

VICTIM SERVICES

INITIATIVES

Help for Homicide Survivors

Assistance and Support within the Criminal Justice System

This resource is available on the Nova Scotia Department of Justice web site at www.gov.ns.ca/just/PolVS/homicide.htm

Portions of this material have been adapted and reproduced with the permission of Victims of Violence Canadian Centre for Missing Children www.victimsofviolence.on.ca We gratefully acknowledge materials from this organization in preparing this resource.

We also acknowledge Victims' Voice, a national resource for families of homicide victims and victims of violent crime.

Introduction

One of the most difficult things for someone to hear is that a loved one is dead. The death of a loved one is an extremely painful experience. It is more difficult, still, if that person is a victim of homicide.

When death is caused by the deliberate act of another human being, the pain of loss is usually both intense and complicated. The way you experience this loss depends on

- what happened at the time of the death
- the actual act of violence
- your past experience with violence or with the criminal justice system
- the support available to you

This brochure will explain some feelings and reactions that other homicide survivors have experienced. It will explain something about the process you will find yourself part of. It will encourage you to seek whatever help you need. Many people find homicide extraordinarily difficult to deal with. Prepare yourself as best you can by surrounding yourself with those who can help you and your family.

Experiencing Loss

The loss of a loved one is always painful. The experience of loss through homicide is often different than death by accident or by natural causes. When the death is violent, it is difficult to understand how someone could commit such a crime. Both the suddenness and manner of the death may cause additional emotional stress, financial expenses, social difficulties, and physical effects.

The Most Common Feelings of Grief

Experiencing grief is very individual. Not everyone feels the same way or uses the same methods to cope.

Common reactions to grief include

- shock
- disbelief
- emptiness
- numbness
- depression
- yearning

Other Feelings Common to Homicide Survivors

If you are a homicide survivor, you, or family members, may also experience strong feelings of

- confusion
- isolation
- vulnerability
- humiliation
- revenge
- anxiety
- fear
- anger
- guilt
- helplessness
- blame
- loss of faith

These effects may last a long time, and these emotions may feel worse during holidays or special days without your loved one.

Grief in Children

Children experiencing these emotions may not be able to tell you how they are feeling. They may complain of headaches and stomachaches. They may become aggressive. They may act young for their age, going back to behaviours you thought they had outgrown. They may seem to recover, then regress, over and over.

Grief in Parents

If the one who was killed was your child, the experience of loss may not be the same for both parents. This can cause difficulties between you. It is important to understand each other's reactions and to be patient with each other.

Dealing with Being the Victim of a Crime

Being the victim of a crime will bring a whole set of experiences that may be completely new for you. Mostly these will not be pleasant. However, by knowing more about how things might go and what are common worries and concerns, you may be better able to deal with being the victim of crime. Some feelings and worries that you may share with other victims of crime are listed below.

Media coverage

- You may not feel that you were treated fairly.
- You may feel that your privacy was invaded.
- You may be bothered by how the offender was described or by details that were given.
- You may worry that the media and society will blame your loved one.

Bad memories and guilty feelings

- You may have witnessed the homicide.
- You may have had to identify your loved one's body.
- You may feel that you could have done something to prevent the death.
- You may blame yourself for something you did or didn't do that may have prevented the crime.

Worries about the crime

- You may worry that your love one suffered during the crime.
- You may wonder how another human being could have deliberately caused the death.
- You may wonder about the number of accused persons or what they were like.
- You may wonder why your loved one was killed, whether it was a random act or if there was a reason behind it.
- You may fear that the offender may never be found or punished.

Concerns about your safety

- You may lose your sense of security, safety, and trust.
- You may fear the offender, or fear that the offender may hurt someone else.
- You may not be able to watch the news or any images of violence.

Concerns about your family and relationships

- You may have conflict about the crime within your family.
- Family members may blame one another.

- You may have known the offender.
- The offender may be a family member.

Be aware that as you deal with the criminal justice process or the media, or both, the natural grieving process may be delayed or postponed. Expect this and be patient both with yourself and with family members.

If you need professional help to deal with the emotional effects of the crime, please contact your local Victim Services office and ask them about the Criminal Injuries Counselling Program.

The Criminal Justice Process

Being involved in the criminal justice system can be difficult. Homicide survivors will have differing experiences and expectations of the criminal justice system. This can depend upon the charges laid and how the proceedings unfold. For example, some survivors may have to wait years for a trial to actually take place.

Family members may differ strongly in their wishes to attend or not attend the proceedings. Our criminal justice system operates on a “presumption of innocence.” That means the accused person must be considered innocent until proven guilty. As a homicide survivor, you may feel that the proceedings favour the accused.

There are many stages to the criminal justice process.

Homicide survivors experience a wide range of reactions as they go through each stage of the process.

For more detailed information on the criminal justice system, the role of key people, and the steps in the court process, ask for the brochure Criminal Justice System: Information for Victims of Crime at your local Victim Services office.

What to Expect

- Your grief and the natural processes of mourning may be complicated by the extra things you need to do while participating in the criminal justice process. You may share the following feelings that have been experienced by other homicide survivors:
- isolation if some of the information is not told to you during the investigation
- reliving the trauma as you see the accused or the accused’s family in the courtroom, provide testimony, hear the testimony of others, or see pictures of the crime scene
- exposure as your grief reactions or personal information about your family or loved one are reported in the media
- injustice or frustration if the accused is found not guilty or receives a sentence with which you do not agree

- disappointment if a guilty verdict does not ease your pain

Some homicide survivors have also felt that

- the accused person receives better treatment than them or their family, because the criminal justice process is based on the rights of the accused
- their loved one is forgotten in the trial process
- their loved one's death is spoken of callously when the focus is on the evidence and the actions of the accused
- their loved one lacks a proper "voice" within the criminal trial process
- their suffering is made worse because of the length of the trial process

You may experience these same feelings.

You may find that participating in the criminal justice process helps you create a sense of safety, value, order, and control. The process may be a vital part of the intense and very hard work of adjusting to a new world and living without your loved one. To a great degree this can depend upon the people you meet and the help you receive.

For information on the services available to you through Victim Services, see our brochure Victim Services Programs and Services or contact our nearest office.

Generally, contact with the Police, Crown Attorney, and Victim Services ends when the trial is over. This may be the time when you are finally able to grieve, and you may need more support. Please speak to Victim Services staff about services available in your community.

Other Sources of Help

MADD Canada

Selected Material

www.madd.ca

- Your Grief: You're Not Going Crazy
- Helping Children Cope with Death
- Men and Mourning: A Man's Journey through Grief
- Straight Talk about Death for Teenagers
- We Hurt Too: A Guide for Adult Siblings
- Fifteen Elements in Healing after Homicide (series) (September, 1998 – January, 2001)

Pathways: Winnipeg, Manitoba

- Naming the Violence
- Stopping the Violence: Creating Safety
- Grieving the Loss, Mourning the Memory
- Encountering an Identity Crisis after Murder
- The Need to Know and Reconstruct the Facts

- Disconnection of Time... Spinning in a Time Warp
- Attending to Our Anger, Recycling Our Rage
- Holding Our Blame Accountable, Confronting Our Self-Blame
- The Need and Hope for Justice, Disillusionment with the Justice System
- Acknowledging the Loss: Finding Compensation
- Exploring, Controlling or Breaking – The Victim- Offender Trauma Bond
- The God Question: Searching for Meaning
- Crystallized Behaviour: Getting Stuck, Breaking Free
- Gaining Control, Independence and Freedom from our Victim Dependency
- Isolated, Feeling Alone, and Wanting to Belong

Justice for All

www.murdervictims.com/Holidays.htm

- Holidays and Grief

Victims of Violence Canadian Centre for Missing Children

www.victimsofviolence.on.ca/research249.html

- Homicide Survivors
- Victims of Violence Canadian Centre for Missing Children Ottawa, Ontario
- Does Everyone Feel Like This? Victims and Grieving

Victims' Voice

- Getting Through the Maze: A Guidebook for Survivors of Homicide (2002), Winnipeg, Manitoba

Victim Services Initiatives

www.gov.ns.ca/just/PolVS/Aug2603/programs.htm

- Criminal Justice System: Information for Victims of Crime Victim Services Initiatives

www.gov.ns.ca/just/PolVS/programs.htm

- Victim Services Programs and Services

Contact Us

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Dartmouth, NS B2Y 4B7

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Victim Services Unit Head Office

Telephone: (902) 424-3309
Fax: (902) 424-2056
Toll Free: 1-888-470-0773

Department of Justice
Victim Services Division