Link:
[Survivors of Homicide Victims - National Organization of Parents of Murdered Children]

Survivors of Homicide Victims

Each year approximately 15,000 men, women, and children are victims of criminal homicide in the United States.

As staggering as that figure is, it does not begin to indicate the toll of suffering that homicide extracts. If one estimates that each of its victims is survived by a minimum of three loved ones for whom the violent death will produce deep and bitter grief, the annual casualty rate escalates to over 45,000 individuals. And if one appreciates the intensity and duration of the trauma suffered by these survivors, we can conservatively estimate that we have in our midst APPROXIMATELY A HALF million wounded and scarred Americans, all victims of the murders of just the past decade.

The purpose of this Information Bulletin is to describe some of the concerns of survivors of homicide victims, discuss some of the problems and situations they face in day-to-day life, and suggest some guidelines for providing support and assistance to them.

Who Are Survivors of Homicide Victims?

"Survivors of Homicide Victims" is a phrase used to describe those individuals who had special ties of kinship with the person murdered, and who were therefore victimized not only by the loss of someone close but also by the horrific circumstances of that untimely death. Survivors are usually thought of as family members or close friends, but at times, the term may include people with seemingly more distant relationships such as neighbors, schoolmates, and members of the community at large.

Murder and homicide are defined interchangeably in this Bulletin as the reckless or intentional taking of a human life by another individual. It includes those killed in drunk driving crashes, since driving while under the influence of drugs or alcohol is quite properly considered to be criminally reckless conduct. Issues influencing the legal definition of murder, such as the state of mind of the assailant, are not considered in this Bulletin except as they affect the survivors.

Let it be said at the outset: nothing in life prepares survivors for the day when a loved one is murdered. Most people live with illusions of immortality both for themselves and the people they know, at least before they reach old age. Death of a younger person is always a shock to those who grieve, who may even be stunned by the expected death of an old, infirm relative.

But murder involves more than death. For a majority of victims, it cuts short a healthy, young life, and for all victims, it is committed through an act of wanton human cruelty.

The dimension of cruelty compounds the sense of sorrow and loss with acute feelings of injustice, distrust, and helplessness.

What Are Common Reactions to Homicide?

The common response to any extraordinary trauma is crisis. The long-term effect of the crisis is influenced by a number of objective and subjective factors, such as:

- the intensity of the event
- the suddenness of the event
- whether the event was anticipated
- the ability to understand the event
- our state of mind prior to the event

It is clear that learning of a loved one's murder is intense, sudden, and virtually impossible to understand. Hence, most survivors face a long period of emotional struggle to reconstruct a devastated life.

Turmoil and Numbness

Survivors report suffering an initial phase of shock and confusion. The shock at receiving the information of the murder is experienced both mentally and physically. Typically, the survivor feels unable to accept the news of the death and even less able to comprehend the murder. After a rush of sensory reactions which accompany the adrenaline response to the news, many survivors collapse into a state of stunned affect and physical exhaustion.

But that paints too predictable a picture. In fact, the feelings aroused by the devastating news, and the way these show themselves in the survivor's behavior, vary considerably from one person to another, so that there is a wide range of normal responses in thinking, feeling, and behavior. All of the following are typical survivor reactions during the acute stages of crises: preoccupation with the survivor's personal loss; horror about the suffering that the murder victim may have suffered; a need to know every detail of the victim's death; attacks of panic; a fixation on maintaining a day-to-day routine; though this may be shattered at times by outbursts of intense emotion; restlessness and insomnia; an inability to concentrate; flashbacks to the memory of receiving the death notification or the memory of, or an imagined picture of, the crime itself; rage at the assailant; fear for one's own life or that of other loved ones; self-blame about something the survivor did or did not do to prevent the murder; hostility towards everyone who cannot bring the victim back to life; and utter hopelessness and helplessness.

For many survivors, the strongest point of focus for their feelings is over the loss, and with this normal focal point of nearly all grieving, the normal mix of grieving emotions, including a guilt inducing sense of anger at the person who died, is present. For those who cannot imagine a life without that loved one, ideas of suicide are common.

Most survivors can recall experiencing a range of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and not having much ability to control which of these will predominate at any given time. Hence the word "turmoil" is often used when recalling this period.

"Turmoil" speaks to the horrible vividness of the experience. For many who are not ready to deal with a kaleidoscope of intense feelings, or who from time to time take an emotional retreat from those feelings, the word they often use to capture that state of mind is "numbness." Many survivors report that they cannot remember much about the first few

weeks or months, or that they had lived in a cloud, or that they felt almost detached from their bodies, watching themselves struggle from a distance.

For most survivors, the distress attributable to the murder itself is compounded by a number of other stressors.

Additional Stress Factors

The first such stressor is the notification process itself. Many survivors remember that event as severely traumatic. Notification by telephone, notification with incomplete or, worse, inaccurate information, notification that takes place in public, or worse, through the media, all cause additional pain. In contrast, notifications performed by trained law enforcement officers, done in person and sometimes with the aid of a crisis counselor, are remembered by some survivors as events of powerful kindness amid the terrible pain.

A second stress factor is the impact of other life changes. Despite the shock and numbness of the survivor, life around them does not end. If there is a divorce occurring in their family, or employment or economic problems, or illness, these stresses rarely go away for very long, and on the contrary, sometimes lead to extraordinary strife.

Third, any violent death produces unwanted and untimely demands on the family. The survivors may be faced with the task of identifying the victim's body, making funeral arrangements, handling medical or ambulance bills, notifying other friends or family of the news, hosting friends or family in their home for the funeral, dealing with the media, and so on. These tasks can seem overwhelming in the midst of personal anguish.

Fourth, death often necessitates a number of role changes for survivors. If a husband is murdered, his wife may have to take on roles he once had in child rearing. At times, a son is called upon to become "the man of the house." All children may find themselves parenting their own parents should the adults lose the ability to attend to household tasks. When children are murdered, their siblings may try to somehow fill in for the missing child, and if they fail to regain their parents' attention, they may conclude that they were far less loved than the murdered child.

Fifth, death often causes financial stress, especially when the victim was the sole or primary source of income. Then there are medical and funeral expenses, and other costs of the crime for cleaning up the victim's home, for dealing with other acts of violence, for any attendant theft, for cooperating with, and even subsidizing in practical terms, the criminal justice follow-up, and so on. Obviously, these involve costs to the spirit as well as to the bank account.

Sixth, many survivors find comfort in their religion, but even their religious community may react with misguided compassion. Statements such as “it was God’s will,” “your loved on is better off in heaven,” or “God called him” often alienates survivors not only from the person speaking but from their own faith. Some survivors report that they are advised to “forgive the murderer” or “pray for his redemption.” Such advice is not only infuriating but painful to hear.

And seventh, the aftermath of murder is made more stressful than other types of death by some of the responses survivors receive from their families, friends, and neighbors.

Murder is a hideously distasteful subject. People do not like to think it can happen and avoid acknowledging the event. They may try to blame the murder, at least in part, on the victim or the survivors. If they can somehow explain what was “wrong” with the victim or his or her family, they can sustain the illusion that murder could not happen to them or their loved ones.

Relatives and friends of the survivors may urge them to “get on with their lives,” “forget about the past,” or “concentrate on the family they have left.” There is a tendency to overlook the fact that all survivors grieve in different ways and process the grief over different lengths of time. Obviously, survivors never forget the murder or the victim. Less obvious to many, good memories of the victim’s life are often comforting, and so “living in the past” can often be a healing thing.

Conversely, focusing on the family members who survive the victim may not necessarily serve the healing process. It sometimes is a good, short-term coping mechanism (like working hard at the job), but it can be used as a substitute for “grief work” which is put off for longer and longer periods of time. One factor in these interfamily dealings is the discovery, reported by many survivors, that having other loving family members to turn to does not mean that they can serve as an emotional replacement for the murdered relative.

A Unique Stressor: The Criminal Justice System

In the case of murder, the survivor becomes involved with the criminal justice system. Most survivors turn to the criminal justice system for a special kind of emotional support, as well as practical support in their passion to see the assailant apprehended, prosecuted, convicted, and punished.

It is particularly from the impassioned survivors that the justice officials hear not from those who are numbed or depressed. The initial reactions of the vocal survivors may often seem fueled by feelings of revenge that may not be the noblest of human emotions, but it is certainly an understandable, even legitimate feeling in the wake of murder. A problem

arises, however, when outsiders like the criminal justice professionals are able to perceive only vengefulness in the survivors, and miss the other feelings at work, feelings of wanting to restore a just order to the world, an order that has been so badly violated by the murder, and feelings that it is important to do something about the crime as a way to combat their sense of helplessness.

Those who see only the survivors' anger are often put off ("frightened" may be more accurate) by its intensity. That may help to explain why the criminal justice system is often unresponsive to homicide victims' survivors. That unresponsiveness is sensed far less often in law enforcement officers, according to many survivors, than in the prosecutors, judges, defense attorneys, and the others, at least in that majority of cases that result in an arrest and prosecution.

But the way the survivors are put at arm's length means that, even in cases that end up with a severe sentence, the survivor may not feel vindicated or relieved. And if the murder is not solved, or the assailant was acquitted or got a light sentence, the survivor may face years of anguish over the fact that their loved one was killed and the criminal "got away with it."

The following review of other stresses that the system puts on survivors starts with an arrest.

When a suspect is arrested, relief bordering on euphoria is common among survivors, who often believe that now everything is going to be all right. What they are almost always forced to learn is that arrests do not necessarily result in prosecutions, or prosecutions in convictions, or convictions in stiff sentences, or stiff sentences order in stiff sentences served.

Part of the survivors' unwanted education is that "murder" is not what they or the lay public understand it to be. Prosecutors, judges, or juries may perceive the killing to be a manslaughter, or a negligent homicide, or even accidental death.

If the case does go to trial, the trial dates may be postponed and delayed for months or years. When it starts, the survivors will almost certainly be barred from attending the proceedings (except in the states which have passed a "court attendance" act), because it is felt that their presence may prove prejudicial to the jury; the fact that relatives of the defendant are usually permitted in the courtroom is one of many indicators given to the survivors that "equal justice" may be an ideal in our civil justice system but not in the criminal justice system.

In the minority of jurisdictions where survivors may attend the court proceedings, they may well hear their loved one maligned as a contemptible person as the defense tries to

minimize the significance of the murder. While most survivors will always opt to attend the trial, most will feel pained, even sullied, by the experience.

But talk of attendance at trial, with all its pains, is sometimes irrelevant. For it is the fate of many survivors that they are not even informed if prosecution charges have been filed, much less whether a trial date has been set or what the trial outcome was. Before the movement for victim rights and services gained momentum in the 1980's, the surviving relatives were not considered the "direct victims" of homicide, and so, unless they were key witnesses, they were simply forgotten as often as not. Although "victims' bills of rights," adopted in the majority of states in recent years, are putting an end to these thoughtless practices, they still survive in many places.

The survivors who are kept informed of the progress of a prosecution may often hope that a plea bargain will be struck, at least if it means a guilty plea to first or second degree murder, or if it means a conviction when the prosecutor has serious evidentiary problems in the case. For the survivors will have learned of the uncertainties of the trial and appeals processes – and they will have learned that 80 to 90 percent of the guilty findings in this country are by way of a guilty plea, not a jury verdict. But, as they also learn, guilty pleas are much less common in homicide cases.

In the unusual case where the survivors are consulted over a plea and feel it is the best way to put an end to their ordeal, they may still feel a lingering distress that there was no public ritual to condemn the person who committed so hideous a crime. To ease that distress, survivors often make it a point in plea-bargained cases to convey their feelings to the sentencing judge, either through a written "victim impact statement" or, when permitted, in person at the sentencing hearing.

For a great many survivors, a plea-bargain is not a real option, and they must face the realities of a trial and its consequences. The reality of the trial is that it usually will be delayed for months and sometimes years. And the reality of its outcome usually boils down to three categories, in the view of most survivors: a "not guilty" verdict; a "guilty" verdict, but one that for one reason or another produces an inappropriate sentence; or one that results in an appropriate sentence.

In all three cases, survivors are often surprised at their own reactions. When a "not guilty" verdict is delivered, the survivors report disillusionment, outrage, and isolation and much more intensely than they had anticipated. At times, the survivors also fear retaliation by the defendant who may have threatened them at one time or another. Whatever the circumstances of the case, these survivors are vulnerable to feelings that they do not live in human society but in a jungle where killing is not viewed as wrong.

If a “guilty” verdict is handed down, the threshold issue is guilty as to which charges, and then, inexorably, the issue is what sentence will be imposed. That can vary widely, thanks to the confusing array of sentencing laws and practices and to the vagaries of the jury system, so that a probationary sentence in one court might be a ten-year prison sentence in another, or a twenty-year sentence in one court might be a death penalty sentence in another. In any case, a sentence felt to be trivial to the survivors can leave them with as much disillusionment, anger, and fear as a “not-guilty” verdict.

Even if the offender receives a just and appropriate sentence from the perspective of the survivors, they are often surprised by their response. Survivors typically assume that a just conclusion will solve their pain, and they are sometimes shocked when it does not. One reason for this is that, from the point of arrest onward, most survivors concentrate so much on the criminal justice dimension that they do not allow themselves the time or space for grieving. Hence, when the trial is over, their emotions are no longer “on hold” and they are plunged back to a starting place in the grieving process, where they are faced with the excruciating knowledge of the everlasting void caused by the murder.

The sentencing stage is of vital concern to survivors. Thanks to legislation mandating “victim impact statements,” survivors in most states now have a right to have some input in sentencing. Sometimes it is limited to a written, objective statement of how the murder affected the survivors financially, medically, and emotionally. In some states, this information may be supplemented by the survivors’ opinions as to what the sentence should be. And in at least a few states, survivors are permitted to speak to the judge at the sentencing hearing itself.

All of these are gratifying to most survivors, at least when they feel that their involvement made a difference.

In the majority of cases where a prison sentence is imposed, survivors in most jurisdictions will soon be concerned about the probability of parole. That concern has turned into fear and anger in many states which are now using early release, even of violent inmates, as a method of reducing prison overcrowding.

For virtually all survivors who see the offender sentenced after a trial rather than a guilty plea, there is the prospect of seemingly endless appeals, and of a possible overturning of the conviction, even of an acquittal in the second or third trial.

The final group of stressors accompanying a murder trial and conviction concerns a sentence of death. For the majority of survivors who strongly favor the death penalty in capital murder cases, there is the statistical likelihood that a death sentence will not be carried out, at least not for years while appeals are heard and, not unusually, retrials are

ordered. Then there is the possibility that, once carried out, a death penalty does not produce the emotional catharsis the survivors had expected.

Some survivors find that they favor the death penalty but not wholeheartedly. One finds this moral stress particularly in those who resent bitterly the feelings of rage they have come to experience for the first time in their lives by people who saw themselves as being kindly and tolerant before the killer robbed them of that self-image.

And for the minority of survivors who oppose the death penalty and whose offenders have been sentenced to die, the moral anguish is acute.

In this unpleasant discussion, we have not meant to paint too bleak a picture about the survivors' experience with the criminal justice system. In more and more jurisdictions, officials are trying to be responsive to survivor concerns, and with increasing frequency, the course of justice brings a measure of satisfaction and resolution to the survivors.

But one must recognize how difficult that result is to achieve. With no other crime is the ideal of "swift and certain punishment" so elusive. And the harsh truth remains that, as a society, we are often relatively lenient with the habitual drunk who kills innocent people, or with the man or woman who reacts murderously to someone who rejects their love, or with many other killers.

So the plain fact remains that the criminal justice process is at least as likely to compound the survivors' distress as to reduce it.

The Toll of Stress on the Survivors' Support Network

Wherever the stress factors come from – from the loss itself, from the circumstances of the murder, or from the outside stressors with their "second wounds," they add up to a terrible strain on the survivors' natural support network. For the fact is that its members will have different methods for dealing with their grief and will operate on different timetables. For some, those strains may prove too heavy, and marriages will break up, or children will leave home, or relatives may drift apart. All will find that at least some friendships will deteriorate.

Because of the extraordinary effect murder has on survivors, some of them feel they are going crazy, especially those who receive no education about normal human reactions to catastrophic stress. Nightmares, insomnia, periods of uncontrollable sobbing, occasional hysterical laughter, nausea, headaches, physical heartaches, fatigue and other reactions may go on for months and years. The fact that emotional stress takes a physical toll means that it may result in serious illnesses. Some survivors believe their battles with heart

disease, cancer, kidney ailments, liver disease, and other potentially terminal conditions were precipitated by the murder.

Even for survivors who manage to reconstruct a useful life, “bad days” will continue to plague them. As one survivor stated, you finally know that you are going to be okay, not because the bad days go away, but because you reach a point when there are more good days than bad ones.

Situational Factors That Affect the Survivors’ Trauma

The Relationship of the Survivor to the Murder Victim

The relationship of the survivor to the murder victim can result in significantly different responses. While it is impossible to explore all possible relationships in this Bulletin, a review of some of the relationships may help illustrate the issues.

Parents

The parental reaction to a child’s murder is perhaps the one on which we have the most knowledge due to the work and observations of the national organization, Parents Of Murdered Children, Inc. The reports indicate that several issues complicate the response of parents.

With the advent of modern medicine in the last century, people who become parents have learned that, in the natural order of things, parents almost always die before their children. Hence the shock of death of one’s child, compounded by murder, is exacerbated even more by the disillusionment of what has become an almost sacred belief.

Parents assume a natural role of protectors of their offspring. While they sometimes acknowledge that they may not have been able to protect them from terminal illnesses or natural disasters, they often convince themselves that they could have, and therefore should have, been able to protect their son or daughter from the murderer. This sense of protectiveness increases parental guilt and self-blame.

Parents normally spend a great deal of time planning their children’s future, and many consider that their child’s future is their own link with immortality. The grief over the loss of the child is complicated by the grief over the loss of a portion of that immortality. This can be especially devastating to parents of an only child.

Parents and society as a whole perceive childhood as a state of innocence, vulnerability, and freedom. Thus, killing a child also kills a special sense of trust we have about

childhood. Even when adults are murdered, their parents often express a sense that their child's innocence was destroyed.

Where there are surviving siblings, parents also face problems of continuing to be a parent, trying to restore trust and faith to their living children, and keeping the family together. This process is often complicated since the murder of one child very often elevates feelings parents have for that child. Consequentially, and unfortunately, sibling survivors who get fewer manifestations of affection from their parents may fear that it is not just grief that is blocking their parents' love but that their dead sibling has become "preferred" – and they may be accurate in their perceptions, at least for a time.

Parents, however, are but a unity of two different individuals. A difference between the male/father reaction and the female/mother reaction is also common. Most observers and survivors attribute many of those differences to the sex roles that society has assigned to each. Hence, males more often report dealing with their grief and anger in a silent manner. They are often less verbal, less anxious to know details, and feel more helpless and guilty than their female counterparts.

These reactions go with the expectations society places on fathers. In the event of death or murder, the father is expected to be strong, to offer comfort to his family, to cope with most of the funeral arrangements, insurance claims, or other details, and to maintain his job.

If the father is unable to cope because of the emotional turmoil, society is far less forgiving than it might be of a mother. On the other hand, as our society experiences the impact of the working woman, expectations may become more comparable.

A mother is often more verbal in her anger and more active in her outward fight against the murder and the sources of the second injury. The murder of a child for the mother often catapults them into an activism she has not experienced in her previous life. There is almost a sense in the reports from mother survivors that they feel that if they had become more involved in politics, their community, or in social change in general, that they might have been able to prevent their child's murder. Hence, they may become committed to that external force in order to compensate for their previous apathy.

In discussing parents, it should be noted that in today's family, the parental responsibilities may be shared with step-parents. Many times this group is ignored. Indeed, the anguish over a child's murder may be intensified if parents who have been divorced and remarried have to deal with their former spouses. Even though some counselors believe it is necessary and healthy to encourage such reunions in order to facilitate the grieving process, it may add to the distress of the natural parent or his or her new partner. Step-

parents often love their step-children with equal intensity as the natural parents. When others expect their grief to be less, their agony is increased.

Siblings

Siblings of children who are murdered are often forgotten in discussions about the aftermath of murder. However, they have some unique concerns. Two of them are paramount: their own sense of vulnerability, and their anxiety about being left alone. Often they become preoccupied with fears of their own death. If their sibling was older than they, they may fear the year upcoming when they become the same age as their murdered brother or sister. The fear of being abandoned and alone is common in childhood, and even older siblings may regress to having "separation anxiety" over the fear that a similar fate might befall them, their parents, or other siblings.

If the siblings are young, it may be the first time they have encountered death, let alone murder. It is very difficult for them to understand the permanency of death and the fact that their brother or sister will never return. Their friends or schoolmates may make the situation worse. Children often have a ghoulish sense of humor and are not kind in their play.

Many times siblings are also best friends. The pain of losing a confidant, a pal, a teammate can increase the sorrow. Conversely, the child who had a difficult relationship with his or her sibling (which is the norm) may fantasize all sorts of terrible things that he or she "willed" a rival's death, that the good child died and the evil one survived, that the inadequate expressions of love now coming from their parents is the dead sibling's form of revenge, and so on.

Siblings report that they feel their roles change both with each other and with their parents. They become the youngest or oldest child as a result of the murder. They may take over the parenting job in the family because their own parents become dysfunctional, or simply as a way of offering assistance. At times they may attempt to take over the identity of the murdered child in order to ease their parents' grief.

In far too many cases, parents cannot find the emotional reserves to take care of the surviving children. Hence, the siblings feel devalued, unworthy of living, and discouraged. And, as mentioned before, parents often report that they feel the child who was murdered was somehow special or they had a special relationship with him or her. If they express these feelings in front of surviving children, the children may feel jealous and angry.

If the parents become active in a victim rights campaign or dramatically change lifestyles, the remaining children may resent the time away from home or the fact that they can't live "like normal" anymore.

Grandparents

Grandparents are another group of individuals whose feelings are often overlooked when a child is murdered. Yet, as one set of grandparents reported, they may feel that they suffer a double loss. They not only lose the grandchild they loved, but may feel the loss of their own child, the parent, who is changed so radically by the murder. And many grandparents have an even stronger sense of the loss of their future than do parents themselves.

Extended family members and friends

Extended family members and friends of the murder victim may have been closer to the victim than the immediate family. It is not unusual to find that a best friend or a favored aunt is more deeply affected by the murder of their loved one than a brother, sister, or even a parent. Yet it is often the case that the support network that bands together to console one another, or to deal as a unit with the criminal justice system and other outsiders, excludes these special people.

Spouses

If the murder victim is an adult, she/he may well be survived by a spouse and children. The death of a spouse is a complex issue. The feelings that the surviving spouse must deal with often are dependent upon the nature of the marital relationship. If there was discord or dissention, survivors may suffer intense guilt feelings – perhaps they had even, at times, wished their spouse dead in fantasy. If it was a very loving relationship, the grief and loss will be increased. The survivor not only loses a close friend and a companion, but a sexual partner.

Losing a spouse who is also a parent means that the survivor is called upon to assume all parenting responsibilities. At times this may seem to be an overwhelming obligation.

Children

Children who lose a parent to murder face serious adjustment problems. They must deal with the issue of “who will take care of me” in a more compelling way than when losing a sibling. In addition, they often interpret a parent’s death as desertion even when the death is caused by murder. They may ask why the parent didn’t fight harder or run away. They in turn may blame the parent or blame themselves for the event. In blaming themselves they often feel that the parent died because the parent didn’t love them. Hence some studies suggest that children who survive the murder of a parent have persistently low self-esteem.

The parent’s death also interferes with the child’s development process. Children normally grow up and learn to become responsible for themselves as they learn to control their environment. The helplessness that accompanies their sense of loss may leave them with a sense of ineffectiveness, leading in time to apathy, depression and passivity.

Anger is often more intense in children who survive their parent because they resent their abandonment. The surviving parent may be placed in a very difficult position. The bereaved child may idealize the murdered parent and project hostility on the survivor. The child may wish the surviving parent to be dead instead of the victim. Some people have suggested that part of the long-term vilification of the surviving parent and canonization of the victim is related to the child's attempt to make up for their anger at the deceased.

Other Situational Factors That Affect the Survivors' Trauma

The Occurrence of Significant Events

A second kind of situational factor that intervenes in survivors' emotional turmoil are significant events in their later lives. The "anniversary date" of the murder is always a painful reminder of the death. The first anniversary is reported to be the most difficult by many survivors, but the date is distressing forever.

Holidays, birthdays, and other formerly-happy events are usually marred by the loss of the loved one. The fond memories of yesteryear become bittersweet with the knowledge that the loved one will never be part of future memories of such family rituals.

Birthdays, bar mitzvahs, graduations, weddings, births, and other normal milestones of life are particularly traumatic when the victim had not experienced such events and when the survivors go on with life without him or her. It may be difficult for parents to attend the graduation of another child because the murdered child did not live long enough to graduate.

Witnessing the Event

A third factor affecting the reconstruction process for survivors concerns their role as witnesses to the event. There is no doubt that individuals who witness a murder, any murder, are vulnerable to severe repercussions for having been present at such a horrific event. How much worse, then, when the witnessed murder is of a loved one.

Often the witness could also have been killed, so that his or her terror and horror are intermixed. It is very common for such witnesses to feel extraordinary guilt about surviving.

Witnesses may have an increased sense of impotence and self-blame. Whereas non-witness survivors may fantasize that, had they been present, they would have prevented the murder, witness/survivors know that they were there and could not, or did not, prevent the killing. In many cases, witnesses are also afraid that the assailant will retaliate against them at another time. Since they will be involved in the criminal justice process, they may

become torn between telling what they saw and vindicating their loved one, and their extreme fear of retribution.

Other survivors may blame the witness survivor as well. If a parent witnesses the murder of the other parent, the children may hold the surviving parent accountable for the death. The child who witnessed the murder of a sibling may feel that their parents believe that the wrong child was killed.

Relationship to Assailant

A critical factor in dealing with the aftermath of murder is relationship of the assailant to the victim and to the survivors. Since many homicides occur between intimates, many survivors must deal with this added complexity. An adult man who kills his brother may leave his widowed sister-in-law and her children as survivors. His parents may feel forced to make a choice between giving emotional support to the murderer and the victim. With one choice, they must lose a second child, and with the other, they abandon the company of their grandchildren. The likelihood of their being able to sustain a relationship with both is negligible.

A husband who kills his wife and who is sent to prison for the crime leaves his children parentless, and competing sets of grandparents may then end up in a custody battle. The same children may be forced to visit their father in spite of their hatred of him. If a boyfriend kills his girlfriend, society often interprets the act as an excusable crime of passion. Or there may be other complications, like the boyfriend's past friendship with other family members. These and other unthinkable convolutions have left some survivors trying to forgive the murderer and other feelings, anger, betrayal, and revulsion.

The Type of Murder

The motives of the murderer and the way in which he killed the victim are significant to both the criminal justice system and the survivors. The following sample of different types of homicide may suggest their special impact on survivors.

Vehicular Homicide

One of the most devastating things about surviving the death of a loved on in vehicular homicide is that most people do not consider the death, most often caused by a drunk driver, to be a criminal homicide. Our society tends to excuse drunk driving and while many people are sympathetic to the survivors of the victim, at least as many are concerned with the plight of the assailant. A telling symbol of these attitudes is the fact that the incidents are often referred to as drunk driving "accidents," not the "crashes" that they truly are. Despite the extraordinary efforts of groups such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving, Reduce

Intoxicated Driving, and Students Against Drunk Driving, the public has yet to take drunk driving seriously.

Survivors of vehicular homicide are very likely to see the assailant arrested and prosecuted but ultimately given a minimal sentence. If the assailant is a young person, the public urge to forgive and forget is even more likely to emerge. Survivors are made to feel even more isolated by such common, thoughtless statements as these: “Your daughter is dead now. Think of the young man’s life. Don’t let this destroy two lives.”

Murder Accompanied by Sexual Assault

When a victim is sexually assaulted as well as murdered, many survivors have additional difficulties dealing with the incident. Male survivors often cannot stand to think of their mother, wife, sister, daughter, or girlfriend sexually abused in any way. In some cases, the sexual assault becomes a source of greater anguish for the survivor than the murder itself; some survivors feel sexual violation is worse than death, while others feel increased anxiety over the imagined possibility that the victim somehow precipitated the murder.

Survivors talk about the degradation and terror that the victim must have felt. Female survivors report that often their own sexual relationships are damaged by the fact that their loved one was sexually assaulted and murdered. Wives may find that their husbands have similar dysfunction’s if it was their daughter who was raped and murdered.

Murder Accompanied by Torture

A major issue for survivors to confront is whether the victim suffered as a result of the murder. It is a critical question and may affect seriously the reconstruction process.

When survivors are reassured that the victim was killed instantly and “didn’t even know what happened,” there is often a certain comfort in that knowledge. Survivors who know that the murder took place over time, or involved maiming or humiliation, often face years of imagining the process of suffering. They report tying to think what their loved one was thinking or feeling during the murder.

If the victim had particular fears or ideals that were exploited by the killer, the survivors often grieve for the victim’s additional loss. For instance, if a victim was afraid of the dark and was forced to stay in a dark room prior to the murder, it gives the incident an added dimension of horror. If a victim was very religious and was forced to destroy a crucifix or a bible, it may seem to increase the sadness of the event.

Murder Preceded by Kidnap

Kidnap and murder cases are particularly painful because often the murder is preceded by a period of time in which the victim was missing. In some cases, the fact that the victim was kidnapped is a well-known fact; in others, the victim may have simply vanished. The

length of time in which the victim is missing adds to the trauma because the survivors don't know what has happened. And the survivors imagine the worst possible scenarios.

Murders in Which the Body is Violated After Death

Obtaining possession of the victim's body and according it a proper burial is very important to many survivors. Hence, if the murderer has dismembered the body, set fire to it, or mutilated it in other ways, survivors are appalled, even survivors whose traditions are to cremate their dead.

One of the reasons for their distress is the nagging question of whether the victim was at least unconscious prior to the mutilation. While sometimes the answer is definitely yes, the survivors may not believe it, and in other cases, there is no certain answer to give. Another reason for their distress is the mutilation deprives them of the traditional, dignified good-bye observed by many families.

Attributes of the Assailant

Although it may not seem that the attributes of the assailant would be of particular concern to survivors, often they are. One of the first issues in this area is whether there was more than one assailant. Murders in which two or three individuals beat, raped, or tortured the victim may seem more violent than some murders with only one victimizer.

The age of the assailant can become a fixation if a child or an adolescent is the murderer. Survivors often have a great deal of difficulty comprehending brutal violence in young people, especially if their own experience affirms a belief in the innocence of childhood and youth.

The race of the assailant can be very important. As a statistical matter, the prototypical murder in the United States involves a young, black, male victim – and a young, black, male murderer. Black-on-black crime is for many in the black community a painful and difficult subject, leading to debates mainly on the causes of the violence and methods of reducing it; less often debated are issues about what is owed the victim and the offender.

At least in past years, when the debates were more prevalent, they sometimes worked hardships on black families who were grieving over the murder of a loved one and were troubled that the crime was being treated as something impersonal or symbolic, not a personal tragedy and a community outrage.

If the crime is interracial, the murder may reconfirm old prejudices or generate new ones. All victims are at risk of getting jolting reminders of the crime from "cues" associated with the event, a sight, a smell, or sense of time or place, and some victims find that the triggering cues start expanding from the very particular to the more general. It seems to be

fairly common that survivors grow fearful of an entire race of people when the homicide was interracial.

Attributes of the Victim

The most critical attribute of the victim that may affect survivors' feelings and the reactions of society is the age of the victim. Sad to say, though people feel a bond with grieving parents, the murder of a baby does not often engage their outrage, as if the baby has not lived long enough for parents to become attached to it. Comments such as, "You can always have another baby," or, "At least she wasn't a real personality yet," are sometimes thoughtlessly made.

The difference between the death of an adult and a child is also marked by societal attitudes. Parents of an adult child may be told that they were lucky to have him or her with them so long. Parents of a younger child may be encouraged to "fill the void" through adoption or pregnancy. Young adult spouses may be expected to remarry.

Society may also find ways to minimize the murder of an elderly person. Death of older people is often not taken as seriously as the death of a younger person. There is a tendency to think that they have already lived their lives and that they are close to death anyway. Forgotten is the ignominy of how that full life was ended.

If the victim is gay or lesbian, the survivors face even more onerous responses. Parents of the victim may not have known about his or her lifestyle prior to the murder, and may have as much difficult dealing compassionately with their child's partner. Even if they have been aware of the victim's sexual preference, they may not be prepared by the way the criminal justice system responds to gay or lesbian victims, in some jurisdictions, the criminal justice response to such crimes is less than vigorous.

Partners of gay or lesbian victims may be excluded from the funeral, much less the funeral arrangements, and from many aspects of the investigation and prosecution. Partners are not eligible for victim compensation and even the surviving parents may be deemed ineligible because the sexual preference of the victim is said to be a crime. It seems often to be an occasion for communicating to gay or lesbian partners social disapproval of their relationships.

The race of the victim – like that of the defendant – may also be an issue. In some communities, race alone produces undue sympathies or animosities for or against the victim, or, sometimes most galling of all, it produces indifference, as when both victim and assailant are seemingly considered unworthy of community outrage.

Geographic Distance Between the Survivors; Home and the Place of the Murder
This is a situational factor that affects the emotional aftermath of murder in ways not often appreciated.

If the survivors live in one state and the murder occurs in another, they may find themselves barred from receiving victim compensation (although that will soon change, thanks to the rule that states accepting Victims of Crime Act subsidies for their compensation programs may no longer discriminate against non-residents). The survivors may find it hard to get information about the criminal justice process in the distant state, much less be involved in the system's decision making. They may even face roadblocks in recovering the body or personal effects of the victim.

The distance between states will affect the financial impact of the murder. If the victim had no roots in the place where he or she was killed, because, for example, he or she was merely driving through, there may be even more difficulty getting information, cooperation, or consideration of the survivors' views. In some small town or rural areas, outsiders, including survivors, will confront a community that habitually offers them little more than stoic silences.

Reconstructing a Life
Having reviewed a host of factors that make the aftermath of murder a heartbreaking ordeal, we turn to a description of how hearts are mended and lives are reconstructed. We start with the healing process as it has been recalled by survivors, one where it is a landmark of progress when the good days start to outnumber the bad. That process includes several features.

First, survivors realize a need to give up previous life patterns. Individuals who survive the murder of a loved one become different people than they were before. That itself is a family stressor. Everyone has changed. Survivors develop new patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting.

Second, survivors often adopt a different lifestyle and redefine their own sense of self. For many, this may involve becoming active in supporting a victim rights group, for others it may entail adopting a new hobby, still others move away from their old neighborhood, acquire new skills, or get a different job.

Third, the reconstruction process usually involves an increased remembering of the murder victim, not the murder. Survivors want to think and, often, talk about the life of victims, their personality traits, their habit and aspirations and the future life that was taken from them. It is often very important for survivors to talk about their "bad" thoughts about victims

because they want to remember them as warm, alive, but genuinely human beings, not as saints.

Most survivors feel that they never "recover" from the impact of the murder. But many do report reconstructing their lives and developing something positive out of the tragedy. In fact, more and more survivors commit their lives to creating a meaningful outcome to their tragedy. That commitment may involve lobbying for legislation to give survivors more rights and more access to the criminal justice process. It may involve establishing a program to assist other survivors in their construction process. It may involve monitoring the parole system so that the murderer is not released and cannot harm anyone else. Whatever the cause, survivors may become absorbed in helping activities in memory of their loved ones.

Assisting Survivors in Reconstructing Their Lives

Having reviewed some of the ways in which survivors fight their way back from the abyss, it is important to examine some of the tools that can be used by criminal justice professionals, victim assistance staff, and survivors themselves to speed the healing process.

Proper Death Notification

One of the most devastating scenes that survivors will remember is receiving notification of their loved one's death. The moment is inherently traumatic, but that trauma can make a tolerable part of the overall experience if the community has established good death notification procedures and has trained, designated staff to perform the task well.

Many experts believe that the best procedure to follow is to have the notification given by a uniformed police officer, who is generally perceived by people in distress as a calm authority figure. But more and more communities are also training "crisis intervenors," usually victim assistance staff, to accompany the officer on the call. One virtue of having the second person is that the crisis intervenor can stay behind after the officer has left and until the survivor is in fairly stable condition.

There are certain steps everyone trained in giving the notification should follow:

- Obtain as much information about the death as possible: what happened, when, where, how, and what is the source of positive identification. The last piece of information is critical. No one wants to ever make a mistake in the identification of the deceased.

- Try to find out something about the survivors. Medical information is important. If the survivor has a history of heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, and the like, the messenger should be aware of the possibility of a life-threatening reaction.
- Never, if possible – and it's almost always possible – make a death notification by telephone. Friends and family members should be advised to follow the same advice. Whenever the notifier is forced to telephone someone to tell them about a death, every effort should be made to call a friend or neighbor first, and ask that they visit the survivors and help you to inform them about the death.
- Do not take any personal items of the victim with you to the place of notification (typically the home or the hospital emergency room). Some people think that such items will help the survivors, but chances are they will add emotional fuel to the tragedy at this time. Later, however, someone should offer to retrieve and return all property of the deceased.
- Ask to speak to parents or an adult alone, if a child is present. Make sure that the adult is the closest available relative of the deceased. If possible, try to discern whether this is the appropriate relative to talk to. If a husband and wife are involved, make sure both are in the room if they are both available.
- If you visit a home, ask the enter the home, Indicate there is a medical emergency and that you have important information but you would rather talk to them inside.
- Seat the survivors and yourself.
- Make sure that there are no dangerous objects nearby. This includes scissors, heavy objects, knives, and so on.
- Tell the survivors simply and directly, "I have some very bad news for you. Your son was shot in an armed robbery and he died immediately." Don't build up to the idea of death. Don't let anxiety grow. Don't use words like "passed away," "expired." Such words may confuse the message. Leave no room for doubt or false hope.
- Be watchful for a variety of responses by the survivor. Shock and disbelief are the classic initial reactions, but one can expect to see others in addition to or instead of that reaction. The others include: hysteria, anger, fainting, physical violence, etc. Assess the physical reactions and be ready to call for medical assistance if necessary.
- Answer questions tactfully but directly. Be prepared for a wide range of questions concerning the details of the murder and the state of the body at this time.

- Focus on the immediate needs of the survivors.
- Help survivors get in touch with other close relatives, friends, or a member of the clergy, if they would like. Make sure, however, that the idea of calling in helpers is brought up in an open-ended way, as in, “Is there someone I can call to see if they could come over now?” – so that the survivor is not burdened with a very close relative who cannot handle the situation.
- Stay until someone arrives to be with the survivor for the rest of the day (and, preferably, night)
- Do not be judgmental about the survivors’ reactions; great calm, laughter, and other “inappropriate” reactions are both appropriate and not uncommon
- Be empathetic and let the survivors know you care about them and about the fact that their loved one was murdered.

In the days that follow the notification, survivors should be supported in a number of ways.

First, if the murder has provoked much media coverage, survivors should be informed what their rights are when media representatives attempt to photograph them or interview them, including the right to say go away, or to write and deliver a press release, or to designate a friend or a victim assistance worker as the press liaison. Survivors should be told what to expect of media coverage so that they will be less shocked to see the event shown time after time on television, or be horrified to see the body bag into which their loved one was placed appear on the evening news.

Second, survivors should be given assistance with funeral arrangements if they want such help. This may include providing an escort to the morgue, providing them with information concerning their options for funeral homes, funeral services, burial services, and the like. If the victim was murdered in his or her home, the survivors may also need assistance with clean-up service.

Third, survivors should be given as much information as there is available and as they request concerning the criminal justice investigation, prosecution, and trial procedures. When decisions are made, they should be informed immediately and provided with an explanation. Remember that not all survivors want a great deal of information, but that many do. Let the survivors tell you what they want to know.

Fourth, survivors need assistance with dealing with the financial consequences of the death. This may mean going through probate with an estate, filing an insurance claim, pursuing victim compensation, dealing with veterans or Social Security death benefits, and the like. This can be a particularly onerous task for survivors not only because forms and

paperwork may seem impossible to deal with but also because some may feel that they are benefiting from the murder and find it a repulsive thought.

Fifth, survivors may need help in disposing of the personal belongings of the victim. Anxiety, fatigue, and depression may leave them unable to face such tasks. Hence, they should be urged to consult with other loved ones before making major decisions.

Sixth, families and friends of survivors should also try to understand what they are experiencing and what kinds of things may be able to assist them in their reconstruction. The following list of small gestures and thoughts can mean a great deal to survivors as they struggle with their grief and anger.

- Allow survivors to grieve in whatever way they wish and for as long as they wish.
- Allow survivors to cry freely. It is a healthy expression of grief and releases tension.
- Allow survivors to talk about the victim, his or her life, and the murder. Allow them to criticize the victim and to talk about the good times and the bad times. Allow them to keep the victim in the family.
- Allow survivors to get angry at you, the victim, the criminal, the criminal justice system, or simply at the unfairness of life. Anger needs expression and sharing.
- Remember the survivors and the victim at holiday time, the anniversary date of the murder, and birthdays. Let the survivors know you remember, too.
- Allow the survivors some time out occasionally from day-to-day pressures. Offer help with the children, a day off work, a day out of the house, help with groceries, or whatever you can do to give them a break.
- Reassure the survivors that the murder was not their fault or the victim's fault.
- Tell survivors that you are sorry the murder happened and that it is horrible that someone killed their loved one.
- Support survivors in their effort to reconstruct a life, even (or especially) if it means a major change in the lifestyle, or work, or place of residence.
- Let survivors know that you will remain their friend and that they mean a great deal to you.

Finally, survivors should be encouraged to seek additional emotional support, whether from mental health professionals or through self-help groups. They should be reassured that their feelings are normal and that these feelings are overwhelming for most individuals.

Helpers should bear in mind that there are other survivors of homicide victims who have lived through similar pain. Often such veterans are the most comforting source of support the survivors can receive; they have felt similar grief, intense anger, overwhelming loss, and have faced the unanswered question raised by what appears to be senseless violence.

Murder is unquestionably the worst thing that one person can do to another. For its survivors, murder is a terrible tragedy. It shatters much of what was joyous and valuable in their lives. There is no cure for the aftermath of murder, but survivors can find help, can find understanding, and can construct a new life with a renewed sense of purpose. They can survive.

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