

Aftermath of Homicide

There is usually a period of grief following any loss. Grief reactions and the tasks of grieving have been identified in many ways by members of the helping profession. Homicide survivors may also experience symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (Rynearson, 1984; Redmond, 1989). Indeed, it has been stated (Rando, 1993) that factors such as the violence, suddenness, unexpectedness and randomness of the death and the anger, self-blame and guilt which result from it may place family members at risk for what has been termed "complicated mourning."

Grief Reactions

Redmond (1989) described many factors which may affect the course of the grieving process for homicide survivors. These factors include: the ages of the survivor and the victim at the time of the homicide; the survivors' physical and/or emotional state before the murder; their prior history of trauma; the way in which their loved one died; and whether or not the survivor has, and can make use of, social support systems. In addition, social and cultural factors may have great impact on the grieving process.

When homicide survivors first learn about the murder, they may experience shock and disbelief, numbness, changes in appetite or sleeping patterns, difficulty concentrating, confusion, anger, fear and anxiety (Redmond, 1989). One survivor described her initial reactions after hearing of the murder of a family member in this way: "I felt a scream coming out and I thought, No! I closed my mouth. My legs turned rubbery, and I started falling, and I still wanted to scream, but I couldn't scream." (Asaro, 1992, p. 34.)

In cases where homicide survivors have not been able to view their loved one's body -- either because it was not permitted or they felt unable to do so -- it is often difficult for them to accept the reality of the death. Homicide survivors sometimes describe a feeling that "the world has stopped"; they cannot understand how everyone else is able to go on about their daily routine. For them, the world as it was has come to an end, causing feelings of confusion and anger.

Later reactions often include feelings of isolation, helplessness, fear and vulnerability, guilt or self-blame, nightmares and a desire for revenge (Redmond, 1989). One survivor described her reaction in this way: "I was empty -- hollow -- and, you know, you don't think . . . you can't concentrate, and you can't see what's in front of your eyes." (Asaro, 1992, p.35.)

Homicide survivors may experience heightened anxiety or phobic reactions; the anguish may seem intense and, sometimes, overwhelming. Sometimes survivors speak of a physical pain -- such as a "pain in my heart" or a "lump in my throat" -- which they could feel for several years after the murder. A survivor spoke of her reactions in this way:

"I'd cry more around my husband and what I called it was 'wailing' . . . when I did cry, I would cry from my soul because it hurt so bad." (Asaro, 1992, p. 35.)

It is not uncommon for homicide survivors to have tremendous feelings of rage toward the person(s) responsible for the murder, but they may also experience anger toward the victim for "being in the wrong place at the wrong time" or for living a lifestyle which placed them at greater risk for victimization.

Feelings of depression and hopelessness may be present; survivors often report that they cannot imagine that they will ever be happy again. It is very important to get professional help if thoughts of self-harm or suicide are present. One survivor described her feelings in this way:

"I've thought maybe it would be just as well that I end it, you know? Some days were so depressing." (Asaro, 1992, p. 36.)

Even many years after the murder, survivors may find themselves suddenly crying over their loss. These feelings have been called "grief spasms" (Lord, 1988) or "memory embraces" (Wolfelt, 1992), and reflect the depth of the pain of the loss. Many survivors have said that they know they are doing better when they begin to have more good days than bad days.

Tasks of Grieving

Worden (1991) described four "tasks" of grieving. These included: accepting the reality of the loss; feeling the grief; adjusting to a life in which the deceased is no longer present; and emotionally relocating the deceased so that life can go on.

The first task (Worden, 1991) is that of acknowledging and accepting the reality of the loss -- that the loved one is dead. Survivors often report a sense that their loved one will come up the driveway as usual at the end of the workday. Others have reported that they felt impelled to follow someone who looked just like their deceased loved one. It is often difficult for homicide survivors who have not had a chance to see their loved one's body to know, finally, that it was not some terrible mistake and that their loved one is really dead.

The second "task" identified by Worden (1991) is that mourners must acknowledge and experience the pain associated with losing their loved one, whether it be physical and/or emotional pain. This is one of the most difficult tasks a mourner faces, even under the most supportive of circumstances. Homicide survivors often find that they must put their feelings on hold as they follow court hearings, trials and numerous appeals. However, no matter how the pain of the loss is held back or "put aside," Worden stated that the mourner must experience these feelings or they may carry the pain of the loss for the rest of their lives.

The third task described by Worden (1991) is to adjust to a life in which their loved one is no longer present. At this point, family members begin to make personal or lifestyle changes which might take them in a very different direction than that planned while their loved one was still alive. Often family members may feel some guilt around these new decisions, wondering whether they are being disloyal to their relationship with the deceased. It is important for survivors to recognize and come to terms with these reactions and feelings.

The last task Worden described (1991) is that the mourner must somehow find a place for their loved one within their emotional life which can, at the same time, permit them to go on in the world. Survivors will not forget their loved one, but eventually will realize that their lives can and do go on.

Posttraumatic Stress Reactions

Studies of families of homicide victims suggest that they may be particularly at risk for developing Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (Redmond, 1989; Amick-McMullan, Kilpatrick & Resnick, 1991). When a family member is murdered, the survivors often react with intense feelings of helplessness, fear and horror. The diagnosis of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) is made when symptoms (listed below) last for *at least one month*; the disturbance adversely affects an important area of functioning, such as work or family relations; and criteria are met in the following three categories:

1. Recurrent and intrusive re-experiencing of the traumatic event, such as dreams or "flashbacks";
2. Avoidance of places or events which serve as reminders of the murder; and
3. Ongoing feelings of increased arousal such as constant vigilance or an exaggerated startled reaction.

One survivor described a recurrent dream she had after several family members were murdered:

" . . . I'd go to bed at night, and I'd dream about saving their lives." (Asaro, 1992, p. 35.)

Some events -- such as news coverage or the approach of birthdays, holidays or the anniversary of the murder -- may trigger the sensation in homicide survivors that they are re-experiencing earlier stress reactions (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). One homicide survivor described her experience in this way:

" . . . nobody prepared me for the year anniversary . . . it just blew me away." (Asaro, 1992, p. 38.)

Impact on Family Unit

It is important to recognize that, although emotional support may have been shared among family members prior to the murder, each individual may grieve the loss in unique ways which might well put them at odds or in conflict with other family members. Some family members may feel that others should not "dwell" on the murder - - that they should "give it up" or "put it behind them." Others may feel that they must learn everything that they can about the murder and fight for the victim's rights through the criminal justice system.

Survivors might also find themselves emotionally withdrawing from each other after the murder -- especially when issues of protectiveness, guilt, anger, or blame are present. One homicide survivor described the way her relationship with her father changed after the murder:

" . . . I can't stand to see him like that, and I feel like I'm the cause of him being upset if I wanted to ask him questions or bring it up, so I don't." (Asaro, 1992, p. 37.)

After the murder, surviving family members may have to assume other roles within the family. For example, the father may have to assume the duties of child-rearing, in addition to being the wage earner in the family; older brothers and sisters may have to

assume care for younger siblings; or grandparents may find themselves caring for young children once again after the parents have been killed.

While survivors may need to deal with new situations or learn new coping skills, they may also need to redefine who they are -- for example, if a woman had been a wife, she must adjust to being a widow. If a woman thought of herself as a caretaker and her child is murdered, then what role does she now fill? These new roles may be thrust upon other family members just when they feel least psychologically, emotionally or financially prepared to adjust to them because of the cataclysm of feelings and reactions they are experiencing after the murder.

If the victim was murdered by another family member -- for example a spouse or brother -- surviving family members may feel additional confusion, guilt, anger, blame and betrayal, and may take sides for or against the victim. This serves to further split family ties and may ultimately result in the family being torn apart.

It sometimes happens that more than one family member is lost through violence, either at the same or different times. This can easily magnify the "sensational" aspects of the crime as far as community and media response, but also can increase the enormity of the loss for those who survive. If so, this will certainly have a great impact on the family's need for, and ability to seek and make use of, outside resources to cope with their losses.

In cases where a relationship between a significant other and the victim was not known or accepted by the victim's family members, this can be the source of additional feelings of confusion, anger or blame. For example, a murder victim may have been in a same-sex relationship and had not "come out" to the family before the murder. Not only must the family then come to terms with their loved one's death, but they must also confront issues surrounding his or her lifestyle which may be at great odds with their personal values or beliefs.