

A SURVIVOR'S GUIDE TO HOMICIDE AND GRIEVING

WHAT IS A HOMICIDE SURVIVOR?

Those who have lost a loved one to murder or homicide are referred to as homicide survivors. Survivors are family members and friends who have close emotional, personal, and/or intimate ties with the homicide victim. Homicide survivors are also victims of crime because they have been indirectly harmed by the commission of a murder. This harm takes the form of the loss they experience because of the murder, and the difficulties resulting from that loss.

Although dealing with a death is always difficult, when the death is the result of a deliberate and often violent act committed by another human being, the pain of loss is intensified, making a survivor's grief is often more complicated. Thus, homicide survivors are known to experience unique emotions and need different types of support when coping with the death of their loved one. If someone close to you has been murdered, you are a homicide survivor and this guide can help you to understand your grief.

HOW IS MY GRIEF DIFFERENT?

UNEXPECTEDNESS

The unexpectedness of murder is one of the reasons that your grief is different. You do not have to prepare for death or to anticipate the grief you will experience. One morning you may go through the normal breakfast routine with your child or spouse for example, without ever knowing that they will not return home at the end of the day. There is no prognosis for homicide like there is for terminal illness, or general timeline like there is for natural death.

VIOLENCE

Dealing with the violent nature of your loved one's death, which was intentionally caused by another person is a difficult task and intensifies the emotions that you may feel while grieving. Survivors are sometimes needed to identify their loved ones either through photos or by physically looking at their body, or may be required to view crime scene photos. If this is the case, you may actually need to view the violence that was inflicted on your family member or friend. Furthermore, you may sometimes find yourself reflecting or imagining the pain that your loved one must have gone through prior to their death. All of these things cause additional emotional trauma, and extend and intensify the grieving process beyond that which others dealing with the death of a loved one would feel.

CRIMINAL NATURE

Another person must have committed a crime in order for a person's death to be deemed a homicide, and therefore many other people outside of the victim's family will be thrust into your life. You will likely have to talk with police and attorney's about the circumstances of your loved one's death, you may be repeatedly approached by the media, and the trial and parole processes can extend the grieving process by years and sometimes for a life time (please see the section titled "Homicide Survivors and the Criminal Justice System" for more information). Survivors often find that they have little control over or input in the criminal justice process as well as what is said in the media. This is a reality that can cause you additional frustration, anxiety, and re-victimization.

INSENSITIVITY

Homicide is a rare occurrence, and because it is such a rare occurrence, few people know how to talk to or help homicide survivors. This includes people in the criminal justice system, friends, family, and unfortunately even some mental health professionals. Repeated questioning by the media, being told that you need to "move on" or "get over it", or having a police officer or service worker say that your loved one's death "could have been worse" or "is no different than if they died in a car accident," are all examples of the type of insensitivity that you may encounter as a homicide survivor.

WHAT ARE SOME THINGS I MIGHT EXPERIENCE WHILE GRIEVING?

It is important to understand that not all survivors will experience the same symptoms of grief, nor will they all experience them in the same order, or with the same intensity. These emotions and grief related symptoms may actually co-exist for survivors of homicide, and do not necessarily happen in stages.

Following the notification of death, many survivors report feeling like “this can’t be happening.” Common emotions you may experience are shock, disbelief, and denial. Experiencing these emotions, particularly denial, is a way of lessening the pain of what has just become your new reality, and has been described as the body’s way of coping and only letting in as much reality as you can handle at a given time. As these initial emotions fade, you may begin to ask questions about the circumstances of your loved one’s death.

In the days and weeks following the notification of death, you must often deal with your loved one’s funeral/memorial, other family obligations, the media, the police, the legal system, and a host of additional sources of stress and anxiety. Throughout this time, feelings of despair, numbness, helplessness, sadness, aloneness and emptiness are often felt. It is also common to feel like life has lost much of its meaning, and that you are simply going through the motions.

As the investigation and judicial process continues, these types of emotions begin to recede and you may begin to feel angry. This anger can be directed at friends, family, doctors, yourself, the loved one who died, and even at religious deities. Others may feel that your anger is misplaced, inappropriate or disproportionate, but this is not true. It is the job of your friends and family members to try and understand your anger, and it is your job to let that anger out. Anger is a necessary stage of healing.

Anger usually coincides with bargaining, where you may explore all of the “what if” and “if only” possibilities around the murder of your loved one. You may try to come to a temporary truce by thinking things such as “what if I devote the rest of my life to helping others? Then can I wake up from this dream?” Unfortunately, guilt is often associated with bargaining, as the “if onlys” tend to cause you to find fault within yourself, or to feel that if you had only done something differently, your loved one would still be alive.

These feelings of guilt often lead to depression. Some level of depression is normal in order to cope with what has happened to your loved one. Friends and family members often see depression as unnatural, something that needs to be fixed, but in reality the situation of losing a loved one in such a violent way is depressing, and not feeling depression would be unnatural. It is important for family and friends to be there for you, but not to prevent these feelings.

Due to the traumatic nature of murder, survivor's are also at a higher risk of developing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. If you experience (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 for a period of one month or more, and these disturbances are effecting important areas of your life such as family and work relationships, you may be suffering from PTSD. If so, it would be beneficial for you to seek help from a mental health professional to help you cope with this disorder.

As time moves on, you may find that you occasionally experience intense feelings of loss, triggered by anything related to your murdered loved one, such as a particular smell, taste, person or place. These intense feelings which often lead to powerful bouts of crying are called grief spasms. They may manifest at any point after the murder, but generally decrease in intensity and frequency as times passes.

Eventually, you are often able to accept that your loss has occurred and cannot be undone. Feelings of acceptance may never be fully achieved however, or may only be achieved in part. This is because while you may be able to accept that your loved one is dead, you may never be able to accept how they died, or the explanation given (if any) for why they were murdered.

Survivors never really "get over" the fact that their loved one has been murdered, but rather evolve to where the bad days slowly lessen and the raw distress and anger felt begins to subside. The survivor creates a new type of normal where they can begin to reinvest in the world again. It is important to understand that experiencing setbacks in your grief is commonplace, as your new normal often includes attending court, giving victim impact statements, attending parole hearings and other justice system related processes, in addition to experiencing holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries without your loved one.

OTHER GRIEF SYMPTOMS YOU MAY EXPERIENCE

PHYSICAL

Fatigue, insomnia, nightmares, hyper arousal / hyper-vigilance (jumpiness), lethargy, muscle tension, chills, increased heart rate or blood pressure, nausea, cramps, fainting, dizziness, respiratory problems, impaired immune response, headaches, change in appetite, decreased libido.

THINKING

Impaired concentration, impaired decision-making ability, difficulty setting priorities, memory impairment, 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

INTERPERSONAL

Alienation / Isolation, social withdrawal, increased conflict in relationships, vocational impairment, school impairment, desire for revenge, decreased feelings of safety and security.

SPIRITUAL

Faith in humanity may be shaken, feeling distant from religion, turning to religion, questioning one's basic beliefs.

HOW WILL THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM AFFECT MY GRIEF?

Having to deal with the intricacies of the criminal justice system is a process that you will have to take part in that other families of deceased loved ones will not. Some particular aspects of the Criminal Justice System that can impact how you are able to grieve are discussed below.

THE POLICE

The biggest impact that the police will have on you will likely occur when they present the notification of death. Treating you with compassion and respect will have a positive impact on you at one of the most overwhelming and devastating times of your life. Ideally, the death notification should:

- Always be done in person, never over the phone, and in a private place
- Provide as much information as possible about the crime
- Have present a crisis counsellor or victim services worker (such as a VCARS volunteer)
- Be direct and honest
- Not leave the survivor alone
- Provide information and referrals to victim services
- Never blame the deceased person for their death
- Allow survivors time to get over the initial shock of the news before asking any questions

The police will also be responsible for arresting the person who murdered your loved one once the investigation is complete. Survivors should understand that the police often cannot disclose certain information while the case is still ongoing, as this may jeopardize the future of the investigation.

THE TRIAL PROCESS

The trial process will determine whether or not the person that the police have arrested is in fact guilty of murder. Throughout the trial process, the Crown Attorney or a service worker from a Victim/Witness Assistance Program (VWAP) should keep you informed about important trial dates, the status of the trial, and be able to provide you with answers to any questions you may have.

PRELIMINARY HEARINGS:

The purpose of a preliminary hearing is to see if the Crown has enough evidence to justify sending the case to trial (if the judge determines that they do not, the charges against the accused person will be dropped). It also gives accused and the defence lawyer a chance to hear the details of the case against the accused. At this time, decisions on whether to exclude or include certain evidence are also made, influencing how much and what types of evidence the jury will hear during the

actual trial. This is meant to ensure that only the evidence that was collected legally is used. The decisions made in a preliminary hearing may cause you to feel like the trial will not be fair or just. If you did not attend the preliminary hearing, finding out only after the trial that certain evidence was excluded may compound these feelings.

PLEA BARGAINING:

Sometimes, the Crown Attorney feels that the probability of convicting the accused of first or second degree murder may be too low, and does not want to risk losing at trial and having the offender freed indefinitely. In these cases, the Crown will likely make a bargain with the accused to plead guilty to a lesser charge, which carries a less serious sentence, in order to ensure a conviction. Plea bargains may be upsetting for you because you may feel that justice was not served properly, or that the system is not taking your victimization as seriously as it should.

EVIDENCE:

The possible presentation of disturbing testimony, crime scene photos, or weapons during the trial can negatively impact your ability to grieve or cope with the loss of your loved one. Survivors should speak with the Crown Attorney about when this sort of evidence might be presented, so that you will have a chance to prepare yourself or to choose not to attend court on that day.

THE VERDICT:

Homicide survivors often feel that once a verdict has been reached, particularly if it is a guilty one, that they will experience a sense of closure and finality. However, often times this is not the case, as the criminal justice process continues into the area of corrections and parole and can stretch out for years. Likewise, a finding of not guilty may trigger feelings of injustice, frustration, and anger because you are no closer to knowing who killed your loved, or the person who did commit the murder has not been punished.

VICTIM IMPACT STATEMENTS:

These statements give survivors a chance to actively participate in the sentencing stage of a trial. Impact statements can have both positive and negative effects on

your grief; positive impacts come from being able to tell the offender and the judge exactly how the murder has affected your life and why their punishment is necessary. Negative impacts can stem from the fact that impact statements are often restrictive and you may not be able to say everything that you would like to say. For more information on impact statements, please refer to our *“Victim’s Guide to Input Opportunities.”*

SENTENCING:

Crown attorney’s can help you to understand why they are asking for a certain sentence, or why a judge gave the offender one sentence versus another (For more information, please refer to our *“Victims Guide to Sentencing”*). For survivors of homicide, any sentence that is given to an offender may not seem like enough, even if it is the maximum sentence available; no amount of time served in prison can bring your loved one back.

OBTAINING PERSONAL ITEMS USED AS EVIDENCE:

To get back personal items used as evidence, you must wait until the trial is over, at which point the judge will state whether the items can be returned. Before actually obtaining these items however, you may have to wait until the time period for either the defence or the prosecution to begin an appeal is over. This is usually 30 days after sentencing. Once it is over, you should speak with the police officer who investigated the case about getting the belongings back. You may have to travel to an evidence storage facility in the area where the trial was held to obtain the items.

CORRECTIONS AND PAROLE (POST-SENTENCING)

For homicide survivors, the criminal justice system often prolongs their grief, and unintentionally re-victimizes them after the offender has been convicted. Depending on the sentence they received, the offender will be eligible for early release (parole) at a time in the future determined by the judge, and will have the opportunity to reapply every two years after this if their first application is denied.

As a survivor, you are entitled to attend the parole board hearing for every application made by an offender to be released on parole. You are also entitled to provide input about why the offender should or should not be released. While

most survivors appreciate the opportunity to participate and voice their concerns at these hearings, dealing with the correction and parole authorities can cause additional emotional burdens. Because the offender can choose to re-apply for early release every 2 years, you are repeatedly required to talk about the experience of losing your loved one and to travel to the place of the hearing. You must do this while at the same time thinking about the possibility that the person who murdered your loved one might be let out of prison. For more information about parole, please see our *“Victim’s Guide to Parole,”* and for more information about participating during parole hearings please see our *“Guide to Victim Input Opportunities”*.

Survivors may also register to receive notifications about their offender (such as when he/she transfers to a different facility or prison security level). If you choose to do this, the semi-regular updates about the offender you will receive may also trigger painful memories and cause further or renewed grief.

WHO CAN HELP ME THROUGH MY GRIEF?

Dealing with the murder of a loved one is overwhelming and can sometimes feel unbearable. You do not have to deal with these feelings on your own. There are a wide range of services that are now available for homicide survivors at various stages of their grieving process. You can also turn to your own personal support network for help—your friends, family, place of worship, family doctor and other members of your community can often be a strong source of support.

You should understand however, that some friends or family members may not know how to talk to you or how to help you. Sometimes, these people will distance themselves from you and your grief, and may not feel comfortable talking to you again for a very long time. It is important to remember that the distance between you and these people was a result of their actions and feelings, and not because you are grieving incorrectly or can’t “get over it.” There is no wrong way to grieve.

For information on specific services that provide support for homicide survivors, you should contact your local victim services agency or program, which can usually be found through your local police service. There are also provincial and territorial victim services programs which can also help you to find an appropriate service or professional to assist you through your grief.

You should know that while some types of professional services are free, most of them are not, particularly if you are seeking long term, professional counselling or psychological help. Fortunately however, most provinces have compensation or financial assistance programs that survivors can apply to receive assistance with paying for these types of services. For more information on financial assistance, please see our *“Victim’s Guide to Financial Assistance”*.

HOW DO DIFFERENT MEMBERS OF MY FAMILY GRIEVE AND COPE WITH HOMICIDE?

CHILDREN

Just like adults, not all children experience grief in the same way, or show the same signs of grief. Depending on the age of the child, it is hard for them to understand the concept that a parent or sibling is “dead.” Below are some points that parents and other adults in a child’s life can use to help a child understand their grief:

- Regardless of age, children should be told of their loved one’s death as soon as possible and in an honest way.
- A good way to explain death to children who might not understand what ‘dead’ means is to tell them that the person’s body stopped working.
- Provide safety and security for the child so that they know it is ok to express their feelings.
- Using activities such as reading books or watching video tapes, making up stories, drawing pictures, and playing or acting can help children to express their feelings. Children sometimes find it easier to have characters in a story or picture, or a stuffed animal, talk for them and express their feelings through those characters.
- Clarify any misconceptions that children might have about why their loved one has died. Reassure them that the death was not their fault. Tell them that crying is how you express your sadness because you miss that person; you are not crying because of something that they did. An adult who shows and talks about their feelings with their children helps the child to understand death and how to deal with their own feelings.

Grieving behaviours in children vary greatly, and sometimes it may not even seem like that are grieving. Below are a few of the ways that children may express their grief:

- ***Children younger than age 2:*** These children do not fully understand the meaning of loss or death, they know that something is different but they do not know what it is. Children at this age are sensitive to the feelings of adults, and therefore often become more fussy than usual.
- ***Children between the ages of 3 and 6:*** These children often think that any major change in their lives is a result of their actions or wishes, and may feel responsible for the loss of their loved one. If they see a loss as a threat, they may think that they are being punished for something. These children may react to loss by being afraid to be alone or to leave the people they love. They may not want to sleep alone at night and may refuse to go to daycare or school. Children this age may express feelings of grief by developing eating, sleeping, or toileting problems.
- ***Children between the ages of 6 and 10:*** Children this age still do not always fully understand loss and death. They may understand only part of what is going on around them and they may invent conclusions, or draw the wrong conclusions, about things they do not understand, resulting in misconceptions about what is happening. At this age, children may act out or find that they cannot concentrate well because they do not fully understand the changes in their lives and have difficulty expressing how they feel.
- ***Children between the ages of 10 and 12:*** These children begin to understand death the way adults do. They see death as permanent and irreversible. They are curious about what and how things happen. If a person close to them dies, they may want to know how bodies are prepared after death, what the rites and rituals of burial mean, and what happens to a person after he or she dies.
- ***Teenagers:*** Fearing the vulnerability that comes with expression, they look for distractions rather than stay with the grief process long enough to find real relief. Teens sometimes forget that the death has affected other people too, and that their parents and other siblings are also dealing with their own grief; the teen may feel like their parents or siblings are ignoring them, or that they don't care about how deeply the murder has affected them. Peer support has been found to be one of the best ways that teens can cope with their grief, as a teenager's social circle and support of their friends is as important to them as the support that their family, however this type of support should never replace that of a parent's.

SIBLINGS

Siblings of homicide victims may experience some aspects of grief in unique ways because of their specific relationship with the victim, as well as their relationship with other members of the family. As the sibling of a homicide victim, you may:

- Feel alone; siblings are often very close, and losing your best friend or confidant can make you feel like there is no one who would understand your feelings like your brother or sister would.
- Believe that you cannot or should not express your feelings with other members of the family because you want to protect them from additional pain. However, it is healthier if all members of the family can share their feelings and support each other through this difficult time.
- Feel long-term guilt when you begin to move forward in your life. Getting married, owning a home, having children, or travelling may trigger this guilt because you are experiencing things that your brother or sister never had the chance to.
- Have to assist in taking care of younger siblings or even your parents for a period of time, which may lead to feelings of anxiety, stress, frustration, or like your family members do not seem to understand that you too are experiencing intense grief.
- If you are still living with your parent(s), you may become over protected or restricted, as your parents do not want you to suffer the same death as your sibling suffered.

All of the above are things that siblings of homicide victims have reported experiencing at one point or another through their grief. Siblings should know that it is okay to feel this way and that expressing these emotions to other family members can be very healing both for themselves and the other members of their family.

PARENTS

The grief experienced by parents is very unique and intense. Parents often find that coping with their grief is much more difficult because in the natural order of life, they should not outlive their children. Living with the reality that their child has died before them is very difficult to accept, and can sometimes lead to feelings of guilt. Both parents may also feel guilt because they have failed in their role as

protector; they did not save their child from being murdered even if there was nothing they could have done to stop it.

For fathers, they may have additional difficulty with their grief because men have been socialized to keep their feelings to themselves, and not to be overly emotional, as expressing emotions is a sign of weakness. Furthermore, men are more likely to be restoration-oriented. They want things to be repaired and to return to normal as soon as possible. Unfortunately, this reaction can be misinterpreted by their partner as not caring about their child who has died, and lead to resentment.

For mothers, grief is often expected to be visible and intense. Women naturally tend to be loss-oriented and are often more concerned with their feelings. They focus on their loss and the emotions they are experiencing. They frequently need to recall, be reminded of and share memories of the child who has died. It is important to know that both parents of homicide victims will experience grief and that both should be allowed to grieve openly and without judgment by others.

There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that the stress of losing a child to murder leads to a higher divorce rate among grieving parents. The cause of this has been attributed to the differences in needs from each parent while they are grieving. For example, while one parent may come to a point where they do not want to talk about how their child died or be involved in the trial or correction processes anymore and only wants to focus on how they lived, the other parent may feel the need to be involved at every stage along the way. These different methods of coping can lead to feelings of resentment from both parents, as each feels that the other is not providing the type of support that they need. These feelings (and resulting divorce if it occurs) can have a ripple effect and can negatively impact other members of the family as well. It is therefore important for both parents to be supportive and responsive to their partner's grief, but also to allow themselves emotional space to experience their grief on their own terms.

WHAT ARE SOME THINGS THAT I CAN DO TO HELP ME TO COPE WITH MY GRIEF?

1. Allow yourself to grieve and do not try to suppress feelings of loss, despair, anger, depression etc. In order to overcome grief, it is necessary to experience these emotions and to accept them.
2. Do not try to rush the grieving process by pressuring yourself with expectations as to when you should stop feeling a certain way, or start feeling another way.
3. Turn to family and friends for emotional and practical support. These are the people who will be there for you when you need someone to cry with or someone to listen to you. If help is needed to plan funeral arrangements, prepare meals, child care, or to get to and from the court house, friends and family will be there to assist you.
4. Try to balance the time you spend doing activities or in the company of family and friends with some alone time.
5. Try to maintain a routine. This will help you to keep a sense of security at a time full of turmoil.
6. Take care of yourself by eating a healthy diet, doing physical activities, and getting adequate rest (this doesn't necessarily mean sleep, but could include things such as going for a walk, having a hot bath, or reading a book).
7. Seek professional assistance to help you make sense of your emotions and to learn healthy ways of coping.
8. Seek support groups to attend with other homicide survivors. Some survivors feel that only other survivors can truly understand what they are going through and talking to them is often very therapeutic.
9. Take part in, or establish a meaningful event in which you can keep the memory of your loved one alive. For example, some survivors find that holding candle light vigils or similar events are very helpful in making them feel closer to their loved one.

MORE SUPPORT AND INFORMATION

HOMICIDE SURVIVOR MEETINGS AND SUPPORT GROUPS:

HOSTING AGENCY	AREA AVAILABLE	FOR MORE INFORMATION
BC Victims of Homicide	Vancouver, BC	604-738-9950 or bcvoh@telus.net
Canadian Parents of Murdered Children and Survivors of Homicide Inc	Ottawa, ON	613-492-1978 or admin@cpomc.ca
IWK Bereaved Parent's Support Group	Halifax, NS	Maureen Brownlow at 470-8167 Vince MacDonald at 434-3283
Lean on Me	Hamilton, ON	info@lean-on-me.org or 289-339-1460
Manitoba Organization for Victims Assistance (MOVA)	Winnipeg, MB	1-877-596-0095 or help@mova.ca
Peel Victim Services	Greater Toronto Area, ON	905-568-8800 or Info@vspeel.org
Regina Palliative Care Inc/Regina Qu'Appelle Health Region	Regina, SK	Lisa Greig at 306-766-6946 or lisa.greig@rqhealth.ca
Rockyview Hospital	Calgary, AB	Candice Lacina at 403-943-0699
The Compassionate Friends of New Brunswick (<i>*not specific to homicide, but does welcome survivors</i>)	Fredericton and Saint John, NB	1 (866) 823-0141 or nationaloffice@tcfcanada.net
The Compassionate Friends of Newfoundland (<i>*not specific to homicide, but does welcome survivors</i>)	St. John's, NL	709-753-3536 or St.JohnsNL@TCFCanada.net
The Compassionate Friends of Southwestern Manitoba (<i>*not specific to homicide, but does welcome survivors</i>)	Winnipeg, Flin Flon, Parkland, Portage La Prairie, Selkirk, and Brandon, MB	1 (866) 823 – 0141 or nationaloffice@tcfcanada.net
Valley View Funeral Home/ Long-term Inmates Now in the Community	Abbotsford, BC	1-877-424-4242 or 604-820-1015
Victim Services of York Region/"Remember Me"	York Region, ON	905-953-5363
Victims of Homicide Support Society	Edmonton, AB	780-478-4544 or info@victimsofhomicide.ca

MORE SUPPORT AND INFORMATION IS AVAILABLE AT THE FOLLOWING WEBSITES:

Association of Families of Persons Assassinated or Disappeared:

www.afpad.ca

BC Victims of Homicide:

www.bcvictimsofhomicide.com

British Columbia Bereavement Helpline:

www.bcbereavementhelpline.com (1-887-779-2223)

Canadian Parents of Murdered Children:

www.cpomc.ca

Lean On Me Homicide Support:

www.lean-on-me.org

Manitoba Organization for Victim Assistance:

www.mova.ca

The Canadian Resource Centre for Victims: of Crime

www.crcvc.ca/docs/homsurv.pdf

Victims of Homicide Support Society of Edmonton:

www.victimsofhomicide.ca