

HOMICIDE LOSS: DEALING WITH GRIEF FOR SURVIVORS

PREPARED BY THE CANADIAN RESOURCE CENTRE FOR VICTIMS OF CRIME

This paper is intended as a general guide for people who may become susceptible to crime or for victims that are already involved in the criminal justice system. Please do not hesitate to contact our office if you require clarification, or for a referral to an agency in your community that may be able to provide services to you.

(Revised May 2022)



Canadian
Resource Centre for
**VICTIMS
OF CRIME**

— Dedicated to Justice —

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
EXPERIENCING LOSS	1
DEALING WITH GRIEF.....	1
DENIAL.....	3
ANGER.....	4
GUILT	4
ANGUISH.....	4
GRIEF SPASMS.....	5
POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER	5
ISOLATION	6
FACTORS INFLUENCING THE GRIEVING PROCESS	7
IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE MURDER.....	7
HOW TO GRIEVE	8
IMPACT ON THE FAMILY	8
PARENTS	9
SIBLINGS.....	9
CHILDREN	9
PRE-ADOLESCENT AND ADOLESCENT: 10 TO 18 YEARS OF AGE	10
DEALING WITH FEAR.....	11
DEALING WITH THE VIOLENT NATURE OF THE CRIME	11
DEALING WITH FRIENDS AND RELATIVES IN THE AFTERMATH	10
DEALING WITH INSENSITIVITY	10
HOW TO HELP A FRIEND WHO HAS LOST A LOVED ONE TO HOMICIDE	12
DEALING WITH THE MEDIA	13
THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM.....	13
FINANCIAL LOSS.....	15
ADDITIONAL LOSSES AND FACTORS THAT MAY ADD TO A HOMICIDE SURVIVOR'S PAIN	16
WORKING WITH HOMICIDE SURVIVORS	16

THE ISSUE OF CLOSURE	19
HEALING	20
SERVICES FOR HOMICIDE SURVIVORS.....	20
COUNSELLING	21
LOCAL FUNERAL DIRECTORS	21
CIVIL LITIGATION	19
ADVOCACY	20
PARTICIPATION IN SUPPORT GROUPS	20
CRCVC MONTHLY HOMICIDE SUPPORT GROUP	20
CONTACT US	21
REFERENCES.....	21

Introduction

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

Those left behind are sometimes referred to as, 'homicide survivors' and are victims of crime. Their lives have been altered forever. Their life will never be the same even though they may not have even been present at the crime.

There was a period when the Canadian justice system did not recognize next of kin as victims. This changed through the lobbying efforts of victims and their advocates.

Today, those who work with homicide survivors, including counsellors, victim service providers, Crown Attorneys, and police officers, must recognize that these survivors of homicide are also victims of crime, and face a unique set of emotions and circumstances.

Experiencing Loss

When someone is murdered, the death is sudden, violent, final, and oftentimes incomprehensible. Though the survivors of the victim may not have even been present during the crime, their world is changed from that moment on. Survivors may not have had the chance to say goodbye to their loved ones. Life may have suddenly lost meaning, and many survivors report that they cannot imagine ever being happy again.

Homicide survivors will experience the death of a loved one differently, as each person had a unique relationship with the victim. A survivor's personal history of trauma will also affect how 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

When a person dies after a long illness, their family has time to prepare emotionally for the death, to feel anticipatory grief.

When someone is murdered, the death comes without warning.

Complicating matters even more, the mourning period following a homicide is unpredictable and may be prolonged due to several factors including the legal system itself, the attitudes of society, the nature of the crime, and the final disposition of the case.

"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 homicide is not something that can easily be overcome. It is a process, that affects each person differently. Survivors must be patient and kind to themselves. Homicide survivors must take time to feel the grief and experience the pain of the loss. It is a process and a feeling that cannot be rushed. It will not go away if they just ignore it.

Everyone will grieve differently; for different lengths of time, in different intensities, and in different ways. It is important to accept the way survivors are managing their grief as much as the way another person manages theirs. Just because others cannot see it, it does not mean survivors are not hurting. Survivors should not rush their grief or 'try to get over it', and if there are people around them, they do not have to grieve alone.

The grief process is often characterized as work because it is laborious and difficult. There is no timetable for this process and there is no amount of time that can be given to 'feel better'. Losing a loved one causes survivors to adjust their lives in an attempt to compensate for the loss and manage their grief. Grief can be a long and painful process, but it can be managed with assistance from friends, family, and/or outside support. When working through grief, it is best to have a support system to fall back on. Even if survivors prefer to work through their grief alone, the knowledge that there are still people out there who are supporting them can be a helpful pillar in this time.

The feeling of grief may present itself in many different ways and it is important to be able to recognize some of the reactions to be able to work through them.

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
- An overwhelming sense of loss and sorrow
- Symptoms of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Physical

- Fatigue
- Insomnia
- Sleep disturbance (nightmares)
- Hyperarousal / 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

Some more in-depth explanations of the more common reactions:

Denial

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. Denial is often not a *choice*, it is not a person refusing to confront a horrible truth, it is an uncontrollable reaction that a person must work through with understanding and patience.

The decision to view the body of the deceased is an incredibly difficult one, but also one that is fairly time-sensitive. Not being able to view the body, either because they were not permitted to or felt

unable to, may complicate or intensify feelings of denial for survivors. Without seeing the body, some survivors cannot extinguish the hope that their loved one is still alive and will return home to them one day. When there is no body to view, this can be even more difficult because even survivors who want to view the body are unable to do so. Some survivors have reported a compelling feeling to follow someone who looks like their loved one, feelings which 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 an intense anger or rage. This rage is often directed at whoever the survivor feels is responsible for the homicide, as well as the criminal justice system, and often at themselves. Though anger is a valid response, it is important to know how to channel that anger and where to aim it. Coping strategies like exercise, physically demanding tasks, or calming strategies like yoga, have been reported by survivors as helpful outlets for their anger. Speaking with a trusted person about those feelings; whether with a psychologist, friend or family, support group, or any other support, can also be beneficial to release that anger and move the discussion forward to healing.

Survivors may even experience anger towards the victim for ‘being in the wrong place at the wrong time’ or putting themselves at risk through their lifestyle or activities. Know that this is also a normal reaction and that there is no reason to feel guilt about ‘blaming’ the victim for their death.

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 to others who knew the loved one and of the circumstances of the death. This may help the survivor discuss their feelings, and the origin of these feelings of guilt and responsibility, and possibly move towards healing.

Homicide survivors may also feel guilty about unresolved conflicts with the deceased, especially if bad feelings existed before the murder. Survivors often feel an 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 feelings of guilt by assuming that the victim was somehow responsible for his or her death. This may then be followed by more feelings of guilt for blaming the victim for their death. It is important to find the source of the feelings to intercept this cycle of guilt.

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’. These pains should be taken seriously as emotional distress

can cause physical distress. As with any symptom, this should not be kept quiet, and physical pains should be reported to a doctor.

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 severe and unusual physical or mental trauma. The severity of the disorder increases if the trauma was unanticipated, as with murder (Pineles et al., 2011; Boals & Schuettler, 2009).

Homicide survivors may be particularly at risk for developing PTSD because survivors may experience intense feelings of helplessness, fear, and horror. For many survivors, these symptoms will dissipate after a few months, but others will remain with a PTSD diagnosis long after the crime (Pineles et al., 2011). Survivors of homicide are often forced to face the media, justice systems, financial hardship, and interpersonal conflict, which increase the likelihood of a PTSD diagnosis. Being able to make sense of what happened or find meaning, also plays a role in symptom outcomes and their intensity (Zinzow et al., 2011). The diagnosis of PTSD 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 who avoid confronting their feelings about the crime or who avoid thinking about it in any way are noted to have more severe PTSD symptoms, as the avoidance reinforces the idea that the memories are dangerous, and that the brain needs to be protected from them (Pineles et al., 2011).

“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 (Pineles et al., 2011).

Children suffering from PTSD can exhibit a number of behaviours:

- They can be irritable and volatile.
- They may re-enact trauma in play.
- What they are unable to express in the language is often acted out in their behaviours. Because of this, they have problems concentrating during class and may be labelled as a ‘troubled child’.
- They are often misdiagnosed with ADD/ADHD, conduct disorder, learning disabilities, and affective disorders.
- They may have a foreshortened sense of the future.
- They may even show a lack of aspirations and dreams, because they may not see how their life can be different from the trauma they are subjected to.
- They may have difficulty getting along with other children and making emotional connections with them.
- Because they are difficult to understand and may take a lot of patience to talk to, these children are vulnerable to further abuse in their homes and institutional settings.
- They are at greater risk of being failed by the caretaking system that is designed to protect them (Fundamentals of Field Traumatology, Traumatology Institute, 2000; Ulman, 2007).

Isolation

It is not uncommon for homicide survivors to feel like outcasts from society. They may feel misunderstood or angry at people who try to say they ‘*understand how you feel*’. They may feel like the event is written on their face, that people on the street can see the victimization, and this may make the survivor want to isolate themselves to protect themselves. Someone who has not had a loved one murdered may feel and act awkwardly around survivors, they may want to help but not know what to say or want to remain sensitive to the situation. It is often very difficult for the rest of society to understand what homicide survivors are going through, but they can still stand beside survivors and support them through their trauma.

Everyday 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, or that another person may be trying to cope by distancing themselves from the pain.

Factors Influencing the Grieving Process

Homicide grief expert, Lu Redmond, has estimated that there are 7 to 10 close relatives (not including friends, neighbours, and co-workers) for each victim. These close relatives will all process their pain and grief differently, and will each need to work through it with the support of each other. Redmond 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;
- How their loved one died;
- Whether the survivor can make use of or has any social support systems; and
- 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 and providing them with information concerning their options for funeral homes, funeral services, burial services, and so on. 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.

Along with the grief from the separation of the loved one from their lives, survivors of homicide also have to manage traumatic grief, the knowledge of what happened to their loved one (or lack of knowledge), and the fact that they were killed so quickly that there is no time beforehand to prepare or adjust to the mentality that they will have to live on without them (Holland & Neimeyer, 2011).

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 death. It sustains the belief that a person can control his/her 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, and 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 are still living is very difficult (Pineles et al., 2011).

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 try to suppress their feelings or keep them to themselves because expressing them is seen as a weakness. ALL men must 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 along with their trust in authority.

Children who are dealing with loss, especially the death of a family member, are likely to lack 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. Adults need to listen, be honest, be supportive, and be there for children during this difficult time. This will help to facilitate a healthy grieving process (Lewandowski et al, 2004).

Infants and younger children may not attribute any meaning to the word '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 have a broader, but still limited understanding of death. They often believe that death is temporary and can be reversed. They may perceive a dead person as asleep, gone away, or broken and can be fixed.

Children in the elementary school 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; and
- 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 not at risk of death, or as untouchable by death. These children may experience guilt,

confusion, depression, shock, crying, stomach aches, 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 the loss of a loved one and the grieving process. Children in this age category are often learning how to manage their emotions and are confronting their worldview. There is a lot to focus on within themselves that they may appear to be egocentric, but this just means that they may 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 also be extremely overwhelming for a young person (Lewandowski et al, 2004).

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 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.

Homicide survivors may be told that anxiety is normal and that it helps prepare the body for action. In regular circumstances this is true, but the anxiety that accompanies a homicide is often a diagnosable anxiety disorder, and this is different from 'everyday anxiety'.

Fears are normal, as long as, they don't become overwhelming and interfere with daily living. If their fear has become disabling, they may have developed an anxiety disorder and should consult their family physician immediately. Do not be embarrassed, as many people suffer from anxiety disorders. They are highly treatable (Boals & Schuettler, 2009).

Dealing with the Violent Nature of the Crime

Dealing with the violent nature of death is often a difficult task. Survivors may reflect upon the extent to which their loved ones 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 unusual 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 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 your other children.

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

Pastors, priests, rabbis, 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 types 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 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 behaviour problems." Dealing with teenager behaviours 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. A man she loved enough to marry murdered my daughter. 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 nobody 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.

For more information on how to deal with the media, please see CRCVC's publication [If the Media Calls: A Guide for Crime Victims & Survivors](#).

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 promptly, how information from an autopsy report is explained, whether a suspect is caught, and how the investigation and prosecution of the offender are handled -- are all very important factors in dealing with homicide survivors sensitively and courteously.

The decision of whether or not to view the body varies from person to person. Some people would prefer to remember their loved ones how they were in life, while some feel they need to see the body to come to terms with the reality of death. Regardless of the decision, the survivor of homicide should be allowed to carry through with it, as long as it does not impede an ongoing investigation (Chapple & Ziebland, 2010).

Secondary victimization can occur easily if and when simple procedures are omitted or ignored. For instance, one survivor described how 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."

How the 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 counsellor 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, run away, or 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 and consideration should be given to the cultural and/or religious background of the victim's family. Depending on the religion/culture, the family might find it very distressing to not be able to make funeral arrangements promptly, as per their customs. Cultural sensitivity is especially important for professionals when dealing with families and explaining to them why the release of the body of their loved one straight away might not be possible. Asking for assistance from clergy can be a good way to try to minimize the re-traumatization of victims.

It is also distressing for survivors to receive autopsy reports without explanation of the forensic or medical terms used. Using language that the family does not understand can make them feel disrespected, uncared for, and overwhelmed.

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 for 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 revictimizing 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 ones 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, 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 because 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, 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. These wishes must be respected.

Financial Loss

Homicide survivors may be impacted financially following the murder of their loved ones. 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. If a survivor sees the possibility of financial difficulties in the future because of the death, they should ask their victim service worker to connect them with any available financial assistance.

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

Working with Homicide Survivors

Professionals working with homicide survivors should use a trauma-informed approach to not revictimize survivors. 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 “shoulds” on survivors, i.e. you should be over that by now, you should get out and have some fun, you should be feeling better, and 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. 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. 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 labelled "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 Nilson-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 ones, which will allow them to go on with their lives. Survivors must, in their own time, realize that life can and does go on.

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 survivors live, they may be entitled to compensation as a result of their 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.

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 is important for 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 the 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 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.

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 can help each other and see the good that can 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.

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

CRCVC Monthly Homicide Support Group

The Homicide Support Group was formed in 2018 due to the lack of formal support that many survivors of homicide experience. As the need grew, the group turned into a virtual, national support group for homicide survivors from every part of Canada.

The group is a drop-in national support group for family members, friends and close loved ones of homicide/murder victims and is intended to offer peer support to those dealing with violent loss.

The group runs every last Thursday of the month, virtually. There is an intake process required but the group is open to all survivors of homicide. To sign up, please email crcvc@crcrc.ca or call toll-free at 1-877-208-0747.

Contact Us

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact us:

Call: 1-877-232-2610

Email: crcvc@crcvc.ca

Text 613-208-0747

Live chat on our website: www.crcvc.ca

References

- "A Grief Like No Other," in The Atlantic Online. Eric Schlosser, September 1997.
- "Anxiety Disorders," American Psychiatric Association, 1994.
- Boals, A., & Schuettler, D. (2009). PTSD symptoms in response to traumatic and non-traumatic events: The role of respondent perception and A2 criterion. *Journal of anxiety disorders*, 23(4), 458-462.
- Chapple, A., & Ziebland, S. (2010). Viewing the body after bereavement due to a traumatic death: a qualitative study in the UK. *BMJ*, 340, c2032.
- "FYI: Homicide Survivors," National Center for Victims of Crime.
- "FYI: Grief (children)," National Center for Victims of Crime.
- "Grief: Coping with the Death of a Loved One," National Center for Victims of Crime.
- Holland, J. M., & Neimeyer, R. A. (2011). Separation and traumatic distress in prolonged grief: The role of cause of death and relationship to the deceased. *Journal of Psychopathology and Behavioral Assessment*, 33(2), 254-263.
- "Homicide Survivors," Steve Sullivan, Victims of Violence Canadian Centre for Missing Children.
- "Information for Professionals," The National Organization of Parents of Murdered Children, Inc.
- Lewandowski, L. A., McFarlane, J., Campbell, J. C., Gary, F., & Barenski, C. (2004). "He killed my mommy!" Murder or attempted murder of a child's mother. *Journal of Family Violence*, 19(4), 211-220.
- Pineles, S. L., Mostoufi, S. M., Ready, C. B., Street, A. E., Griffin, M. G., & Resick, P. A. (2011). Trauma reactivity, avoidant coping, and PTSD symptoms: a moderating relationship?. *Journal of abnormal psychology*, 120(1), 240.
- Survivors of Homicide - <http://www.survivorsofhomicide.com/>
- "Tips from Survivors," The National Organization of Parents of Murdered Children, Inc.
- "To the Family of a Homicide Victim," New Hampshire Department of Justice.
- Ullman, S. E. (2007). Relationship to Perpetrator, Disclosure, Social Reactions, and PTSD Symptoms in Child Sexual Abuse Survivors. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 16(1), 19-36.
- Zinzow, H. M., Rheingold, A. A., Byczkiewicz, M., Saunders, B. E., & Kilpatrick, D. G. (2011). Examining posttraumatic stress symptoms in a national sample of homicide survivors: Prevalence and comparison to other violence victims. *Journal of traumatic stress*, 24(6), 743-746.