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A Survivors Guide to Homicide and Grieving

Adapted from: *Victims of Violence*, <http://www.victimsofviolence.on.ca>, and *Rachel's Fund*, www.ncadp.org/rachelsfund

Those who have had a loved one murdered are referred to as homicide survivors. Homicide survivors are also victims of the crime because they have been indirectly harmed by the act of the murder. When the death of a loved one 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 often more complicated.

Factors that Impact a Homicide Survivors Grief

- **Trauma** – The typical response to a homicide is a crisis response, which is experienced both emotionally and physically. Homicide grief can also be classified as traumatic grief: a combination of trauma reactions and grief reactions.
 - The physical response to trauma is the body trying to protect itself. This is the body getting ready for fight or flight. There are many ways this can be experienced, including: *physical shock, numbness, disorientation, increased adrenaline, heart palpitations, nausea and vomiting, sweating, hyperventilating, hyper alertness, panic attacks, difficulty breathing, tightness in chest, and constant crying or the inability to cry.*
 - The emotional response is the brain becoming overwhelmed and disorganized and experiences the trauma as a threat and responds with fear and anger. This response can include: *recurrent nightmares about the murder, anger, rage, depression, feeling helpless, feeling powerless, loneliness, and isolation.*
- **The death was unexpected** – Because there is no prognosis or general timeline for homicide like there is for terminal illness, you're not prepared for the death when it occurs. Due to this, initial reactions are typically those of *shock, disbelief, denial, like the news could not possibly be real.*
- **Violence** - Dealing with the violent nature of your loved one's death is difficult and intensifies emotions. When survivors are needed to identify their loved one's body, or required to view crime scene photos, the survivor has to come face to face with the violence that their love one endured. It is not uncommon for survivors to think about the pain that their loved one must have gone through prior to their death.
- **The criminal nature of the death** – Due to this many other people will be thrust into a survivor's life: police, attorneys, the media, and the criminal justice system. Survivors may find that they have little control over or input in the criminal justice process as well as what is said in the media.
- **Insensitivity from those around you** – Few people know how to talk to or help homicide survivors. This includes the professionals you may have to work with regarding your loved ones murder, but can also include your friends and family. Unless someone has had a loved one murdered it's hard for them to truly understand the complexity and intensity of your grief. When others say things like "it could have been worse", "at least they didn't (fill in the blank)" or "aren't you over it yet", among others, it's best to assume they mean well but to find other supportive people to talk to.

Grief after a Loved One is Murdered

Grief is a natural and normal reaction to loss. It is important to keep in mind that everyone is unique and so is their grief. There are no right or wrong ways to grieve, and know that whatever feelings you have are okay. Grief after a loved one has been murdered has an added level of complexity and intensity that we don't feel equipped to handle. We are often left wondering how we can endure and survive this level of trauma. Be gentle with yourself and know that even though it doesn't feel like it right now that you can survive this. Some of the emotions may seem very distressing and out of your normal character but remind yourself that this is a normal reaction to a very extreme emotional situation.



Anger is a common grief emotion but is especially intense when a loved one was the victim of a homicide. This can be very jarring to the survivor and those around them. This anger most often is directed at the murderer but can also be directed at friends, family, the person who died, your faith, members of the criminal justice system, and even at yourself. Others may feel that your anger is misplaced, inappropriate or extreme, but this is not true. Your friends and family members need to try to understand your anger, while you need to find healthy ways to let that anger out.

You may find yourself plagued by the “what if’s” and “if only’s” surrounding your loved one’s death. These questions can spur feelings of guilt, as the “if only’s” can lead to finding fault within yourself or to feel that if you had done something different your loved one would still be alive. There are two types of guilt: *actual and perceived*. **Actual guilt** is when you have actually done something wrong. **Perceived guilt** is when you feel *as if* you have done something wrong or could have protected your loved one in some way. This is a false sense of guilt and most often the type we feel after our loved one has been murdered. The rational part of our brain knows that there was nothing we could have done to have prevented this tragedy but we find ourselves feeling guilty nonetheless. What’s important is to not focus on the guilt itself but to accept the things that you were able to control and let go of the things you could not control. Take time to process these feelings so that you can eventually come to terms with the fact that we can’t change what has happened or that there was nothing you could have done to prevent your loved one’s death.

The desire to be with the person who died is common. This can be a jarring emotion for the survivor but is common. Survivors want to be with their loved one again and want the pain to stop. It is important to note the difference between wanting to be with that person again and being suicidal.

Due to the traumatic nature of murder, survivors are 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 affecting important areas of your life, you may be suffering from PTSD. If so, it would be beneficial for you to seek help from a mental health professional.

*“You don’t think you’ll live past it and you don’t really. The person you were is gone.
But the half of you that’s still alive wakes up one day and takes over again.”*

– Barbara Kingsolver.

Survivors never really “get over” the fact that their loved one has been murdered, but instead evolve to where the bad days slowly lessen and the raw distress and anger begins to subside. Eventually you will be able to create a new type of normal where you can begin to reinvest in the world again. It is important to understand that experiencing bouts of raw emotions after the death is normal, and can lead to powerful bouts of emotion called *grief bursts*. These feelings can also be triggered by anything related to your loved one, such as a particular smell, taste, person, place or item. They can manifest at any point, but generally decrease in intensity and frequency as times passes.

Remember there is no time frame on how long grief lasts. Due to the intensity of grief after the murder of a loved one and length of time spent in the criminal justice system, it may take more time to be able to feel like you are functioning close to full capacity again. Be patient with yourself and others who do not understand that. You will get to a day when it doesn’t hurt as bad as it first did when you found out. You will get to a day where you can think of your loved one and not only think of how they died but instead think about the life they lived. You will be able to laugh and experience joy again. It will take time but you will be able to live life again and be able to carry the love you have for your loved one with you.