

Grief Process for Survivors of Homicide

- **Family of a Homicide Victim**
- **Coping Skills**

Family of a Homicide Victim

There is nothing to compare with the impact and profound shock of losing a loved one to a sudden, unexpected and violent death.

Grieving is an important and difficult process. It can be emotionally draining, confusing and sometimes frightening because we usually do not have much experience with it. No two people ever grieve the same way, with the same intensity or for the same duration.

Perhaps most important is the fact that it really helps to know what kind of feelings and experiences are normal and natural for a grieving person to have. Many have found their feelings so intense and their behavior so unlike their usual pattern that they have begun to doubt their own sanity. Give yourself time to heal slowly.

Those suffering the loss of loved one may experience a number of reactions to grief:

- **Shock and Denial** – A numbing shock and the denial that the loved one is really gone. These are normal human responses. Eventually these feelings will pass, and you will be able to face the reality of your loss.
- **Anger** – Losing something precious hurts and is unfair. You may feel resentful anger with yourself and with others for not preventing the loss. For some the need to express anger is a consuming one.
- **Guilt** – It is not unusual to blame yourself for something you did or did not do prior to your loss. Guilt for things that were said or left unsaid, for moments of impatience or anger for failure to act fast enough. "If only I had..." Remember, you are human and there are events you just can't control.
- **Depression** – For a time you may feel physically and mentally drained, unable and unwilling to perform even routine tasks. Eventually, you will take steps, perhaps tiny ones at first, toward becoming involved in life again.
- **Hope** – You will reach a stage where you can accept your loss. This does not mean that you forget about your loved one or that the pain disappears completely. But you do start to break the strong emotional ties with the past and look at the present and future.

Many survivors may experience a variety of "trigger events." "Trigger events" often remind the survivor of the trauma. They may include:

- Identification of the assailant
- Sensing (seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, tasting) something similar to something that one was acutely aware of during the trauma

- "Anniversaries" of the event
- The proximity of holidays or significant "life events"
- Hearings, trial, appeals or other critical phases of the criminal justice proceeding
- Media articles about similar events

It is natural to be angry, guilty, afraid and sad. It is natural to feel confused, to have trouble remembering things, to get lost or forget what you are doing. It is natural to wonder if life is worth living and even to think of suicide. It is natural for there to be weeks and months of depression and apathy, for your body to rebel and for you to have difficulty sleeping, illnesses. It is natural also to feel that the pain will never ease. These are all "normal" reactions to an "abnormal circumstance."

Coping Skills

You have experienced a devastating loss and will never again be the same person you were before. To deny the pain of this is to shore up serious physical and emotional problems for the future. It takes time to recover from grief, a lot of time, but it also takes a willingness to face the hurt, to work through it and eventually let it go.

Here are some helpful suggestions:

- Express your feelings. When you are feeling grief you need to cry, to get angry, to share your guilty and unacceptable feelings with someone you trust. The important thing is to seek and find the outlet, which helps you. Feelings are not right or wrong. They simply are. Your feelings are your feelings with no "shoulds" attached.
- Accept help from those who offer it. Understanding and support can make difficult moments easier.
- Ask for help when you need it. Relatives and friends want to help but often do not know quite what to do until you make your needs known to them. Professional help is also available.
- Be kind and patient with yourself. Some days will be more difficult than others.
- Get plenty of rest, eat right, and exercise.
- Seek support from your victim advocate.
- Be aware of increased grief responses associated with holidays, the anniversary of your loved one's death, birthdays, etc.
- Keep social contacts.

It is important to remember that there is no way of escaping the pain of losing someone you love. It cannot be masked by drugs, alcohol or by pretending it doesn't exist. Trying to avoid the pain only delays and extends it.

- Explain to siblings that no one can replace the child who is dead, and you love them for just who they are.

- As children get older and move to the next developmental stage, they may need to revisit the death and their feelings, in order to accommodate it to their new maturity.

Adapted from: Janice Harris Lord “No Time for Good-byes”

Books for Loss of Loved One:

- Living With Grief by Kenneth J. Doka
- And I Don't Want to Live This Life by Deborah Spungen
- No Time for Good-byes by Janice Lord
- A Grief Like No Other by Kathleen O'Hara
- A Guide to Understanding Guilt During Bereavement by Bob Baugher
- Coping with Traumatic Death by Bob Baugher and Lew Cox
- Understanding Anger During Bereavement by Bob Baugher, Carol Hankins and Gary Hankins