

Coping with the Aftermath of Homicide

Working with the Media

As described earlier, homicide survivors may have positive or negative experiences with the news media and may feel uncertain about the extent of their rights. A sensitive reporter can be an ally to the family in trying to get their story told; however, it is important for the surviving family to remember that you are never required to talk with the media and that there are no guarantees that the information you give them will be presented as you expect or want it to be presented. The goal of printed and electronic journalism is to sell papers, not necessarily to see that justice is done.

Working Within the Criminal Justice System

The Victim Witness Assistance Program, located in the office of the District Attorney, can provide information about the way the criminal justice system works and your rights. It is important to remember that, while there may not always be answers, you are entitled to ask as many questions as you feel necessary.

The Victim Witness Coordinator can also be very helpful in letting you know about changes in scheduled hearings and often can assist in making arrangements for overnight stays for family members who travel from other locations in order to attend judicial proceedings. Be aware, however, that frequently the times and dates of proceedings, hearings and trials may be changed or postponed, even at the last moment. This often causes family members to feel as though they are living on "pins and needles" and leads to a great deal of frustration and anger with the criminal justice system.

If the defendant is found guilty, a *Victim Impact Statement* (VIS) can be presented by the family as part of the sentencing procedure. For many homicide survivors, this may be the only opportunity they will have to speak on behalf of their loved one or to describe the impact the murder has had on themselves and their family. This statement is a description of how the crime has impacted every area of the survivors' lives. It is a way for the family to describe who the victim was as a person, as well as their pain and anguish resulting from the loss of their loved one and the ongoing ways in which the murder continues to affect them. The VIS is taken into consideration when the judge is making a determination about the type of sentence to be imposed.

Surviving family members can also ask to be notified and to be present when the convicted felons come up for parole or release. Additionally, survivors can often request that the parole board include in their parole instructions and conditions that the assailant not contact the family in any way. If contact is made, the felon will then be in violation of parole. If the terms or conditions of parole are violated, the felon may then be forced to return to prison.

Dealing with the Emotional Aftermath

Understand that grieving is a process and not an event. Get as much information as you can about this process. Remember that everyone's grief is unique because everyone's loss is different.

Be patient with yourself and be good to yourself, especially around holidays or on anniversaries of the date of the murder.

Some families find it comforting to keep the same traditions or rituals around the holidays; others find it deeply painful because they serve as a reminder of their loved one who is no longer alive. Family members may also feel they have much less energy than usual. The following are examples of ways in which traditions can be changed in order to respect these feelings:

- Instead of having a family dinner at home, eat at a restaurant or order dinner "to go";
- Limit or change the type of decorations you put up;
- Give gift certificates instead of presents or shop by catalog;
- Limit the number of social gatherings you attend. Choose those that will be most supportive to you and your family;
- Buy something special in honor of your loved one, such as a tree or a plant. Include children in the planning;
- Skip holiday cards or reduce the amount of work involved by instead sending a holiday newsletter;
- Choose a new family holiday activity such as an out-of-town vacation;
- Share the day with other grieving families; or
- Give yourself permission to read, listen to music or simply stay home and do nothing.

Other Resources

State Crime Victims Compensation Program:

These programs may reimburse families for funeral expenses, counseling fees, loss of income and expenses associated with the clean-up of crime scenes. However, most states, including Georgia, have a cap or limit on the amount of money they can award, and this may not cover all the expenses resulting from the crime. Application information can be obtained through the Victim Witness Assistance Programs or the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council at <http://www.cjcc.ga.gov/victimDetails.aspx?id=240>.

Counseling:

Obtaining individual or family counseling services with a therapist trained in trauma work can be very helpful to you in working through the strong feelings of anger and grief in the aftermath of murder. It is especially important to contact a therapist when thoughts of self-harm or suicide are present. Feelings of rage and a desire for revenge are common; however, you should contact a therapist if you feel it would be difficult to avoid acting on these impulses.

Civil Attorneys:

Attorneys who are trained in civil litigation on behalf of crime victims can advise you of your civil rights after a loved one has been killed. While bringing a civil suit against the individual who has caused so much pain for the homicide victim's family can never bring a loved one back, it can assist in recovering economic losses resulting from the murder and may also hold the responsible person(s) directly accountable for their actions.