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Homicide Survivors: Dealing With Grief

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Introduction

Losing a loved one through an act of violence is a very traumatic experience. No one can ever be prepared for such a loss. No amount of counselling, prayer, justice, restitution, or compassion can ever bring a loved one back.

Experiencing Loss

When someone is murdered, the death is sudden, violent, final, and incomprehensible. Your world is abruptly and forever changed.

Homicide survivors will each experience the death differently, as each of you had a unique relationship to the victim. Your own personal history of trauma will also affect the manner in which you experience the death. It is important to remember that no two people grieve the same way, with the same intensity, or for the same duration.ⁱ

Dealing with Grief

The founders of *'Parents of Murdered Children'* learned that, *"the grief caused by murder does not follow a predictable course. It does not neatly unfold in stages. When a person dies after a long illness, his or her family has time to prepare emotionally for the death, to feel anticipatory grief. When someone is murdered, the death usually comes without warning.....The much more complicated mourning that follows a homicide may be prolonged by the legal system, the attitudes of society, the nature of the crime, and the final disposition of the case. The intense grief experienced by survivors can last four years, five years, a decade, even a lifetime."*ⁱⁱ

Grief can be a long, painful process, but it can be managed with assistance from family, friends and/or outside support. Grief may provoke intense stress reactions such as:

Emotional

Shock, anger, despair, numbness, grief spasms, terror, guilt, anguish, grief, sadness, irritability, helplessness, loss of pleasure from regular activities, dissociation (i.e. experiences are "dreamlike," "tunnel vision," "spacey," or on "automatic pilot"), hypersensitivity, depression,

emotional outbursts, emptiness or hollowness, overwhelming sense of loss and sorrow, symptoms of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

❑ **Physical**

Fatigue, insomnia, nightmares, Hyper arousal / Hypervigilance, lethargy, muscle tension, chills, increased heart rate or blood pressure, nausea, diarrhea, cramps, fainting, dizziness, impaired immune system, headaches, respiratory problems, gastrointestinal problems, change in appetite, decreased libido, startled response / constant arousal

❑ **Cognitive**

Impaired concentration, impaired decision-making ability, difficulty setting priorities, memory impairment, disbelief / denial, confusion, decreased self-esteem, self-blame, reduced ability to express emotion, intrusive thoughts and memories / constant thoughts about the circumstances of the death, worry / anxiety, vulnerability

❑ **Interpersonal**

Alienation / isolation, social withdrawal, increased conflict in relationships, vocational impairment, school impairment, a desire for revenge

❑ **Spirituality**

Questioning one's basic beliefs, faith may be shaken, feeling distant from God, suddenly turning to God

Do not be embarrassed or confused by these feelings. They are all natural reactions to an unnatural event, like the murder of a loved one.ⁱⁱⁱ

Steps for Healing

Although there is no one way to grieve, the following list provides some important steps for healing:

- Be honest about your feelings
- Find a safe way to release your anger
- Admit that you may need help
- Allow yourself to cry
- Allow yourself time to recover
- Do not compare your grief with that of others, as everyone is unique
- Surround yourself with supportive people
- Do not blame yourself
- Reflect on your memories and share them with others
- Write down your feelings if that helps
- Be patient and tolerant with yourself – recovery is not an overnight phenomenon.

Adjusting to a life in which the deceased is no longer present can be a difficult task. You may feel guilt about decisions you make or wonder if you are being disloyal to the deceased.

Relief from stresses, the ability to talk about the experience, and the passage of time are important factors in the healing process. You must find a place for your loved one, which will allow you to go on with your life. You must, in your own time, come to the realization that life can and does go on.^{iv}

Compensation for Victims of Crime:

Criminal Injuries Compensation Board (CICB)

<http://www.cicb.gov.on.ca/en/> or Toll-Free: 1-800-372-7463

Financial compensation for those who qualify under the Compensation for Victims of Crime Act may include victims and family members of deceased victims of violent crimes committed in Ontario. A person can also apply for compensation if he/she witnessed or came upon the scene of a crime that resulted in a death and meets the criteria for a finding of *“mental or nervous shock.”*

Compensation may be awarded regardless of whether a person has been prosecuted or convicted of the offence, giving rise to the injury or death.

An application for compensation must be made within **two years** of the date of the incident. However, CICB can extend the two-year limitation period when it is warranted, but a request and explanation would be needed upon completion of the application. Click on **When do I file my application?** on the website for more information.

☐ Victim Quick Response Program (Ministry of the Attorney General)

If each of the following applies to you, you may be eligible for Victim Quick Response Program assistance:

1. Funeral expenses (up to \$5000) no later than 45 calendar days after the date of the crime, or counseling services and related transportation cost, no later than 90 calendar days after the date of the crime.
2. Have not been charged as a result of the crime
3. No other financial resources to assist with funeral expenses; and/or short-term counseling services.

The police service to which you reported the crime will refer you to the local Victim Crisis Assistance and Referral Services (VCARS) organization. This organization will help you understand the eligibility requirements, complete forms, and identify local support services.

ⁱ Schlosser, E. (1997, September). A Grief Like No Other. The Atlantic Online.

^{ii iii iv} The Canadian Resource Centre for Victims of Crime. (2005, November). Homicide Survivors - Dealing with Grief.



Caledon \ Dufferin
Victim Services

Support, Information, Referrals