media. It is important to keep in mind that privacy is something that is usually lost following a homicide. The murder and the circumstances surrounding it often become public knowledge, as do the identities of the surviving family members. Sadly, the more sensational the case, the more media coverage it will attract.

Survivors should be prepared to have to deal with the media following court appearances. They should also be prepared in case inaccurate or inappropriate information is reported about their loved one or if the offender is portrayed as the victim in the case.

The Criminal Justice System

The criminal justice system is a unique stressor or burden for homicide survivors who are sometimes forced to deal with it for many years after the murder. A homicide case can take many years to complete, and there are no guarantees that the outcome will satisfy the survivors. Delays and appeals may disrupt the grieving process and prolong the survivors' suffering. Each new hearing stirs up feelings seemingly laid to rest.

Dealing with the criminal justice system can be very frustrating for survivors. While most people working within the system are trained professionals, the re-victimization of family members may occur. How family members are notified of the murder, whether their loved one's body is released by the coroner in a timely manner, how information from an autopsy report is explained, whether a suspect is caught and the manner in which the investigation and prosecution of the offender are handled -- are all very important factors in dealing with homicide survivors sensitively and courteously.

"The police may try to shield family members, keeping them away from the crime scene and from gruesome photographs of the victim. Nevertheless, many survivors demand to see these things. They want to confront the reality of the murder and to know the worst. Denied access to the facts by the authorities or by a lack of information about the crime, the relatives of murder victims are frequently tormented by questions that can never be answered." (A Grief Like No Other, Eric Schlosser, 1997)

Secondary victimization can occur easily if and when simple procedures are omitted or ignored. For instance, one survivor described the way in which her family learned the circumstances of their loved one's death. "The policeman said to us, 'You people get out of here...get the hell out of here. We're dealing with a homicide.' That's how we found out."

The manner in which death notification is handled has a great impact on the survivors. Police report this duty as the worst aspect of their jobs, and understandably so. Unfortunately, some police officers may be insensitive to the needs of homicide survivors, while others may be lacking information about the case or how to deal appropriately with them. Since police officers are most often faced with this difficult task, there are a few important things to remember:

- Always provide death notification in person – never over the telephone.
- Ideally, two people should conduct the death notification.
- The message should be straightforward, compassionate, and honest.
- Provide survivors with as much information as possible.
- Bring a crisis/trauma counselor or psychologist.
- Do not leave the survivor alone. Contact someone for the victim if necessary.
- Provide information on crime victim services.
- Do not rush the notification - give the survivor ample time to absorb the initial shock of the news.
- Be prepared for all sorts of behaviour – survivors may try to harm themselves, to run away, or to attack the person bringing the bad news.

In certain circumstances, the coroner or medical examiner may have to keep the victim's body for longer than expected, as it is the primary evidence in a murder investigation. This can be distressing for families trying to make funeral arrangements. It is also distressing for survivors to receive autopsy reports without explanation of the forensic or medical terms used.

Many professionals, in fear of causing further trauma, are reluctant to show homicide survivors crime scene photographs, even after the trial is over. If this is one of the needs of the family, it should be respected. This information will be helpful to the long term grieving process. The following is a suggestion from the National Organization of Parents of Murdered Children, Inc., as to how to present the photographs without re-victimizing the family.

- Put the photos, one at a time, in a manila envelope.
- Mark each envelope with a consecutive number, beginning at one.
- Envelope number one should contain the least graphic photograph, while the last number would contain the most graphic photo.
- Explain to the family what they are going to see as they open each envelope.
- Allow the family the control of viewing as many or as few of the photos as necessary.

The court process often leaves victims feeling like outsiders, as they have no formal role in it. The justice system concentrates on the accused and his/her guilt, leaving victims wondering what if any rights they have. Survivors soon learn that crimes do not always result in convictions and that sentences do not necessarily match the severity of the crime. Perceptions of injustice and a lack of respect for their loved one often cause further distress for homicide survivors. The victim is seldom referred to by name, which can seem dehumanizing to the family.

Plea-bargaining is a procedure that is used to save the court system time and money by accepting guilty pleas in exchange for reduced charges and a lesser sentence. Co-defendants may be given lesser punishments, despite a role in the murder, in order to obtain their cooperation. Insufficient evidence may lead to the dropping of charges or

reduced charges. Many homicide survivors are troubled and hurt by this process, as they feel that the value of their loved one's life has been lessened.

Homicide survivors are often told to show little or no emotion in the courtroom so that they will not influence the jury. This is especially difficult to do when they face an alleged killer and hear painful details of their loved one's death.

Even if the offender receives a "just and appropriate" sentence, survivors may be surprised by their response. Homicide survivors often assume that a just conclusion will absolve their pain, and they are sometimes shocked when it does not. This may be due to the fact that survivors concentrate so intensely on the justice system that they do not allow themselves the time to grieve. Thus, when the trial is over, their emotions are no longer "on hold" and they are forced to deal with the pain of the eternal void caused by the murder.

Keeping 'tabs' on an offender by dealing with corrections and paroling authorities may be another emotional burden for homicide survivors who choose to do so. Receiving semi-regular updates about an offender as he/she progresses through the prison system may rehash painful memories for survivors. At the same time, some survivors express a desire to ensure that the offender is never able to harm anyone else and monitoring them is the best way to do so.

There is also the possibility that the offender is never found, let alone arrested or convicted – a reality that many homicide survivors have had to cope with. This situation can be especially painful for survivors as they are lacking any sense of justice. These survivors may experience especially strong feelings of resentment, frustration, fear and anger.

The fact is that the criminal justice process is as likely to compound the survivors' distress as to reduce it. While some victims and survivors wish to have little or no involvement with the criminal justice system, others want to be informed of every aspect of the investigation and prosecution. It is important that these wishes be respected.

Financial Loss

Homicide survivors may be impacted financially following the murder of their loved one. Homicide may mean a significant loss of income for a family, especially if the victim was the primary 'breadwinner'. Survivors may be unable to return to work following the loss of the loved one for one reason or another. The possibility of losing the family home is real if mortgage payments cannot be made. Plans to return to or complete school may have to be postponed. There may be unexpected medical/funeral bills to pay.

Additional losses and factors that may add to a homicide survivor's pain:

- ? Loss of self – a sense of having changed as a person;
- ? Loss of a sense of control over your life;
- ? Loss of independence – a greater dependence on other individuals or institutions to address the wrong done to you and your loved one;
- ? Loss of social support – increased feelings of isolation and loneliness;
- ? Loss of a sense of safety and security;
- ? Loss or questioning of faith or religion – survivors often question how God could let something like this happen to a person they love;

- ? Loss of a sense of community – physical loss of a member of one's family;
- ? Disillusionment with the justice system;
- ? Pain in knowing that the victim suffered (especially in cases of sexual assault, torture or mutilation);
- ? A family member may be the suspect or the murderer;
- ? Nightmares of the loved one being murdered; and
- ? The murderer never being identified or caught -- the death lacks a sense of justice

Services for Homicide Survivors

There are different levels of service providers throughout the justice system that may be beneficial to homicide survivors.

- ? Several communities have established police based victim service units/programs available for usage. Where available, these services are confidential and will provide immediate crisis intervention, emotional support, practical assistance, general information about the criminal justice system and referrals for consideration.
- ? Crown or court-based victim services help to prepare victims for the court process, securing documents such as transcripts, preparing victims to be witnesses, providing referrals to community and other counselling agencies, and helping family members prepare victim impact statements.
- ? Community-based service providers may provide advocacy and other supportive services to homicide survivors, such as court accompaniment or liaising with parole authorities.

Depending on where you live, you may be entitled to compensation as a result of your criminal victimization. Such compensation programs may reimburse families for funeral expenses, counselling fees, loss of income, medical expenses, etc. There are however, limits on such compensation and victims should contact their provincial Criminal Injuries Compensation program for more specific and detailed information.

Participation in Support Groups

Many homicide survivors have found it helpful to speak with others who have been through a similar experience. Being able to openly express the pain of their loss, and reveal "revenge fantasies" (a normal reaction to violent victimization) is quite satisfying. Support groups can be very normalizing for families and friends of victims, allowing them to feel that they are not going crazy and that others are experiencing and surviving the same complexity of emotions. As homicide survivors cannot always relate to people who have lost a loved one due to accidental or natural causes, it is often helpful to speak with other homicide survivors because they understand the specific and unique suffering that is taking place.

Support groups are a means for survivors who are further along in the healing process to help others who are newly bereaved or who are having an especially difficult time coping. By providing and receiving support, survivors are able to help each other and see the good that is able to come out of the pain they have experienced.

People who have experienced the murder of a loved one have stated that they often feel an immediate and close bond with other homicide survivors, even if they do not meet face-to-face.

It is important to note that some survivors have reported feeling worse after attending the first few support group sessions. This is usually because many painful emotions have been brought to the surface. As difficult as this may be at the time, many survivors state that this process ultimately helps them through the grieving process.

Your community may have a support group for homicide survivors, which is organized through hospitals, churches or various other social service agencies. Or, you may be able to make contact with other homicide survivors through a victim services agency or an advocacy group such as ours. Such support groups lend an atmosphere of assistance and empathy to the homicide survivor.

Counselling

Obtaining individual or family counselling services with a therapist trained in trauma work can be very helpful to homicide survivors. Working through feelings of anger, revenge, fear and grief are important to your healing. It is especially important to contact a therapist when thoughts of self-harm or suicide are present.

Homicide survivors may be able to receive reimbursement for counselling expenses through provincial crime compensation programs. Contact your Crown Attorney or victim services office for more information.

Local Funeral Directors

Local funeral directors are often an excellent source of information during the grieving process. They may also facilitate grief support groups or provide referral information about other community services for homicide survivors.

Civil Litigation

Survivors may consider proceeding with a civil suit against the individual who is responsible for causing them so much pain. Victims should be aware that the civil litigation system is very costly and much more time consuming than the criminal process. Civil litigation also provides for an enormous emotional burden on the victims, as it does not restrict the flow of information or questioning like the criminal system does. A victim's past can be cross-examined liberally. Civil litigation is also a risky avenue to pursue, as criminal defendants often do not have the financial means to compensate a victim for their pain and suffering.

Advocacy

Homicide survivors often find ways to channel their grief positively, including involving themselves in helping activities in memory of their loved one. Many survivors have gone on to take active roles in education and advocacy following their victimization. Working for change within the criminal justice system is seen as a way to make something positive out of their tragedy, while helping others in the process. Survivors may choose to tackle victims' rights issues, young offenders, sentencing laws, or restorative justice approaches.

Working with Homicide Survivors

It has been said that homicide survivors are needier than other victims of crime, more demanding than other victims of crime, and angrier than other victims of crime. Their needs and intense feelings are normal and must be validated.

Professionals are in a delicate position to either help or hinder homicide survivors in their journey. The following are some tips from The National Organization of Parents of Murdered Children, Inc., for professionals working with homicide survivors:

- Accurate information delivered with extreme sensitivity is vital.
- Provide the family with basic facts and answer their questions as they arise.
- No information should be withheld.
- If a question cannot be answered, say so and explain why.
- Listen to their needs – they may need to know whether their loved one suffered or to see the crime scene photographs.
- Permit family members to verbalize the horror of the tragedy.
- Do not use clichés (“It’ll get better” or “He/she was in the wrong place at the wrong time”).
- Be careful not to reinforce the family’s theories that have no basis, i.e., who is guilty or that there is a conspiracy. Often, these theories are based on the inability to obtain information or to get answers.
- Do not make promises you cannot keep -- “We’ll catch the person who did this.”
- Do not make promises on behalf of others – “The prosecutor will see to it that he gets life.”
- Do not assume that the family has been provided all the information or understands complicated legal issues.
- Recognize burnout. Burnout may cause the professional to believe the job is routine, to avoid all contact with the victims, or make excuses about their workload being too heavy.
- Avoid prejudices or stereotypes about the victim and his/her lifestyle, the family and their socioeconomic status, minorities, etc.
- Do not place unrealistic “should’s” on survivors, i.e. you should be over that by now, you should get out and have some fun, you should be feeling better, you should be able to forgive.
- Professionals should not expect total resolution or closure.

The Issue of Closure

Attaining a sense of closure is a goal that is too often forced upon homicide survivors in their journey through healing. In fact, many homicide survivors report never attaining a complete or true sense of closure.

While forgiveness is possible for some survivors, do not expect everyone to be able to do so. Also, although finding forgiveness may allow someone to put their problems to rest, ease their mind, and even benefit their physical health, it is not possible in all circumstances.

“I don't think it's possible to describe what happens when a loved one's life is taken in an act of violence. In the hours after learning the circumstances and details of my father's death, I thought that I, myself, might die - literally. I reacted on a cellular level, dropping weight at an alarming rate made more frightening because I was nursing my six-month old daughter and her sustenance depended on me.

I remember the nightmare trip to the morgue to identify his body, and at the worst moment, sitting alone in a small chapel wondering if I would survive and feeling an overwhelming assurance from something, somewhere, that I would.

I remember the frightening trip with my brother to the D.C. homicide office; the room in which we were "interviewed" was an interrogation room with handcuffs on the desk and holes punched into the wall.

I also remember seeing a television news clip of police wheeling my father's body out of his apartment. And, the young man who showed up at my mother's house claiming that his car had broken down and asking if he could use the phone. After I let him in, I realized that his car story was a ruse; he wanted to witness our pain. He was one of the few I later labeled "death groupies."

But people also provided unexpected and extraordinary kindnesses. An elderly friend brought flowers and homemade bread; she said nothing, her simple gift was a reminder of life amongst so much horror. My father's landlord called me with the (not unreasonable) request that the apartment where my father was killed be cleaned. When we could find no one willing to do it, my best friend offered to help.

In the aftermath of my dad's death, there were many changes and ruptures in relationships between family and friends. My father was killed on my ninth wedding anniversary. We had planned to celebrate that evening. Instead, my marriage broke up six weeks later. My brother's wife, who had left him a couple of months before, returned.

Because my father's case was so convoluted and complicated, and because no person or persons was ever arrested, never mind convicted, there has never been any closure."

Written by Rebecca Nison-Owens

Healing

Adjusting to a life in which the deceased is no longer present can be a difficult task. Survivors may feel guilt about decisions they make or wonder if they are being disloyal to the deceased.

Relief from stresses, the ability to talk about the experience, and the passage of time are important factors in the healing process. Homicide survivors must find a place for their loved one, which will allow them to go on with their lives. Survivors must, in their own time, come to the realization that life can and does go on.

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