

A GUIDE TO SURVIVAL FOR FAMILY AND FRIENDS OF HOMICIDE VICTIMS

INTRODUCTION

Someone you love has been murdered, or was killed by a drunk driver. It is an understatement to say that your life has been changed. Your anger and pain are deep, and it will take a great deal of hard work and time to recover. You may never feel as if you have “recovered.” It may be difficult to believe now, but many persons who have been in your situation learn to manage their grief. You will need time, determination, and the support of a caring listener.

The feelings you experience are likely to be very difficult and foreign for you, but most likely, they will be similar to what others have felt. This booklet was written to help you, as the survivor of a homicide victim, cope with the fears and anxiety of losing someone close to you.

THE MOST COMMON FEELINGS OF GRIEF

Shock

In the beginning, most people feel a profound numbness. Some liken it to being in a fog. It may be this “fog” that allows you to accomplish the necessary arrangements for the funeral and other duties.

Turmoil

When the fog clears, most people’s emotions fall into turmoil. You may have flashbacks of the moment you were notified of the death, or of the last time you saw your loved one alive. You may dream of your loved one, or believe that he or she will soon walk through the door. Part of you will deny that your loved one really is dead.

You may experience many grief spasms at first, crying as if you can’t stop. The spasms gradually happen less often. You may have panic attacks and feel afraid for your life or the lives of other family members. You may be filled with restlessness and unable to concentrate on anything. You may be unable to sleep at night or find it very hard to get out of bed in the morning.

As the reality of death sinks in, depression is usually not far behind. The world may seem to lose its meaning for you. Activities that you once enjoyed may seem like a burden. Or you may stop all activities. You may feel as if there is little point in going on, and you may want to withdraw from everyone.

During all of these emotions and phases, you need to talk with someone you can trust and who will listen with a non-judgmental ear. It is the only way we know to keep from getting stuck in one of the phases.

Searching for Understanding

You will probably experience a great need to understand why this tragedy happened. In your search for understanding, you may feel the need to know everything there is to know about what happened, where it happened, who did it, etc. If someone is arrested, you may want to know as much as you can about the person.

You may expect the criminal justice system to work more quickly and keep you better informed than it does. For information about your rights as a crime victim and the criminal justice system, please refer to the last section of this document.

Rumors and opinions of many people may come your way concerning the crime, motivation and the criminal. You may decide to attend the trial, if there is one, as part of your search to why this happened. Oftentimes you will not find answers to all of your questions. If a survivor is a witness at the trial, he or she may not be able to attend the trial prior to giving testimony. You can ask the county attorney handling the case for information on this.

Guilt

Each survivor lives with “*what-ifs*.” “Why did I let her go home alone?” “What if I had been there with him?” This is a normal reaction. Please remember that no one can predict the future or recreate what might have been. We can’t change the events that took place, and continuing to blame ourselves will only be destructive to ourselves and those around us.

Anger

Anger can be both frightening and motivating. Sometimes it may feel as if anger will overwhelm you. It may be directed at the murderer, society, the criminal justice system, family members or friends. It is not uncommon to be angry at God.

Many people feel *guilty* about their anger, but it is a completely normal feeling.

Anger may immobilize you or move you to relentless activity. It is a natural reaction to severe loss. Your anger may never completely go away. With time and support, your anger can be managed and may even contribute to helping you gain back some control in your life.

Revenge

For the first time in their lives, many survivors find themselves thinking of ways to kill another human being, the person responsible for the death of your loved one. Understandably, some people are deeply disturbed by this emotion. You may wonder if you are losing your mind. You aren’t. You are normal. Counselors of survivors find that almost every person they work with thinks about revenge. Having these feelings does not mean you are going to act on them.

Some people will tell you that wanting revenge is unhealthy and that the only way you can find peace is to forgive. If forgiveness is in your heart, fine, but do not allow people to create unnecessary guilt in you. Chances are they have never been through what you are experiencing.

COPING WITH THE REACTIONS OF OTHERS

Each of us is an individual. We like different foods, wear different clothing and choose unique lifestyles. It stands to reason that at the most painful time in our lives, we would also grieve in our own way. How we choose to grieve is determined by three things – our personal view of death, how society views death and our individual personalities.

Family

Not all families become closer in the aftermath of a homicide. It is not unusual for counselors to see families separate, both physically and emotionally. At this time, communication is very important. Work hard to express your feelings within the family and with supportive friends.

Friends

When you hurt, you turn to people who have always been there, your friends. But where are they a month, six months or a year after the murder? Often, they have gone back to their lives, but you still need to talk. Many times friends don't know how to react and feel that steering away from mentioning the victim is the best way to handle the situation.

If you bring up the homicide, some people will change the subject. Many people do not want to listen to the details of the tragedy, even though survivors often talk about details. People often can't bring themselves to talk about homicide. They may feel they do not have the words to say or the ability to listen. They may feel hopelessly inadequate. And the loss of your loved one probably hit them with a stark realization: If it happened to you, it could happen to them.

You may notice that people you have known for years avoid you on the street or in a store. Your co-workers may avert their eyes and "not see you." They usually have no idea that this feels like rejection and only adds to your grief.

You can face this problem in various ways. You can write those friends off and stop seeing them. You can continue contact but avoid the subject you most need to discuss. You can raise the issue directly with your friends, which may allow you to deal openly and honestly with each other. You can add to your circle of friends other people who have lost loved ones or who are willing to share your experience. Many people are ready to respond when they understand how important it is to talk with you about the experience rather than avoid it.

Many community hospitals have grief support groups for family members who have lost someone they love. Not all members of these groups have lost a loved one to violence, but nonetheless feel the pain, shock, guilt and anger that you are experiencing. Consider joining a grief support group.

COPING WITH HOLIDAYS

Holidays can be an extremely difficult time for you. They are usually an accumulation of traditions or customs created by families to be shared with family members. When a member of the family is no longer there to share a cherished tradition, the holiday can become a painful reminder instead of a time of joy.

The first time you celebrate a holiday after a death, it may become a nightmare. Holiday gifts that once were ripped open immediately may sit for days. Thanksgiving is hollow. "What do I have to be thankful for?" is a common reaction for the survivor. New Year's Day and birthdays, which celebrate another year of life, become reminders of death.

You may find the need to develop new traditions. For some, a trip out of town at holiday time may be beneficial. A birthday can be observed by donating to a charitable organization or doing something that is meaningful to you. Sometimes being with other family members and talking together about the good times experienced in the past can be a source of strength. There is no rule to follow on how to "get through" a holiday. You will grieve. Allow yourself to grieve. It's all part of the healing process.

COPING WITH THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

Most victims are new to the workings of the criminal justice system. As you progress through various stages, you may become angry and frustrated because the offender seems to have more rights than the victim or the victim's family. People naturally want to see justice done swiftly so that they may heal from that part of the trauma. Try to remember that law enforcement officials want to get the crime solved and see justice served too. Criminal cases do take a lot of preparation time, and it is important to remember that accuracy and careful preparation are critical to a successful prosecution.

You may find that justice does not always prevail. Sometimes, the guilty are released on procedural grounds. Many homicide cases are never solved or do not result in convictions, even if the identity of the offender is known.

Sometimes, it may seem the only ones serving a "life sentence" are the victim and the victim's loved ones. Cases may drag on and on. Many cases never go to trial or take years for a conviction. If there is a conviction, it likely will be appealed, and a small fraction of cases find their way back to court for another trial.

To help you through this ordeal, seek out supportive friends, counselors or advocates. Victim/witness advocates and victim assistance programs have staff members who are trained to help survivors of homicide victims. They are there to help you. Ask your county attorney or law enforcement agency to help you get in touch with the victim advocates in your area.

Remember, too, that Montana law gives survivors of homicide victims certain rights to information about pending cases and other assistance. Please see the last section of this document for information.

EPILOGUE

The rest of your life is the epilogue. The widow of a homicide victim said, "My life has been permanently changed. I don't know who I am anymore." This is a common reaction for most homicide survivors.

Your life *has* changed. You will see things differently now. You may never again want to watch violence portrayed on TV. You may have to struggle with new or stronger prejudices for the rest of your life. You may feel irritated by "the little things" in life. Or, incidents that once seemed to be a catastrophe will be only minor aggravations because you have already survived the worst.

Your faith may be shaken. You may find it impossible to trust strangers. You may feel that laws you thought were designed to protect you are really designed to protect criminals. You may wonder if the victim has any rights.

Most survivors heal slowly. Meaning comes back into their daily activities. They find people to stand by them and give them support. Some find sensitivity for others they never experienced before. Most find joy in the treasured memories of their loved ones. Many join others who want to carry on the vigil for all of those who have died as the result of violence.

ASSISTANCE AND INFORMATION FOR CRIME VICTIMS

The Attorney General's Office and the Crime Victim Compensation program have prepared an information guide that describes the criminal justice process and what you can expect from it. This guide can be obtained, free of charge, at the address listed below or online at www.doj.mt.gov/victims/forms.asp#victimservices.

Victim Compensation

Survivors of homicide victims may be eligible for some compensation for out-of-pocket expenses relating to the crime, such as: compensation for funeral and burial expenses, counseling of survivors of a homicide victim; and compensation for loss of support for dependents of homicide victims.

The compensation program can never erase the painful memories of a crime, but it can help people in recovery and help ease the financial burdens faced by survivors.

For an informational guide about crime victim rights or a Crime Victim Compensation application, please contact:

Crime Victim Compensation Program
Office of Victim Services
Montana Department of Justice
2225 11th Avenue
PO Box 201410
Helena MT 59620-1410
(406) 444-3653
1-800-498-6455
Web address: www.doj.mt.gov/victims/victimcompensation.asp