



A Survivors Guide to Homicide

By Buffy Peters

When someone you love has been murdered, it can feel as if the world you once knew is now crashing down around you. The tsunami of emotions comes rushing in with an intensity that you have never experienced before, leaving you feeling overwhelmed, disoriented, confused, and exhausted. In the beginning, it feels impossible to pick up the broken, shattered pieces of what used to be your world. How could that unrecognizable mess be made into anything resembling the life you once had? Becoming a homicide survivor (a club **NO ONE** wants to be in) is a new territory that we don't feel adequately equipped to handle. Yet here we are. Still alive. Living in a nightmare we can't wake up from. How do you pick up the fragile pieces? How do you survive the unimaginable? How do you keep living in spite of the immense pain? This is a guide to help you begin to understand your new life as a Homicide Survivor.

The Grief of a Homicide Survivor

Grief is a natural and normal reaction to loss. Just as individuals are unique, so is their grief. There is no right or wrong way to grieve and any feelings you have are okay! Feelings aren't inherently good or bad, it is what we do and how we act on those feelings that can have consequences. Some of the emotions you experience may seem very distressing and out of your normal character but it's important to remind yourself that this is a normal reaction to a traumatic situation. Grief after a loved one has been murdered has an added level of complexity and intensity that we don't feel prepared to handle. Our previous coping strategies may become overwhelmed and inadequate for this level of loss. Be gentle with yourself and know that even though it doesn't feel like it right now that you can survive this.

Anger is a normal grief feeling, but is especially pronounced when the grief is caused by homicide. This can be very jarring to the survivor and those around them. This intense anger is most often directed at the murderer, but can also be directed at friends, family, the person who died, faith, members of the criminal justice system, and even yourself. Others may feel that your anger is misplaced, inappropriate, or extreme. While others may have those judgements on how you *should* be feeling that doesn't take away the emotion. Your job is to process this emotion and find healthy ways to let that anger out.

You may find yourself plagued by the "what if's" and "if only's" surrounding the death. These questions can spur feelings of guilt, as the "if only's" can lead to finding fault within yourself. You may find yourself feeling that if you had only 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 done something different to prevent what happened. The latter is a false sense of guilt and most often the type felt by homicide survivors. The rational part of our brain knows that there was nothing we could have done, but our hearts feel different. It is important to acknowledge how you are feeling and to do your best 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, understanding that what happened can't be changed, and there was nothing you could have done to prevent your loved one's death.

An alarming, but common, emotion that often accompanies homicide survivor's grief is the desire to want to be with the person who died. The core of this feeling is the yearning we feel to be with our loved one again. We just want them to come back, and we want the intense pain to stop. It is important to know the difference between wanting to be with that person again and feeling suicidal. If you are feeling suicidal, please text the Crisis Text Line at 741741 or contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 988.

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.

Factors that Impact Grief for Homicide Survivors

- **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. The body is getting ready for fight or flight. You may experience: *physical shock, numbness, disorientation, increased adrenaline, heart palpitations, nausea and vomiting, sweating, hyperventilating, hyper alertness, panic attacks, difficulty breathing, tightness in chest, constant crying or the inability to cry.*
 - The emotional response is the brain becoming overwhelmed and disorganized. It 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.*
- **Unexpectedness** – Unlike a terminal illness, you’re typically not prepared for the death when it occurs. Due to this, initial reactions are typically those of *shock, disbelief, and denial* - like the news could not possibly be real.
- **Violence** – Dealing with the violent nature of your loved one’s death is extremely difficult and intensifies the emotions felt. 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 common 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** – This thrusts many other people into a survivor’s life: police, attorneys, media, and the criminal justice system. Survivors 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. Sometimes including the professionals you may have to work with regarding the death, but can also include your friends and family. Unless someone is a homicide survivor, it is 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”, try to remind yourself that their intention is not to hurt you and find other supportive people to talk to.

Special Considerations - Children

Depending on the age of the child, it can be hard for them to understand what the word *die* means. For more information on the different developmental considerations for children, refer to our handout *Children's Understanding of Death - Developmental Stages*. 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 is to explain when someone dies that means the person’s body stopped working. To explain in the context of a homicide you can say that someone else made their loved one’s body stop working. Let them lead you with their questions as to what information they are needing and be sure to clarify any misconceptions that the child might have about why their loved one died. Children’s magical thinking may lead them to believe that the person will come back, or make them feel as if it is their fault. 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 they did. An adult who shows and talks about their feelings models healthy coping skills and this will help children to understand their own feelings.

It is also important to provide safety and security for the child so that they know their basic needs are being met and that they are safe. Try using activities like reading books, watching videos, making up stories, drawing pictures, and playing. These activities can help children to express their feelings. Children sometimes find it easier to have characters in a story, picture, or stuffed animal, talk for them and express their feelings through those characters.

Siblings

The siblings of homicide victims may experience some aspects of grief in unique ways because of their relationship with the victim and other members of the family. They may:

- Feel alone. Siblings are often very close, and losing a sibling can make them feel like there is no one who would understand them like their brother or sister would.
- Believe that they cannot/should not express their feelings with other members of the family because they want to protect them from additional pain. It is healthy if all members of the family share their feelings and support each other.
- Feel long-term guilt when they begin to move forward in their life. Graduating from school, getting married, or having children may trigger guilt because they are experiencing things without their sibling or things their sibling never had the chance to.
- Try to fill their sibling's roles, by taking care of the other siblings or even parents for some time, which may lead to anxiety, stress, and frustration.

Parents

In the natural order of life, parents do not outlive their children. A parent living with the reality that their child has died before them is very difficult to accept, and can sometimes lead to feelings of guilt. Parents may feel as if they have failed in their role as protector; they could not save their child, even if there was nothing they could have done to stop it.

Fathers may have difficulty with their grief because men have been socialized to keep their feelings to themselves, and not to be overly emotional. They are often taught showing emotions is a sign of weakness. They may feel they are supposed to be strong for the rest of the family, adding additional pressure. Men are more likely to be restoration-oriented; meaning 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 may lead to resentment.

For mothers, grief is often expected to be visible and intense. Women tend to be loss-oriented and concerned with their feelings, and focus on the emotions they are experiencing. They frequently need to recall and share memories of the child who has died. Some women want to share with those around her, while others process their grief more internally. Both are appropriate ways to express grief.

Life after a Homicide

*"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 long after the death is normal, and these powerful bouts of emotion are called *grief bursts*. These feelings can be triggered by anything related to your loved one - 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. **Time does not heal all wounds.** Some wounds we have to learn how to carry. Know you will get to a day when the pain isn't as sharp as it was when you first 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 about the life they lived. You will be able to laugh and experience joy again and one day you will be able to live life again while continuing to carry the love you have for your person with you.

Some information in this handout was adapted from: Rachel's Fund and Victims of Violence.