

Helping a Homicide Survivor Heal

by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

A friend has experienced the sudden, violent death of someone they love. You want to help, but aren't sure how to go about it. This article will guide you in ways to turn your cares and concerns into positive actions.

Traumatic and Violent Death

Death by homicide creates overwhelming grief for survivors. Their world has been turned upside down. Nothing in life prepares survivors for the reality that someone they love has died a violent death.

Murder results in survivors grieving not only the death, but how the person died. A life has been cut short through an act of cruelty. The disregard for human life adds overwhelming feelings of turmoil, distrust, injustice and helplessness to normal sense of loss and sorrow.

Murder and Social Stigma

Survivors of murder victims enter into a world that is not understood by most people. A sad reality is that members of a community where a tragic murder has occurred sometimes blame the victim or survivors. Out of a need to protect themselves from their own personal feelings of vulnerability, some people reason that what has happened has to be somebody's fault. This need to "place blame" is projected in an effort to fight off any thoughts that such a tragedy would ever happen to them.

As a result of this fear and misunderstanding, survivors of homicide deaths are often left feeling abandoned at a time when they desperately need unconditional support and understanding. Without a doubt, homicide survivors suffer in a variety of ways: one, because they need to mourn the loss of someone who has died; two, because they have experienced a sudden, traumatic death; and three, because they are often shunned by a society unwilling to enter into the pain of their grief.

Allow for Numbness

Feeling dazed or numb is a good thing for your friend. This numbness serves a valuable purpose: it gives emotions time to catch up with what the mind has been told. Nothing in one's coping mechanisms prepares survivors for this kind of trauma. Shock is like an anesthetic-it helps create insulation from the reality of the death until your friend is more able to tolerate what he or she doesn't want to believe.

Don't assume your friend is "being strong and taking it well" when he or she is really in shock. They may appear strong, but early on in grief, their appearance reflects their numbness and disbelief. However, they need you now, and will particularly need you when the shock begins to wear off and reality sets in. Let your friend move at his or her own pace. It is damaging to try to push someone through shock and numbness. By "walking with" your friend at his or her own pace, you are giving one of life's most precious gifts-yourself.

Accept the Intensity of the Grief

Grief following a murder is always complex. Survivors don't "get over it." Instead, with support and understanding they can come to reconcile themselves to its reality. Don't be surprised by the intensity of their feelings. In light of what has happened, it is only natural that they are in pain. Accept that survivors may be struggling with a multitude of emotions more intense than those experienced after other types of death. Confusion, disorganization, fear, vulnerability, guilt or anger are just a few of the emotions survivors may feel.

Sometimes these emotions will follow each other within a short period of time. Or they may occur simultaneously. And don't be surprised if out of nowhere your friend suddenly experiences surges of grief, even at the most unexpected times. These grief attacks can be frightening and leave them feeling overwhelmed. Be patient, compassionate and understanding.

Don't Be Frightened by Rage

Anger and rage responses might make you-a helping friend-feel helpless. For survivors, the sense of injustice about the nature of the death turns the normal anger of grief into rage. Remember-anger is not right or wrong, good or bad, appropriate or not appropriate. In fact, rage often relates to a desire to restore things to the way they were before the death. The person to be most concerned about is probably the one who doesn't experience rage.

The anger and rage may be directed at the murderer, at God, you, or even at the person who was killed. Your friend may even be frightened by the intensity of his or her own rage. Be willing to listen to what your friend feels without judging him or her. And do not try to diminish the anger, for it is in expressing rage that it begins to lose some of its power. Ultimately, healthy grief requires that these explosive emotions be expressed, not repressed.

Feeling Anxious and Fearful is Normal

Feelings of anxiety, panic, and fear are normal after a murder. Threats to one's feelings of security naturally brings about these emotions. The world no longer feels as safe as it once did.

Fear of what the future holds, fear that more murders might occur, an increased awareness of one's own mortality, feelings of vulnerability about being able to survive without the person, an inability to concentrate and emotional and physical fatigue all serve to heighten anxiety, panic and fear. Your grieving friend may feel overwhelmed by everyday problems and concerns. Your awareness of these common fears can help you anticipate some of what your friend might talk about with you.

Understand the Need to Ask "Why?"

The unanswerable question, "But, why?" naturally comes up for survivors of a traumatic, violent death. Your friend is searching to understand how something like this could happen. Understand that this is a normal question to ask in a very abnormal situation.

Your friend probably doesn't want you to try to answer the "why?" question. He or she often realizes there is no rational explanation for the murder, yet still needs to ask the question. While you can't provide explanations for what happened, you can stand beside your friend as he or she searches for meaning.

Be Compassionate

Give your friend permission to express his or her feelings without fear of criticism. Learn from your friend; don't instruct or set expectations about how he or she should respond. Never say, "I know just how you feel." You don't.

Allow your friend to experience all the hurt, sorrow and pain that he or she is feeling at the time. Enter into your friend's feelings, but never try to take them away. And recognize tears are a natural and appropriate expression of the pain associated with the death.

Avoid Clichés

Clichés, though they are often intended to diminish the pain of loss, can actually cause more pain for a grieving friend. Comments like "You are holding up so well," "Time will heal all wounds," or "Think of all you still have to be thankful for" are not constructive. Instead, they hurt and make a friend's journey through grief more difficult.

Listen to Questions About Faith

If you allow them, homicide survivors will "teach" you about their feelings regarding faith and spirituality. Many survivors will express doubt about beliefs they held before the murder. If they cannot doubt, their faith will have little meaning. Whatever you do, don't tell your friend that the murder was "God's will."

Also, don't tell your friend to forgive the murderer. No matter their spiritual convictions, survivors of homicide should not be made to feel obligated to forgive someone who killed their loved one. Don't push your friend to forgive simply to satisfy your needs.

Be Aware of Support Groups

Support groups are one of the best ways to help survivors of traumatic deaths. In a group, survivors can connect with other people who share their experience. They are allowed and encouraged to tell their stories as much, and as often, as they like.

Do be aware that you should not push survivors to attend a group if they are not ready. We know that if they find a group unhelpful because they aren't ready to share their grief in this way, they may be hesitant to make use of the group later, when it could help them very much.

Also, some survivors find support groups helpful and some don't. For those who want to participate in a support group, you may be able to help them find one. This practical effort on your part will be appreciated.

Work Together as Helpers

Remember that the murder of someone loved is a shattering experience. As a result of this death, your friend's life is under reconstruction. He or she will need to talk about it for years to come. Be the person who will encourage and allow your friend to share feelings about the homicide after other listeners have moved on.

Use the name of the person who was killed when you talk to your friend. Hearing the name can be comforting, and it confirms that you have not forgotten this important person who was so much a part of your friend's life.

To experience grief is the result of having loved. Homicide survivors must be guaranteed this privilege. While the guidelines in this article may help, it is important to recognize that helping a homicide survivor heal will not be an easy task. You may have to give more concern, time, and love than you ever knew you had. But this helping effort will be more than worth it.

About the Author

Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt is a noted author, educator and practicing grief counselor. He serves as Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition in Fort Collins, Colorado and presents dozens of grief-related workshops each year across North America. Among his books are *Healing Your Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas* and *The Healing Your Grieving Heart Journal for Teens*. For more information, write or call The Center for Loss and Life Transition, 3735 Broken Bow Road, Fort Collins, Colorado 80526, (970) 226-6050 or visit their website, www.centerforloss.com.