

Helping Someone When A Loved One Has Been Murdered

By Wanda Henry-Jenkins

When a former high school classmate was murdered during a fight, I was saddened. When my sister's brother-in-law was slain several years later by a drug-crazed man, I helped the family get through the funeral and burial. But, on February 12, 1972, homicidal loss became my own personal experience when my mother was killed.

My mother left behind nine children, my father and her mother to mourn her murder, but we never shared our suffering together beyond the funeral and burial. We were eleven individually bereaved persons, each trying to handle his or her own grief. At the same time, we were putting on happy faces and trying to encourage one another that we could go on living. All the while, other family members, friends, news media, police, clergy, mortuary personnel and curious onlookers were peeping in on our devastation. The murder was never solved, and within two weeks of her homicide, we (her bereaved family) were left alone and expected to recover without much help or direction.

Though all death leaves behind human pain and suffering, murder is preventable, and it screams terror, mutilation and "bad" death. No one, regardless of place or goals in life, should be killed. The sad truth is, however, that every day nearly sixty families experience the agony of learning that a loved one has been murdered. Both immediate and distant family members and friends are caught up in the shock and outrage of such violent loss of life.

Murder is like a violent thief in the night, causing great suffering. The funerals of murder victims often attract large crowds, but once the ceremonies are over, few remain with the bereaved to help dry their tears or relieve the burden of their pain. Family members are encouraged to recover and heal from the violent wound in their emotional fabric, but no one tells them how to heal.

Friends, church and community members, and co-workers can become facilitative comforters who help themselves and the family to feel cared for through the journey to recovery. Here are some suggestions that may help:

Be Open

If you would provide comfort and consolation, be open to accept whatever statements of pain and rage those who have experienced homicidal loss may express. Immediately after a homicide the bereaved may make some terribly shocking statements. Do not attempt to be the survivor's conscience. Just listen carefully and respond compassionately to their needs.

Emotions following homicidal loss often range from numb passivity to overwhelming rage. Survivors may appear the same outwardly, but they are irrevocably changed. They cannot go back to being the same person they were before, but they can become renewed and healthy.

Be Observant

Some of the things that survivors say they want to do could harm themselves or someone else if they were carried out. Be observant and keep a close watch on friends or family members. They are secondary victims in the awful aftermath of murder.

You have probably watched a news telecast or read a newspaper account where a bereaved person sought out and killed the murderer of their loved one.

When multiple family members have been killed, some survivors no longer want to live. Without appropriate support, they may attempt or complete suicide. By your presence, encourage them that they are not alone. Take them out to dinner or to a movie, hug them and encourage grief counseling.

Be Honest

Honestly share your own grief experiences with your friend, but don't try to identify with the experience of someone else. You can be a bridge over the murky waters of murder by seeking to understand how bereaved survivors see their experience.

One survivor reported that the dawning of her recovery from turmoil came when she was told by another grieving survivor, "I can't tell you how to feel. I can only share what it was like for me when my son was murdered." Another said that the cloud of tragedy she felt over her life began to lift when a friend asked, "Tell me what you are feeling, because I have never known anyone who was killed."

Be Non-Judgmental

The most miserable "comforters" are those who have all the answers! "It was too late at night for a woman to be out," or, "He was in the wrong place at the wrong time." Also, "What did you expect? They were drug dealers," and, "if you play, you must pay." These statements or similar ones only serve to hurt and further isolate the survivors. There are times when it's best to not say anything. Murder is a mixture of pain and frustration that is not helped by judgment.

Be Respectful and Loving

Those who have been bereaved by murder are already upset with God and humanity. Their faith in fair play and divine protection has been destroyed. Such statements as, "The good die young," only infuriate them and hamper their ability to mourn effectively. Show the kind of respect and love to the bereaved that you would want to receive under the same conditions.

Be Patient

Homicide bereavement is cyclical in nature. The three cycles of grief are crisis, conflict and commencement. The crisis period is from the time of death notification through the burial. Conflict begins with the trial and ends after the sentencing of the murderer. The commencement cycle begins when the survivor is ready to grieve the loss and move toward a healthy resolution.

Cycles can intermingle and relapse in grief recovery is common among survivors of murder victims. Complicating circumstances may be the arrest of the murderer, the trial itself, the parole or death of the murderer or an unsolved murder. Mourning is hard work and it takes time - sometimes many years. This is especially true in the case of an unsolved murder. The amount and quality of available lay, peer and professional support can make a major difference.

Be Supportive and Available

In the aftermath of murder, it is common for survivors of murder victims to feel alone. However, the grim and escalating statistics from FBI records and emergency room files report multiple thousands of new murder victims are added yearly. Survivors often can be helped by support groups that are especially for families of murder victims, but sometimes the hardest step is going to the first group session. As a caring friend, your most effective support may be to accompany your survivor/friend to the group meeting. One best friend reported to a support group, "I am here to learn how to help my friend." Being available is the best support a friend can provide.

Be Aware of Your Own Needs

Since some friends and co-workers may have spent their time with the person who was murdered, they may not know the family members as well. Be aware of your own grief needs in the aftermath of tragedy. Share your feelings and how you are resolving your grief. The best thing a friend did for me was to cry over my loss. I felt she loved me and recognized my great pain. Remember, there may be times when you cannot help your friend due to your grief, family obligations or professional competence. Admit your feelings to your friend and refer him to another part of the support system.

Be Knowledgeable About Available Resources

Survivors of murder victims sometimes do get stuck in their grief. They report continual nightmares, suicidal or homicidal ideas, excessive drinking or the use of drugs. Any of these reasons is important enough to warrant a visit to a professional. Call your local mental health organization, district attorney's office or victim's assistance program to discover who may be the appropriate caregiver. Then, gently suggest to your friend that professional intervention may help to resolve the grief.

These nine steps are only suggestions for helping someone whose loved one was murdered, but by following these steps you can provide comfort, compassion and consolation. In the end, you will also strengthen your family ties or friendships.

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Bereavement Magazine
July/August 1992

Distributed by:

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