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Homicide and Grieving

Why Is Homicide Different

"When I think of my son, the thoughts are never just of my love for him and the short but wonderful time we shared together. My thoughts are always marred by the brutal way in which he died, the senselessness of the act, and eventually, the offender and the justice system."- mother of a murdered child

Homicide is different from death by other means for a number of reasons. To begin with, homicide is usually deliberate. In other words, another person caused the death of a person's loved one deliberately and with malice as opposed to a natural death by old age or a death caused by disease or accident. With homicide, there could also be extreme violence associated with the death of a loved one, increased media attention to the death, and for the survivors, a lifetime of courts, parole hearings, and the eventual release of the offender, all having a significant impact upon the survivors.

For these reasons, many families of homicide victims feel unique and very much alone in their efforts to recover from the murder of a loved one. This feeling of being alone is sometimes exasperated by caring relatives and friends who urge them to "forget the offender" and carry on with their lives. For them, it may not be possible and this can lead to them withdrawing further and further from family and friends. They might seek grief counseling or join a grief sharing group and feel that they do not fit in. The death in their case is different from most, making it extremely difficult for them to grieve their loss which is essential to their recovery. Although the means of death may be different from most, families of homicide victims must still go through a grieving process if they are to recover from their loss and continue to lead productive lives.

Defining Grief

Grief is a natural, universal and emotional response to the loss of someone or

something significant in a person's life. This typically includes painful emotions and sorrow caused by loss. The responses vary widely and usually depend upon each person's individual personality, life circumstances, past experiences with grief and how others react to their grief. Grief should not be something that is prevented or avoided. Grief will often surface in other ways such as physical symptoms, erratic behavior or displacing it onto others.

There is an endless range of emotions associated with grief. Common emotions of shock, depression, isolation, panic, anxiety, guilt, anger and resentment will be further discussed in the stages of grief. Other symptoms include disbelief, helplessness, withdrawal, confusion, frustration, restlessness, uncontrollable crying, rejection by others, humiliation and feelings of abandonment. Besides the actual loss of a loved one, there are emotional losses of identity, trust, intimacy, independence, control and power. Some physical reactions to the death of a loved one include the loss of appetite or overeating, sleeplessness, sexual difficulties, little energy, the inability to concentrate, tightness in the throat, heaviness in the chest, increased heart rate, nausea, a temporary feeling of being paralyzed, feeling light-headed or dizziness and headaches.

Stages of Grief

"Traumatic events are extraordinary; not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life." - Judith Herman

According to the book "Good Grief" by Granger E. Westberg (1971), there are ten stages of grief. Since grieving is a very individual and personal process, not everyone will go through all the stages and they won't necessarily go through them in the order listed. These stages have been listed to make the grief process more comprehensible. It is important to remember, however, that there isn't any 'one' way or 'right' way to grieve.

Stage 1: Shock

In response to tragic death, sorrow may be so overwhelming that a person's senses are numbed. Often, during the shock phase, a person will experience denial of the loss of a loved one. It is common to hear phrases, words or actions that reduce the reality that a loved one is gone. If the survivor is experiencing shock, this is a mental method of temporarily escaping reality. As long as the shock is a temporary phase, it is completely normal. It is recommended that an individual continue with

their usual daily activities as much as possible because it promotes healing. Shock can help someone deal with the grief until they are ready to move on to the next stage.

Stage 2: Emotional Release

Emotional release tends to occur when a person mentally realizes how devastating the loss is. Uncontrollable urges to express grief can occur without warning and when there is a build up of emotions. Letting out emotions is a healthy thing to do! It can promote healing by allowing feelings to come to the surface. Repressing feelings can only make the situation worse. It is perfectly natural and therapeutic to cry. No one should feel embarrassed to cry because it is essential to release and express negative emotions. Some people may not want to grieve in front of others. That is okay, too. It is perfectly healthy to release one's emotions in private.

Stage 3: Depression and Isolation

Eventually, a point will probably come when a person may feel totally depressed and isolated. They may also feel that no one has ever grieved the way they are grieving. Despite this sense of isolation, grief is a universal process. After experiencing a great loss, sadness is completely normal and essential to grieving. Depression in this stage refers to the inability to see hope and positivity. This despair leads to feelings of loneliness where no end is in sight. For some, this stage ends quickly but for others it can last for months. It is normal when it is temporary but if it lasts for a prolonged period of time, highly interferes with normal functioning or if a person has suicidal thoughts, it may have developed into clinical depression. This requires professional help.

Stage 4: Physical Symptoms

Many survivors may feel physical effects of being distressed. These physical symptoms can be very wide-ranging; there isn't any 'one' physical side effect of grieving. Common physical symptoms can include overeating, undereating, nausea, dizziness or headaches. Any prolonged or extended physical symptoms should be taken seriously and treated by a professional. Long-term physical symptoms that are left untreated will usually get worse - not better.

Stage 5: Panic (also referred to as Anxiety)

Many people become panicky because they can only think of the loss. This can prevent a person from being effective in accomplishing things, such as work. It may cause an individual to worry about their own mental health and their inability to

concentrate. Some people also panic because they feel as if they are "losing their mind." It is important to understand that experiencing panic and having uncharacteristic thoughts is sometimes a part of the grieving process. When a grieving person is warned about the worrisome and fearful thoughts, it is less likely they will be overwhelmed with thoughts that they are "losing it." It may also be comforting to know that panic is normal in this situation.

Stage 6: Guilt

Guilt is also a typical feeling associated with grief. Two types of guilt can be considered, 'normal guilt' and 'irrational guilt'. 'Normal guilt' is when a person feels guilty for something they did or didn't do that they should feel guilty about. For example, feeling guilty about things that they didn't do for a loved one when the loved one was still alive. 'Irrational guilt' is when a person feels more involved or responsible for a particular problem. For example, feeling guilty because they couldn't prevent the murder of a loved one. This is also called self-blame. Both types of guilt are often linked, so distinguishing between the two can be difficult. Everyone has feelings of 'irrational guilt' but it depends upon the degree to which it is experienced. Unresolved guilt can cause further distress if it is not dealt with properly. It can be dealt with through expression and in some cases speaking to mental health professionals.

Stage 7: Anger and Resentment

As a person comes out of feeling depressed, they may be able to express strong feelings of anger and resentment. Some people may not be aware of their anger until the depression dissipates. Anger is an important and normal part of going through grief. When there is a significant loss, most people go through a stage where they are very critical of everything and everyone associated with the loved one who has died. Sometimes, people need something to blame for the tragedy that occurred. This can cause hostility toward relatives, police and others. Even though anger is healthy, it is damaging if that emotion overrides everything else.

Stage 8: Resistance

Although a person may feel that they are far along in the grieving process and have a desire to return to usual activities, there may be a resistance to returning to their regular life. This can sometimes come from the feeling that others don't understand how special the loved one was to them. Some may want to remain in grief to keep the memory of the person alive or facing 'life' again seems too painful. For some, the grief has become a familiar and comfortable place to be in.

Resistance can also occur because there doesn't appear to be a place for grief in society. Grief tends to remain quite private and some may feel they are forced to carry the burden within themselves.

Stage 9: Hope

Grief can last anywhere from a few weeks to a few years. How long grief will last for a survivor is unknown ahead of time. During this time of grief there will be glimpses of hope. Eventually this hope will outweigh discouraging feelings. No two people are the same and no two people grieve the same. Some may go through the stages not asking for help while others may grieve openly. Most will want affection and reassurance. Although grieving is an individual process, most cannot do it alone. It makes a significant difference when there is support and encouragement for someone who is grieving.

Stage 10: Affirming Reality

The final stage is affirming reality but this does not mean becoming their "old self again." When anyone goes through a significant grief experience, they come out as a changed person. Although life won't be the same, it is important for them to reaffirm what is good in their life. Even though they have endured a tremendous loss, it is important to realize that everything good has not been taken from them. As the struggle to affirm reality begins, a person should be encouraged not to be afraid of the real world anymore. This stage is also known as acceptance.

"Following the murder of our daughter, I lost all sense of goodness in the world. I saw only evil and despair. It took years, but eventually, once again I began to see good in society. I began to smell the flowers again and it felt good." - parent of a murdered child

Factors That Can Influence Grief

Grieving is not a simple process that is as clear-cut as these ten stages may suggest. It is complicated because there are internal factors (components within the grieving person) and external factors (outside influences) that impact the grieving process.

Internal factors, which make grieving so difficult and confusing, include:

□ **the extent of the loss** - this means how much was actually lost; hopes and dreams for the future are lost; a friend or relative is lost; someone who knows them well

and shares the past is lost; if the victim was their child, all their prospects of grandchildren to enjoy in their retirement could be suddenly gone.

□ **range of emotions** - experiencing emotions that they may not have felt before; with homicide, this could include anger and hatred of someone they do not even know - the person said to be responsible for their loved one's death; if no arrest is made they can be left wondering for a lifetime the identity of the offender, not having a real person to direct their anger to.

□ **intensity of emotions** - they can erupt and be overwhelming sometimes.

□ **every death is unique** - the personal relationship with the loved one and the circumstances of their death makes the situation unique; although they may have grieved before, this is a separate experience; homicide is also different since it is much more uncommon - everyone grieves with the deaths of loved ones, but few people experience homicide.

□ **lack of understanding** - not understanding why a person feels the way they do.

There are three external factors that can have an impact on the grieving process for homicide victims. They are the assisting services available, the media and the criminal justice system.

□ **available assisting services** - if there are a variety of services available, they may help the person in the grieving process; the first type of assistance that is typically available is crisis intervention; crisis intervention is short term assistance provided to homicide survivors and other victims of crime; this assistance is usually provided only for a short period of time following the crime; this is when survivors are experiencing the 'shock stage' of grieving; the type of assistance includes validating the survivor's feelings, dispelling blame, assuring safety, compassion, making funeral arrangements, and informing or contacting friends/family; beyond crisis intervention, other types of more long term services include mental health specialists, community service groups, victim advocacy groups and support groups.

□ **the media** - the media can have an impact on grieving since most homicides become front page news stories; when there is public exposure of the death, additional pain and suffering are sometimes caused to those grieving; grief can be intensified by the media's portrayal of the homicide victim or the accused killer

and invasion into the privacy of those who are grieving.

□ **the criminal justice system** - the criminal justice system can prolong and heighten the grieving process; the justice system and the trial process can go on for years, forcing those grieving to prolong their mourning period; grief can also be deepened by a lack of sensitivity within the system, a lack of information provided by the system, a lack of cooperation by participants in the trial, and the lack of victim rights and involvement within the justice system.

Children and Grief

Children must not be forgotten in a time of grief. When a child has lost a loved one, they also experience grief. Just as not all adults grieve the same, not all children grieve the same. For younger children especially, the concept of someone gone "forever" is very difficult. This concept is difficult to understand. For older children, they may understand that their loved one is gone, but they still may have some problems or questions.

Schroeder and Gordon (1996) suggest the following ways to assist grieving children:

□ regardless of age, children can be told of a death in a statement that includes the following information - the person has died, this is sad and it is okay for them to talk about it; they died because something happened to their body (for younger children explain 'dead' as the body stopped working); and it is okay for them to ask questions about death; caregivers should be honest in answering any questions.

□ children should be told right away, told what to expect in the following days, for example, the funeral taking place, who is going to be taking care of them, etc.

□ children should be allowed to attend the funeral, however, they should not be forced to attend; ask them what they want to do and explain to them what will happen and what they can expect.

□ avoid terms such as "gone away," "passed on" or "left us" because they can be misinterpreted; explain 'death' as the body no longer working.

□ encourage children to say "goodbye" to the loved one, like writing a letter,

drawing a picture, placing flowers on the grave, etc.

□ children often misread parents' expressions of emotion so they should be explained (for example, children believing their parents are crying because of them instead of knowing they are crying because they miss the loved one).

□ if parents are unable to provide for a child's needs because of their own grief, another adult should take care of the child until the parents are better able to function.

□ be aware that young children's reactions to death may be different from adults because they focus on grief for a shorter period of time; they may play or laugh as a way to cope, or act out death scenes to express their feelings; this behavior is completely normal for a grieving child.

□ it is important to continue to talk about the loved one and recall positive memories of them.

□ return children to their normal routine as soon as possible after the death, such as returning to school or daycare within a few days to show that life continues on; a teacher or caregiver should be informed so they can assist the child if he or she becomes upset.

□ a change to rules and expectations that occur during a time of family stress can cause a child to feel insecure or unsettled; this means that expectations of appropriate behavior must be maintained, for example: even though they are upset, it is not okay to fight with their siblings.

□ following a death, children may worry about what will happen to them if their parents die so it must be explained it is not likely, but if it were to happen, they would be taken care of.

Holidays and Anniversaries

Once the reality has been affirmed for a survivor, it does not mean that they will no longer grieve. Special days such as holidays, birthdays and anniversaries can heighten emotional pain in the absence of the loved one lost to homicide. Holidays can bring feelings of sadness, loss and emptiness. It is important for those

supporting someone who is grieving to know that love does not go away with death. A renewed personal grief can result because special days bring feelings of loss that aren't encountered during daily routines. Although these days are associated with celebration, symbols of the day can trigger memories of the deceased. The easiest way to support survivors at these times is to listen without judgment to feelings and memories; accommodate plans to include their wishes for that day; and don't try to make them do things that you think they should do.

The Justice System

"We didn't ask to be part of his life, but when he murdered my sister, he made us a part of his life and we are never going to go away. Every time he appears in court or at a parole hearing our family will be there for her." - sister of a murder victim

Families of homicide victims, not only have to deal with the loss of their loved ones, but they are also thrown into a justice system that they usually know nothing about. They are confused and bewildered with the senselessness of the act that took their loved one's life. And then, just when they think they are beginning to see some sunshine in their lives again and some beauty in the world around them, the offender seems to make headlines again with another crime or an appeal and the grieving process seems to begin all over again. This can go on for the rest of their lives, attending court, presenting victim impact statements at parole hearings, and eventually, in most cases, seeing the offender released back into their community.

Just as all individuals grieve differently, all families of homicide victims react differently to their necessary dealings with the justice system. There is no 'right' way or 'wrong' way for any family member to behave. Some feel an intense need to be there for their loved one while others cannot face the offender in court, let alone present a public victim impact statement detailing how the loss has affected them. Every family member should be left to decide for themselves the extent of their involvement. Friends and family should support them in their decisions and, if possible attend court and other hearings with them. Judging them for their decisions will only make them withdraw from friends and family and persist on their own without support. Older children should also be allowed to attend court hearings if they feel they need to be with their parents.

Assisting Families of Homicide Victims

Providing assistance or support to someone who has lost a loved one to homicide may be difficult to do, but it can make a difference in their recovery. There are a few things you can do to support homicide survivors throughout their grieving process and their necessary dealings with the justice system:

- assist with identification and funeral plans - the survivors will still be in shock so help with these difficult tasks can be invaluable.

- offer to assist with some daily routines - they may need help with things like groceries or caring for pets; this doesn't mean doing everything for them but rather give them a helping hand when their focus and energy are low.

- listen without judgment - having someone to express feelings to is important and let them know that you want to listen; never judge their need to understand and be part of the criminal justice process.

- acknowledge the death that has occurred and how it is impacting those who are grieving.

- show genuine concern, care and compassion - you do not have to have experienced a criminal act and know exactly what they are going through to show that you care.

- express that you're sorry for what happened to their loved one, and that it was not their loved one's fault - no matter what the circumstances of the homicide, do not be judgmental of the victim (she shouldn't have been out so late at night).

- encourage them to be patient with themselves and to continue to participate in healthy functioning, such as friendships and activities.

- don't put too much pressure on yourself when helping those grieving - be willing to admit that you do not know what is best for them.

- educate yourself about grief so you better understand what they are going through.

- don't take rejection personally - those grieving may not always want people around and they may not have the energy to consider your feelings all of the time.

□ educate yourself and assist them in their necessary dealings with the justice system - if possible, attend court and meetings with police and prosecutors with the victims; assist them with preparation of a "victim impact statement" if requested to do so.

□ if necessary, assist them with the media - the media can sometimes be overpowering and a spokesperson may be needed on their behalf;

□ be there to assist in the long run, not just for a few days or weeks.

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