

SECTION I Learning to Cope After Tragedy

Chapter 1 Coping with the Emotional Reactions

Coping with the death of a loved one is always difficult. When that loved one is murdered, the death, the police investigation, the media attention, and the chaos surrounding the murder creates a situation so difficult and complex to cope with, that the trauma is only matched by living in a war zone.

Not only has the victim's life been willfully taken, but the survivors and witnesses also have been violated. They, too, become victims. These survivors experience overwhelming shock and grief. They do not know how to feel or behave.

Immediately following a murder, family members may appear to be coping well. However, even though parents may continue to go to work and the children go to school, all is not well.

Family members feel estranged from each other and outsiders. It is not uncommon for parents to refuse to talk about a murdered child or refuse to enter the bedroom of the deceased. They may feel isolated as friends and



colleagues, not sure how to react and frightened by the murder, distance themselves. Additionally, family members may feel stigmatized by the murder and the complicated series of legal events and procedures that can cause further isolation and prolonged recovery.

Understanding the grief families experience and the obstacles they face in resolving their suffering is important to families, friends, and those that work with these family members. Family members of murder victims must try to prepare themselves, at least as much as possible, for the turmoil that will surround them for days, months, or years following a murder.

They must also realize that friends, professionals, clergy, and other families of murder victims can be important tools for assisting them in their long, slow, and painful journey to recovery.

The Process of Grief

Grief is a common human experience. People experience grief when they leave particular places, when they divorce, when someone they know dies. But grief for families of murder victims has unique qualities. It is more profound, more lingering, more complex.

Murder changes normal reactions and responses and, without a doubt, influences the length of time necessary to resolve grief. It intensifies feelings and makes the journey to recovery for family members long and slow and difficult.

Just as families, people, and cultures differ, grief takes on a great many forms. Men and women experience grief in different ways. Even a person's religious beliefs can affect the way grief is experienced.

There are certain phases in grief, but it is important to understand that most individuals will not go through these phases in a rigid and fixed manner or in a sequence. Some may experience many feelings at once, while others may cope with grief one step at a time. The way these phases are experienced by survivors of murder victims may also differ somewhat from the way they are experienced by others.

The ten steps in the grieving process, according to psychologist Anna Westberg, follow: (1.) Shock; (2.) Emotion; (3.) Depression and loneliness; (4.) Physical symptoms of distress; (5.) Panic; (6.) Guilt; (7.) Hostility and resentment; (8.) Inability to return to usual activities; (9.) Hope; and (10.) Affirming reality. These steps or phases may occur repeatedly over the first several years following a murder, and often occur in no logical sequence. In fact, any and/or each phase may occur again and again over time.

Shock

Shock is almost always the first stage of grief experienced by a survivor. Shock protects the survivor from experiencing the total extent of the reality of murder all at once. In fact, murder is so alien to human

experience, and so devastating, that it is not unusual for family members to think, “This is a bad dream. This is not happening.” During this time, family members commonly say, “I don’t believe it. I just can’t believe it.”

There is a part of the mind that does not want to accept the murder as “real” and “thinks” the loved one is alive and may appear at any time. These feelings often make the family members think they are “crazy.” In fact, it is a part of the shock and disbelief of grief.

Shock is considered healthy following natural death as long as it does not extend for more than a few days. In the case of murder, however, this stage generally lasts to some extent for three months to one year. Even at one year, the experience may seem “unreal.” Keep in mind that like any phase in the process of grief, shock may return from time to time in the months to follow.

Emotion

Crying is not a strong enough word. In addition to “crying,” I needed such words as “wailing, moaning, groaning, and screaming.” I experienced these emotions or feelings (whatever they are) quite frequently, even though this was totally out of character for me. I am not an overly emotional person, but I found many times when I was alone in my car that the tears would turn into loud wailing and groaning. That seemed to be the only way I could release the horrific pain I was feeling. And again, let me emphasize that was so out of character for me. I would often almost feel out of body listening to myself and would think I had lost my mind—I sounded like a terribly injured animal. Had people heard me, they would have thought I was crazy!

Jo Ann, mother of murdered child

As the shock and disbelief begin to diminish, family members generally will experience intense emotion and emotional release, such as crying and screaming. While our society tends to discourage emotional behavior, especially in men, this emotional release is an essential part of grieving for many people. To try and hold back or “swallow” emotion is unhealthy and can actually prolong the grief experience. A person uncomfortable with these feelings should see a professional or seek help from a support group.

Depression and Loneliness

Depression and loneliness may be felt at any time, and family members often experience these emotions during grief. Frequently a person thinks these feelings will last forever. Indeed, with families of murder victims, these feelings may last a considerable length of time. Trials often are delayed for years, triggering a return of all emotions when the case finally comes to the courtroom. In fact, the feelings may even be intensified as they are relived.

Thoughts of suicide are common during the grieving process. In fact, some grief-stricken survivors commit suicide to escape their pain. If the pain and grief bring on suicidal thoughts and if these thoughts become persistent, help must be sought. Watch for the following danger signals:

1. Persistent thoughts of self-destruction.
2. Extended isolation. The inability to reach out to others and talk with others about the important issues and feelings being experienced.
3. Rapid weight loss or weight gain.
4. Sleep disturbances. Either being unable to sleep or sleeping excessively.
5. Excessive use of alcohol or drugs (including prescription drugs).
6. Making a suicide plan.

The hardest time for me was around the third month after Kris's death. I came out of shock and realized it was not a dream, she would not be back, and I had to deal with life without her. It was very upsetting for me when a mother in another city committed suicide last year in the third month after her daughter's murder. I knew the pain she felt.

Karon, mother of murdered daughter

Some key predictors to look for in suicidal behavior are depression, withdrawal, anger, panic, and putting affairs in order. If you suspect a family member is thinking of suicide, openly ask him/her. A list of questions follows:

1. Are you thinking about suicide?
2. Do you have a plan?
3. What is the plan?

4. Do you have a time frame for when you plan to commit suicide?

If he/she answers the questions in the affirmative and he/she does have a plan, seek professional help immediately. Suicide is most common during the grief stages depression, anger, and panic. It is not helpful for people to keep feelings inside and to go through each day acting like everything is okay, when it is not. Reaching out is very important to recovery. No one should be afraid to seek professional counseling or professional help.

The family of a murder victim faces a difficult time with depression and loneliness while dealing with holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries. For many, this makes the holiday season one of pain and difficulty. Feelings of depression and loneliness during the holiday season are complicated by the thought that “no one understands.” During Christmas, Hanukkah, and the New Year celebration, it may be difficult watching other families celebrating, laughing, and experiencing the festive spirit of the season.

It is important that family members do what they need to do to survive the holidays and the anniversaries. They could take a trip or stay home and continue or even change the holiday traditions. It is a matter of finding what is best for them at the time.

The family will have difficult times with the “small stuff” too. One cup of coffee in the morning. The missing plate at the dinner table. Picking up laundry for the victim. There are many small reminders that will have to be dealt with. These small events can trigger major emotions and intrusive memories of the loved one and the murder. These emotions must be dealt with as they occur; an individual must allow his/her grief. Unfortunately, these emotions and memories may manifest in public, which may make dealing with them more challenging.

Physical Symptoms of Distress

Physical symptoms of distress can be experienced at any time during the grief process. Headaches, nausea, insomnia (or sleeping all the time), and an increase or decrease in weight during the grief experience are common. Some individuals state that they experience their loss as a feeling of physical pain, generally in the area of the chest or heart (especially if the loss was a child or spouse). It’s almost a physical feeling that the heart indeed is “broken.”

Panic

Panic, a sudden overpowering feeling of terror, is another stage of grief that can occur at any time and can be very difficult to cope with. This feeling is not at all uncommon in families of murder victims. Often, the feeling is caused by the disorientation and disorganization prompted by the grief and the act of murder.

Most families in our culture do not experience murder of a close family member; therefore, the feelings associated with this cruel act seem abnormal both to victims and to others. During these panic attacks, individuals may feel and believe they really are going “crazy.” When you put a normal person into a bizarre environment, such as murder, that person may well feel “crazy.” It can help a great deal to talk with other families who have had similar feelings and truly understand what this crazy feeling is all about.

Guilt

Family members commonly experience guilt during the grieving process. This emotion leads to the thinking, “If only I had (or had not). . .” Families of murder victims often feel guilt and regret for things they did or did not do or say. These feelings are greatly magnified compared to those experienced with normal deaths. Often, family members feel they should have protected their loved ones or should have done something to prevent their deaths. They spend a lot of time thinking “what if.” This guilt is almost always unjustified because the circumstances leading to murder usually cannot be controlled and are very difficult to predict.

These guilt feelings are intensified by people who say, “If that had been my daughter, I would have . . .” Such statements are attempts by others to assure themselves that murder could never happen to their family. Sadly, victims know murder can happen to anyone.

Hostility and Resentment

Hostility and resentment, like most other grief phases, can occur at any time. During this phase, survivors may search for someone to blame. If a murder suspect is arrested, this hostility may flow in that direction. However, it is not unusual for families to direct their anger toward the police, the district attorney, other family members, or even themselves.

It may be difficult for survivors to overcome their anger due to its intensity. These feelings will resurface upon capture of the criminal, or during the murder trial, and may seem to last forever. If there is no trial,

the absence of a criminal creates an emotional vacuum, leaving the survivors with no way to identify or confront the source of their anger.

Many families try to release their rage and anger through fantasy. The most common fantasy is revenge, which is normal and can be helpful in providing an outlet for discharging frustration and anger. Most family members think about murdering the murderer. It rarely happens. These family members are not murderers. The desire for revenge, as well as the anger, should decrease in intensity as the individual progresses through the grieving process. Victims and those who help them should understand that anger may be a cover-up for other more painful feelings such as guilt, sadness, and depression.

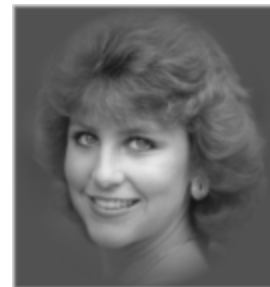
Inability to Resume Normal Activities

Grieving family members may find themselves unable to function in society and unable to resume normal activities. Difficulty in thinking and planning in a purposeful manner are common, and life may seem hollow and empty, without happiness. Activities that were once enjoyed now seem meaningless. There may be an inability to laugh for a long time. When laughter does return, it also may bring on feelings of guilt.

This lack of ability to function “normally” may not start until several months after the murder. Frequently, business associates and friends do not comprehend the implications of murder. They simply think it is time for the family to put the murder behind and go on with a normal life. They do not understand that recovery from the murder of a family member is much more complicated than from any other type of death, and that the recovery time is extended. Individuals should travel at their own pace and speak with others who have survived the murder of a family member.

Hope

Finally, hope appears. Suddenly there is a realization that overcoming or transcending the tragedy is possible, even though the family will have to redefine the meaning of “normal.” It may take several years for the family as a whole to reach this stage of hope. At this point, family members will redefine the family and themselves, reestablish themselves in the community, and become reinvolved in activities.



Affirming Reality

Affirming reality is the final stage of grief. Family members have been changed by the experience of murder. They realize that while things will never be the same, they can approach life with new understanding. Normal has been redefined, and the individual members affirm that reality.

Things are better now, but for a long while I didn't want
to be around my kids like I used to, or talk to my
husband, cook, clean house, or anything.

Kay, mother of murdered son

The journey to recovery for families of murder victims is long, painful, and full of obstacles. People trying to help families cope and adjust should be prepared for the intense emotions—anger, depression, and sorrow—and the possibility that victims will close themselves off. Some feelings are just too painful to be shared.

Chapter 2 Coping with the Funeral

When a loved one dies, the bereaved often feels overwhelmed and is not sure where to begin making arrangements. Fortunately, there are people who can help during this difficult time. The funeral director will assist the family in planning the funeral, choosing a burial site, flowers, a casket, and pallbearers. Generally, the director can be trusted to let the bereaved know what decisions must be made at this time. The funeral director is a professional and may seem overly efficient and detached for the occasion. However, it is important at this time for someone to accept the responsibility for being efficient.

The Value of Friends

Friends can be invaluable in the days surrounding the funeral. Often, they are overzealous or may say the wrong things. However, their motivations are usually loving and they can assist the bereaved in many ways, such as contacting other friends and family, running errands, and preparing food. Although friends can relieve a great deal of the burden, the bereaved should be specific as to what duties they need help with. Involvement at this time will give the friends a sense of sharing their love with the family of the one who has died. This can be very beneficial.



Planning the funeral

Funerals fulfill critical psychological and social needs after a death. Every culture has certain rituals and customs that dictate the pattern for funerals. These customs can be a source of confusion and pressure for the bereaved. According to psychologist T. A. Rando, “Whatever rituals

are adopted, the important issue is that they be personally meaningful to the bereaved.” The funeral itself can be either harmful or beneficial to survivors depending on how meaningful the ritual was to them. Mourners who do not feel they truly participated in the funeral, often experience unhealthy grief.

Religious funerals can provide mourners with an opportunity to fit the death into their own religious framework, as well as provide an event during which individuals can grieve.



Viewing the Body

One of the most difficult decisions a mourner must make is whether or not to view the body. There are many viewpoints about this issue, but it is up to the survivors to decide which choice would be best for them.

Some people feel preparing the body for viewing is artificial and viewing the deceased is similar to worshipping the body (Manning, 1985). Many people do not want to remember the deceased in the casket or may be uncomfortable with the appearance of the body. It should be noted that the goal of body preparation is not to make the deceased look alive, but to provide an acceptable recollection of the loved one for the survivors and help survivors accept the reality of the death.

Viewing the body can be the first step toward handling grief and facing the reality of the death. One study finds that mourners who did not view the body or arranged for immediately disposal of the remains (excluding the Jewish ritual of not viewing the body) reported “the greatest hostility following death; the greatest increase in the consumption of alcohol, tranquilizers and sedatives; the greatest increase in tension and anxiety; the lowest positive recall of the deceased; and greater problems with adjustment to the death, especially in males” (Rando 1984).

Due to the brutal nature of my daughter’s murder, I chose not to view her in death. I chose to remember and retain images of her in life, vitality, and beauty. To this day, I have no regrets about my decision. At the time of

her death and in the days that followed, I was hanging on by the slenderest thread. To have seen her brutalized, little body would have surely snapped that thread. I haven't turned to medicating myself with alcohol, drugs, or unbecoming behaviors, but had I viewed her after death I am sure I would have. I saw and still see my decision as a way of protecting my sanity and myself.

Syd, mother of murdered daughter

Murder is problematic in cases where the victim was mutilated or the body was not discovered for a long time. Under these circumstances, the bereaved may not want to view the body. The family should be given the facts about the murder so they can make an informed decision about whether or not they want to view the body. Being in the room alone with the casket may be helpful. Viewing a recognizable part of the body such as a hand, scar, or birthmark can be a substitute for viewing the entire body. Even viewing or holding a ring or watch or some jewelry from the loved one may be helpful. If the family does view the body, those images will live forever in their minds, but may help them with the difficult process of accepting the death.

Coroner's Office

The county medical examiner's office and the local police department generally share the responsibility for the notification of survivors when a body has been found and identified. This process can take from several hours to several days, depending on the time needed to identify the deceased, locate the family, and determine cause of death.

In large cities where heavy caseloads may delay the medical examiner's office, police are often used to expedite notification procedures.

The task of notifying a family member of the death of a loved one is unpleasant and requires tact and empathy. Usually, the medical examiner's office will attempt to make notification only after acquiring as much information as possible about the survivor's medical condition and, if possible, making sure the survivor is not alone. Telephone notifications are made when the deceased lives out of the county and the area police department is unable or unwilling to make a home visit.

Autopsies must be performed on all murder victims to determine the cause of death. When the coroner is finished with the body of the

deceased, the body is released to a funeral home of the family's choosing.

One question often asked at the medical examiner's office is, "When will the death certificate be completed?" Providing there are no complications identifying the body or with the police investigation, the death certificate usually is completed within one week.

However, delays can result from pending lab reports and weapons testing. Lab reports can usually be purchased from the coroner for a small fee, but the language in the reports is very technical and may not be understood by lay people. Other questions to the coroner from family members are usually directed to the police detective in charge of the case.



Funeral of Michael McEachern

Courtesy of the Fort Worth Star Telegram

Chapter 2 Coping with Social Reactions

Historically, family members and friends, religious rituals, social traditions and customs have helped individual grieving. Today, grieving individuals must frequently face their pain and struggle alone. Neighbors, colleagues, and acquaintances often do not know what to say, especially when the loss involves murder, and they may choose to avoid the grieving family. Extended families often live far away and are not available for support.

Many people in our society shy away from discussing death. Society is geared to convenience and speed. TV news stories about murder have a beginning, a middle, and an end—and they last for three minutes. People do not know how to deal with a family whose grieving may take years. It is very easy to understand why many individuals do not effectively deal with the tasks of grieving. As a result, they may experience prolonged and destructive reactions to the murder of a loved one.

Friends

Almost immediately I began to experience avoidance from people, some of whom had been long-term friends. While this attitude was extremely hurtful for me, I began to realize why. I had now become their "worst nightmare" after the murder of my daughter. It was as if

they distanced themselves from me emotionally, they would somehow be insulated against the possibility of this ever happening to them.

Syd, mother of murdered daughter

Friends can be a source of comfort or confusion to an individual after a loved one has been murdered. This is a very difficult time for friendships, and they will either diminish or strengthen depending on the circumstances. Due to the horrible, senseless nature of the loss, friends often do not know what to say and end up avoiding the grieving individual. This can cause an irreversible strain on the relationship. In order to provide some understanding of what to say and what not to say at this tragic time, here are some experiences that victims have had with friends.

If they just held you and said, “I’m sorry,” it would have sufficed ... but to say, “I understand” when clearly they didn’t ... it upset me! Some overwhelmed me with love and concern ... while others still to this day have not mentioned it—even those with whom I work daily.

Ellen, wife of murdered husband

Friends helped by saying, “I can’t imagine how you feel.” They didn’t help by saying, “I know just how you feel.” My friends had to be tremendously supportive through long periods of depression. The ones who remained are as close as family. Friends seem to have the hardest time understanding my feeling of loss of control.

Carla, sister of murdered sister

Friends helped me most by just being there for me and listening to what I had to say. Some of the people we thought were our friends turned out not to be friends. It seems like they avoided us because we depressed them. The real friends have suffered, too, because they loved Kevin almost as much as we did.

Kay, wife of murdered husband

Being there and listening was helpful. People telling me there was a reason my husband was murdered, that God had a plan—that was painful. Such statements infuriate

me! Also, people saying, “something good will come out of this” or “you’ll be a stronger person because of this,” really upsets me. I feel these are stupid statements about a senseless waste of precious life.

Steffenie, wife of murdered husband

Most of my friends were understanding. But after a month or two, some think you should be over this kind of experience.

Barbara, mother of murdered daughter

Do not say:

- I know just how you feel.
- I understand (unless you too have had a family member murdered).
- You must be strong now.
- You will get over this.
- It’s Gods will.
- He/she lived a good life, and it was his/her time to die.
- Calm down and try to relax.
- Let’s not talk about that.
- Your anguish won’t bring him/her back, so forget it.
- You need to move on. Get over it.
- You are lucky that....
- Are you feeling better yet?
- Closure
- Everything will be all right.

Do Say:

- I care about you.
- I am sorry this has happened to you.
- I can’t imagine how difficult this must be for you.
- You don’t have to be strong.
- You did nothing wrong.
- It was not your fault.
- I feel for your pain.
- You have every right to feel this way.
- Is there someone I may call for you?
- I’m glad you’re here with me now.
- I am glad you are talking with me now.
- It’s okay to cry in front of me.

When there is a sudden death, especially in the case of murder, people will experience intense emotions. Individuals may experience psychological or physical symptoms of grief, including the inability to sleep, an increase or decrease in weight, depression, helplessness, disorientation, and the feeling that they are going crazy. Their view of the world and priorities will certainly change.

This is a time when the individual, especially the family members of murder victims, will most need love and support. Usually, support is given during the funeral, when family and friends gather. Unfortunately, during the following weeks, when support is needed most, the families of murder victims often find themselves alone.

Death of a Spouse

The death of a family member has a profound effect on the existing family unit. A wife who loses her husband may find herself trying to support herself with a greatly reduced income. Facing loneliness, isolation, incompleteness, and disorganization, in addition to her grief, she may be forced to redefine her self-concept. A husband who loses his wife may have a great deal of difficulty managing the household and children while dealing with his grief. As a general rule, men find more discomfort in expressing their grief emotions than women. However, the expression of emotion is very important for the ongoing health of the individual.

Since my husband was murdered, our happy marriage of 16 years ended tragically with no time to say goodbye or tell him how much I love him. Sometimes I feel so much anger I have to be careful not to take it out on my family. I couldn't have made it without the support of my parents and daughter.

Steffenie, wife of murdered husband

When a Child Is Murdered

The death of a child, especially the murder of a child, is particularly difficult for all involved. Society's orientation to children is one of supporting them and helping them grow and develop. Parents have been entrusted with this task and often feel extremely angry and guilt-ridden when their child dies. They may perceive the death as a personal failure. Unfortunately, outsiders may seem more concerned with trying to protect themselves than with listening to and supporting grieving parents.

Individuals who do not understand the trauma often make statements such as "that could never happen to me." The grieving parents feel that their friends have abandoned them when they need them most, adding further pain. Meeting with other parents who have had the same cruel experience can eliminate the isolation.



When a Parent Is Murdered

Children of murdered parents have a devastating and overwhelming experience. Although it is not uncommon for a parent to die, very few children expect their parents to be murdered. After the death, the children may feel that the special source of love and caring is gone and can never be replaced. Insecurities may arise and an overwhelming sense of emptiness and loneliness occur, often forcing the children into premature maturity (Lord 1987). If one parent is murdered, the child may develop an excessive clinging and fear of loss involving the other parent.

Younger children may be overcome with guilt, believing they somehow caused the death by thinking bad thoughts about their parents. The child may be fearful that he/she will be killed as punishment for being bad. Misunderstandings regarding these issues can cause complications in the grief process and should be addressed by family, friends, or professionals.

It should be recognized that as time goes on, the understanding of what has happened will take on new meaning for the child. Certain life events can cause unpleasant feelings to resurface for children and the grieving to begin again. Mourning for a murdered parent may occur repeatedly over the years as children develop and face experiences they long to share with their deceased parents such as graduation, marriage, or the birth of a child.

Coping with the Family Unit



The murder of a family member places tremendous stress on a family system. Husbands and wives can grow apart and children may feel alienated. It is important for family members to understand and care for each other as each individual struggles to understand the murder in his/her own way.

The Differences Between Men and Women

Men and women deal with grief in different ways. Some men may not want to talk about the murder, while their wives want to “talk all the time.” Either a man or a woman may become overly involved with work, while the other spouse feels abandoned. The means with which they cope serves to push them apart.

As a general rule, and there are exceptions, men tend to be angry, while women tend to be hurt and depressed. These differences in coping put a tremendous strain on a couple and/or family while they are dealing with the murder of a loved one. Husbands and wives may grow distant, or they may find themselves involved in destructive arguments.

Marriage, Family, and/or Individual Counseling and the help of a support group may keep communication open and healthy in the marriage and family. In fact, it may save a couple from divorce. If a couple/family seeks counseling, it is recommended to seek a counselor that has experience with trauma and family members of murder victims.

Caring for Siblings

Frequently, the brothers and sisters of the murdered person are forgotten. Surviving siblings look to their parents as an example for handling their grief. Yet, parents may be so caught up in their own grief that the children may feel left out, unloved, and unimportant. Parents may be afraid to show their love for their remaining children or may be overprotective, fearing that something may happen to them as well. Family routines may be painful and, therefore, abandoned, leaving the children to feel isolated and alone.

No one knows exactly how to respond to a murder or how best to comfort surviving family members. The need for group support meeting or family counseling should not be overlooked. In addition, children as well as adults need on-going attention and support from friends and family (LaTour 1983).

Injury to Basic Trust

Basic trust is the feeling that the world is a safe place. For instance, most people feel safe walking to their car after shopping. They trust they will not be victimized. When someone becomes a direct victim of a crime, severe injury to that basic trust occurs. They do not feel safe anymore.

Similarly, when a loved one is murdered, a survivor may experience fear for themselves or for other family members. Children of a murdered parent may deeply fear the loss of the other parent and cling to the living parent. If a child is murdered, a parent may become over-protective of other surviving children. This over protection may border on the irrational. These feelings should be discussed and dealt with in a loving and considerate manner. Openness of communication and time help restore most basic trust.

Talking With Children About Death

It is often difficult to know how much to tell a child about death, or whether or not they should attend the funeral. These are difficult decisions and should be given a great deal of thought. Many of the answers depend on the child's age, level of sensitivity, and relationship to the deceased. It is important to be straightforward, honest, and give facts. Below are a few suggestions on talking to children about death and understanding their grief:

Birth to 2 years

Infants and young toddlers cannot understand death. If a parent has died, they will sense the absence of that parent and the change in the emotional atmosphere at home. It is important to maintain a child's daily routine during this time. Children at this age are still learning to bond, so it is important to hold, play with, and nurture them.

Age 3-5

Children at this age will sense something bad has happened. They are beginning to understand the basic meaning of death. They may ask questions and parents should answer them as simply and calmly as possible. If a child has previously experienced the loss of a pet, it may be possible to relate the two events. While no human being can be compared to a pet, relating the two may help the child understand the finality of this tragic event. Caregivers might say, "It's like when your puppy died, there is a time when things die."

Avoid statements such as, "you are too young to understand," since they can cause a child to feel insecure (Manning 1985). Caregivers should also avoid explaining the death by relating it to an "endless sleep." This can cause children to fear going to sleep. Caregivers must deal with a child's "what ifs" immediately. Young children may say, "if only I was good," or ask, "will mommy come back if I clean my room?" Explain to children that they are not at fault and there is nothing they can do to change the reality of the event.

Children at this age also may regress in their development, feel guilty, or have somatic complaints. Keep in mind, children at this age have difficulty expressing their feelings with words. It is helpful to have toys, paper, crayons, clay, markers, and dolls to allow children to play out or draw their feelings.

Age 6-12

Children at this age will react similarly to younger children, but will ask more questions. Again, be honest and answer their questions in ways they can understand. However, the murder of a family member also provides adults with an opportunity to distinguish for the child the difference between natural death and violent death. Depending on the child's maturity, adults can explain to the child how, by society's rules, the murder is wrong, illegal, and punishable, and how from a religious point of view, it is bad or perhaps even contrary to God's wishes. These children should not be isolated from the family and left out of events surrounding the funeral. If isolated they may draw their own conclusions about the event. These conclusions may color their thinking and cause difficulties in years ahead. Children at this age may also act out the event and/or their feelings during play. This is normal due to their inability to express themselves verbally.

At this age, children may have feelings of guilt, which can result in assuming responsibilities for the death. Again, respond to these feelings immediately, assuring the child that his/her feelings, thoughts, and acts had nothing to do with the death. For example, a child may have secretly

wished his/her parent, friend, or sibling dead, and may now fear that wish caused the death. It is important to assure the child that they are not responsible.

Children at this age may experience anger, fear, nightmares, acting-out behaviors, and a decline in academic performance following a traumatic loss. These children may benefit from attending a children's grief support group. Also, children's books about death are available at bookstores and may be beneficial to grieving children.

Age 12-18

By adolescence children have a more mature concept of death and its finality. Adolescents grieve much like adults. However, they may be reluctant to express their grief for fear of appearing abnormal or losing control (Sigelman and Shaffer 1995). Adolescents should be encouraged to talk about their thoughts and feelings in a safe, nurturing environment. Adolescents will relate death in their own terms, which may appear selfish to others, but it is their way of expressing the loss they feel. For example, they may talk of the vacation they will not get to take or the movie they won't get to see. These children should not be left out of the overall funeral process. To leave them out is not protective, and can create feelings of rejection and insecurity.



During this age, children are beginning to establish their identity and independence from their caregivers. A death may alter that development. In cases of the death of a parent, a child may attempt to take on an adult role to carry out the responsibilities of the dead parent. Children should be discouraged from doing this. They need to maintain an adolescent role and avoid jumping into an adult role too soon.

Furthermore, adolescents may act-out in response to the loss. Behaviors to look for include, but are not limited to, aggression, running away, substance abuse, sexual promiscuity, self-mutilation, suicidal thoughts, socially inappropriate behavior, negative peer association, decline in school performance, rebellion against authority, and school drop-out or truancy. Severe acting-out or showing no emotion may be an indication of depression or a cry for help. An adolescent support group or an individual counselor may be helpful for this age group.

Children of all ages should be encouraged to share their feelings and should have their questions answered truthfully up to the level of their understanding. With older children, parents may want to share their own feelings and beliefs.

Most importantly, children of all ages should be loved, touched, and supported. Children will pick up on the feelings of those around them. At all times, the special needs of a child should be considered and family members should be aware that the children are also grieving.

Help children avoid:

1. Insecurity during the funeral process. Days of preparation and a house full of people can create chaos and isolation.
2. Being excluded from the funeral process because adults are more comfortable with them absent.
3. Guilt—children also experience “If I had only . . .” thoughts.
4. Rejection—children are often lost in the crowd. Or parents are too overcome with grief to notice their confusion (Manning 1985).

Symptoms of childhood grief:

- Spending more time alone
- Rebellion
- Inappropriate anger
- Hyperactivity
- Running away from home
- Acting-out and getting into trouble (including sexual acting out)

- School failure, if previously successful
- Drug, substance, and/or alcohol abuse

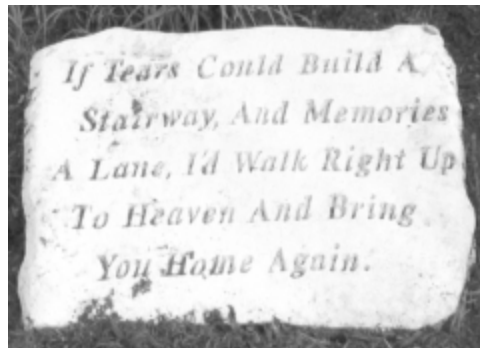
If behaviors like these persist, families may want to seek the help of a professional counselor for the child.

Chapter 4 Religion

At first I blamed God for this and couldn't understand—and still don't—why this happened to such a wonderful person and not to someone else.

Kay, mother of a murder victim

When the murder of a loved one leaves the survivors asking “why,” some turn to religion for the answer. An individual's religious background can provide answers or give some perspective to the situation.



However, the answers provided though religion can often increase the pain, anger, and confusion. While for some victims the tragedy solidifies and increases their faith, for others, a loss of faith occurs.

Common questions include: Why did this happen to me? What is God's purpose? Is this God's will? Will God punish the killer? Is God punishing me?

My church did me a great deal of harm when it insisted on telling me that this was God's will and I had to accept it. No questions asked. The attitude of the people in my church helped drive me away from God at a time when I needed God's strength most. On the other hand, several years later, a wonderful psychologist who also happened to be a part-time pastor at my new church, explored my feelings with me and helped me to rediscover the healing power of God's love. Religion was my downfall, but also my salvation. This experience revamped my faith. I have the faith of a child, one who sees no guarantees other than that God will not abandon you. I have a lot of arguments with people who insist that everything

happens for a reason or God is going to show you that this was a good thing. I am a cynical church member.

Carla, sister of a murder victim

Many people attempt to answer these questions with responses such as: The deceased is with God now; this is God's will; it will all work out according to God's plan; God will take care of it. While these comments might provide support to some, they most often deny suffering and grief and only increase pain.

My religion has had a very positive impact as my faith failed me only for a short while. It continues to sustain me... and comfort me, especially in the middle of the night when other sources are unavailable.

Ellen, wife of a murder victim

Following the murder of a loved one, the need to find an explanation for the death can prompt such beliefs as: "There is a reason beyond our understanding" or "there is no reason for this at all" or "it is a result of human freedom."

While there is no "satisfactory" explanation that will justify the murder of a loved one, there are several possible approaches a person might take to explain, from a religious standpoint, the existence of evil and suffering in the world.

Theologian T. C. Oden offers ideas on the existence of evil in the world:

1. Out of God's love, God allows for human freedom and human choice.
2. Because humans have freedom of choice, they can choose to do good or to do evil. Often this freedom is abused and misused.
3. God does not directly "will" evil and suffering. God intends for the good of all creation, though creation often ignores God's intentions.
4. God suffers with us and is first to cry with us.
5. Anger and doubt toward God are acceptable feelings for a person to work through.
6. Perhaps God works in ways that are more complex than people can grasp.

Victims may feel the need to discuss these issues and other questions and doubts with their clergy member. Families can also gain insight into the religious dimension of their grief by following these suggestions:

1. Talk with others who have experienced a similar situation.
2. Communicate with God, and honestly express anger, frustration, pain, dismay, and doubts.
3. Read scripture, particularly the lamentations of the Psalms.

Whether religion provides comfort to victims or merely makes things harder to understand depends on many things, including a person's basic religious beliefs and the response of church friends to the murder. Supportive clergy who allow family members to express feelings and even religious doubts can be a great help to the grieving family.

Chapter 5 Advocacy and Support Groups

I was leading a support group for families of murder victims when a new visitor started to say, “You just don’t understand.” He stopped before he finished his sentence. He knew those around him did indeed understand.

Jerry H, author

When I saw in those first weeks that mentioning my son’s death made my husband very uncomfortable and nervous, I knew I needed to find my emotional support somewhere else. That is when I sought out a homicide survivors support group. Finding other mothers who had lost a child to murder and understood what I was feeling helped me to know I was not alone and truly saved my sanity.”

Jo Ann, mother of murdered son

Family members of a murder victim may be confronted with a decision about whether or not to participate in support groups or advocacy organizations. While these groups may be helpful to many people, they are not for everyone.

Grief is highly personal, and the need to share emotions or experiences with others will be great for some people and small for others. It may also vary in the same person depending on where the person is in the recovery process.

Support Groups

Join a victims group. They can offer you the emotional support you need that the general public cannot offer. You can hasten your healing by reaching out to others who suffered as much as you; therein lies your true healing!

Ellen, wife of murder victim

Support groups, which offer a bond with other families who have suffered similar losses, exist in most of the major cities across Texas. Participation in these groups has been encouraged throughout this manual because the evidence is strong that social support is significantly related to grief recovery.

Experience suggests, however, that some families may not feel ready to share their feelings in a support group for three months to a year. It seems to take this long to recover from the initial shock of the murder. Other families may want to attend immediately and to talk about their loved one. Some families may want to attend but only want to listen. Each family should respect their needs and travel at their own speed in coming and talking in a support group.

Support groups offer the following to family members:

- An arena to share where they are psychologically.
- An arena to talk about the loss of a loved one and his/her life.
- An opportunity to discuss legal cases and at what stage they are in the judicial system.
- Help in understanding how others have coped.
- Help in understanding how the police and the legal systems work.
- Support and understanding.

Unfortunately, it has been the experience of the author that some groups try to serve as both a support and an advocacy group. This is extremely difficult, and usually one function is not adequately fulfilled. For a new family member, raw with pain and grief, to enter a group where only political advocacy is dealt with can possibly make the person feel even more isolated and alone in his/her attempt to deal with his/her overwhelming emotions. It is very important to find out the function of the group and fit the group to your family's needs.

Advocacy Groups

Advocacy organizations, groups devoted to making changes in the criminal justice system, also are on the rise. These groups can offer families a healthy way to vent the anger, guilt, and frustration they may feel at the slowness of the judicial process or the early release of prisoners. In Texas, these groups have made great strides in changing

the laws to help keep perpetrators incarcerated and give families of murder victims a voice.

Family members should carefully consider their own needs as well as the goals of the organization before joining. Participation may be highly beneficial for the families and individuals involved. Many members progress from needing the help of the group to helping others who face the same issues. The seasoned group members understand the new comers and both benefit. Helping itself is therapeutic.

However, it is not unheard of for individuals to become stuck in their grief as a result of letting advocacy issues and support organizations consume their lives. Families should never feel pressured to join a group and should never feel guilty about leaving a group when their need for it has been satisfied.

The goal for families should be one of acquiring and maintaining a healthy perspective about themselves and on the tragedy they've experienced.

I would encourage you to get help through a victims group and/or counseling. I could not have survived alone.

Steffenie, wife of murdered husband

It is not an exaggeration to say that meeting with other victims has completely alleviated the feelings of isolation I have felt since the murder.

Carla, sister of murdered sister

Chapter 6 Process of Recovery

I hate the words *closure, healing, recovery*. You close doors and windows; you don't close the life and death of your child. What does healing and recovery mean? I have a huge hole in my heart and in my soul that will never heal. I have just learned to build a new life and a new "normal" around that huge hole that will always be there.

Jo Ann, mother of murdered son

When a loved one is murdered, the act is so violent and permanent that it is truly difficult to believe that person is dead. However, before family members can begin the process of recovery, the reality that their loved one is dead must be faced.

Fantasies

There is a part of the mind in which people never die and there is no progression of time. Sigmund Freud called this part of the mind the unconscious. Even though a loved one is dead, an individual can dream of the person or even "see" that person in fantasy, or the "mind's eye." The fantasies can be a comfort or an intense pain, depending upon the attitudes and beliefs of the grieving individual. This part of the mind can keep the loved one "alive," so to speak, and greatly prolong the grief period. It can also be a source of fond memories, and as such, a comfort.

During the initial shock of the murder, it may be difficult to accept the death because the experience seems so crazy and so unreal. The loved one is still "seen" in the mind's eye. The grieving survivor's unconscious expects the deceased to walk in the door or drive up in the driveway. Viewing the body of a loved one or visiting the gravesite is important in the process of coming to accept that the individual is actually dead.

Breaking Out of Isolation

As time passes, it is important for families to talk about the loved one. It is especially important to do this on birthdays, holidays, and important dates. To outsiders this may seem to be causing more grief

and pain, but those images and memories are already in the mind and they need to be brought out. To not confront them is to create isolation.

A common feeling families of murder victims have is that people do not care and do not understand, and indeed, most do not understand. However, it is very important to break out of this isolation, to find and identify and talk with those individuals. This is one of the goals of a group of families of murder victims. These families truly understand.

Believe people when they tell you it will get easier. It never, never, goes away, but it does get easier to bear. When people first told me that, I wanted to scream!

Kay, wife of murdered husband

Finding Meaning

Through the darkness slowly comes dawn. In the process of redefining their lives, grieving individuals will gain a new realization of the meaning the deceased brought to their lives. Family members tend to identify with loved ones. These loved ones become part of their self-concept and bring meaning to their lives. When a loved one is lost it may seem to family members that they have lost a part of themselves. The mourner may feel empty and hollow. Life does not mean what it used to.

Recovery, for the family member of a murder victim, means to redefine the family, the future, and their individual lives.

Nothing helps except time! I have taken the last 18 months to turn inside myself and become acquainted with *my* truth.

Karon, mother of a murder victim

Life is not the same following a murder, and it never will be the same. What seemed so very important before may not be important at all now. It is difficult to face questions such as: “What does life mean now?” “What is there to live for?” It may be important to “talk” with the loved one at the gravesite or in prayers or to write the loved one a letter. All of these are okay (they do NOT indicate craziness) and are attempts to redefine life in light of the missing loved one. This redefinition is painful and, at times, slow.

Getting Better

An indication that individuals are getting better is when they allow themselves to laugh. Initially in a support group, the new members are unable to laugh. When they do laugh, they feel guilty, as if they should not enjoy their life anymore because their loved one is gone. Slowly, mourners will begin to be able to laugh and smile. Their lives will never be the same, but as they redefine “normal” they will be able to go on with new meaning.