

ADDITIONAL PROBLEMS OF SURVIVORS OF A HOMICIDE

This excerpt was taken from a report on the first 18 months of operation of the Victim Services Agency's "Families of Homicide Victims Project," New York City.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL REACTIONS TO THE TRAUMA OF HOMICIDE

In working with families of homicide victims, we have learned that homicide inflicts a devastating emotional trauma on the surviving relatives. Among the reactions we typically encounter are: shock and apathy; helplessness and terror; overwhelming rage; guilt; intense yearning for the one who is dead. It is difficult to overstate the intensity of these reactions. Moreover, surviving relatives (particularly parents) often continue in a state of *acute* grief for well over a year. Frequently the friends and relatives of the close survivors become uncomfortable and finally exasperated by this intense mourning. As months go by, those close to the survivors begin admonishing them to resume normal living—"It's time to go on with your lives." When admonishment proves fruitless, the friends and relatives often begin to withdraw emotionally from the survivors. Thus, for the survivors, murder of a loved one is often compounded by isolation and increased loneliness.

LEGAL AND JUDICIAL SYSTEM RELATED

- No arrest
- Rude treatment by police
- No information from police or prosecutor
- No notification of trial date
- Not allowed to attend trial
- Plea bargaining with no explanation
- Hearing the defense attorney slander the victim
- Killer free on bail while awaiting appeal; possibly in the same neighborhood as the victim's family
- Confession thrown out of court without explanation
- Poor handling of case by prosecutor
- Sentence seems too lenient
- Murdered out on parole in short period of time
- No sense of closure because of no arrest
- Feeling that the police are no longer working on the case
- Feeling of being ignored throughout the whole legal/judicial process

FINANCIAL

- Funeral and medical costs
- Medical expenses for psychiatric care for family members
- Medical care for health problems for family members
- Cost of private investigators, private attorneys
- Possible loss of breadwinner
- Various costs and financial losses that others may not realize are related to the murder; such as, the sister who gives up a 4-year college scholarship because she needs to come home and spend time with her family; the family sells their house and moves away because their child was killed in their own home and they're trying to get away from those memories; the teen-age brother who has one car accident after another because his rage is coming out in his driving, etc.

JOB RELATED

- Inability to function and perform on the job
- Lack of interest and motivation
- Demotion or loss of job
- Loss of job because of a show of grief; such as, crying at work
- Using job as an excuse to avoid working through the grief and to avoid a grieving spouse
- Running away from pain by becoming a workaholic

MARITAL/SEXUAL

- Husband and wife grieve in different ways
- Husband and wife blame each other
- Depression resulting in no interest in sexual contact
- Trying to bury the pain by divorcing the parent of the murdered child and starting over with someone else without painful memories
- The emotional pain of sexual contact because it is a constant reminder of the dead child and all the hopes they had for this child at the time of conception and throughout the pregnancy

FAMILY/CHILDREN

- Lack of communication/alienation
- School drop-outs
- Use of alcohol and drugs to ease the pain
- Bitterness and wanting to get revenge
- Withdrawal of family members
- Fear of adding to the others' pain
- Pressure from some family members to put it behind them and irritation if they don't
- Myth that sorrow draws a family closer together
- Suicide on anniversary date
- Danger of becoming overprotective of other children

RELIGIOUS/SPIRITUAL

- Guilt because of anger
- Absence of expected response and support from others in church or synagogue
- Comments of clergy, other members, which indicate lack of understanding
- Disillusionment with self that faith was not strong enough to carry one through the grieving process bravely
- Being put on a pedestal by others and told what a good example they are
- The shaking – and sometimes the crumbling – of one's religious or philosophical foundations

MEDIA COVERAGE

- Sensational/pulp detective magazines
- Inaccurate
- Inflammatory and slanderous
- Intrusive and/or prolonged
- For offender only – almost glorifying the offender and carrying him through each stage of the proceeding while the victim and survivors are forgotten (at least this may be the perception of the victim's family)

TREATMENT BY PROFESSIONALS

All of the following frequently demonstrate that they do not understand the effects of a violent death upon family members: police, hospital personnel, funeral directors, clergy, school counselors and teachers, psychologists and psychiatrists.