

The Impact of Murder on the Family Unit

Health and Social Issues Following the Murder of a Loved One

“Death is not the greatest loss of life. The greatest loss is what dies inside us while we live”

—Norman Cousins

Family units are unique in that they have their own culture, identifiers and rules for existence, and various levels of connections with each other.

After a murder, the family unit undergoes permanent changes that are difficult for the surviving members to accept. As each member of the family struggles with his or her own pain and grief, offering emotional support to the other members of the family network can be challenging and sometimes impossible. Not only must each member navigate through his or her own feelings about the murder, but they must also deal with the way their loved one died.

Part of the family has died along with the victim. This missing piece can never be restored.

The challenges that lie ahead for the families and loved ones of a murder victim are complex and unique to each individual. These challenges do not stop at the end of the trial, if indeed there is one. The murder of your child or loved one has created an irreversible life-changing effect.

Following the trial, if there is a conviction, some suggest we can now experience a sense of “closure”. While in actual fact, as we work to reconstruct our new lives and restore a sense of hope and purpose, we move into another fearful and confusing state. We are now the invisible victims of crime. THERE IS NO “CLOSURE”.

The death of any child of any age is devastating. However, the pain and anguish is compounded when the death comes at the hands of another human being. Parents and family members face a number of very complicated issues, even as they try to make sense of the incomprehensible reality that someone knowingly, intentionally killed a child who was loved.

The child may be the main evidence and an autopsy and the investigation may cause a lengthy delay in the release of your child's body.

The child's body may not be found for proper internment or cremation. If found, your child may not be viewable.

A police investigation can take weeks, months, even years.

Authorities may first look for suspects within the family, creating a re-victimization of those very survivors feeling the most acute pain.

If the child was murdered in another country, the family may be forced to deal with that country's law enforcement and legal system, which may have completely different procedures than in Canada.

Your child becomes dehumanized as the police, the media, prosecutors, and others, refer to “the victim”, “the body,” and “the deceased.”

The murderer may never be caught or may choose suicide or death rather than capture.

If someone is charged with the murder, the trial, including appeals, can take years.

The murderer may go free for any number of reasons or receive a sentence much lighter than the family expected.

In the case of an older child, the parents may not be the next of kin, as the spouse and immediate family may be given information and kept “in the loop”. Meanwhile, the parents may be left on their own to learn whatever they can about the case and developments. This may be particularly difficult if family members are estranged from one another; especially, if the estrangement occurs as a result of the circumstances surrounding or following the murder.

When a sibling is murdered, the sudden reality of the death will probably be too much for a brother or sister to accept all at once. Due to the shock and confusion that murder brings, there will be no comprehension of why he or she was so quickly and violently taken. This pain is intense and frightening. The murder of a sibling who shared a childhood creates feelings of despair, loneliness, and hopelessness.

As a sibling you may feel that you cannot share your feelings with other members of the family, especially your parents, because you want to protect them from additional pain. As a result, you may stifle the normal expressions of mourning that are imperative to journeying through the grief process.

The murder of a sibling can create a wide range of emotions. Denial, guilt, anger, fear, intense sorrow, listlessness, loss of appetite, profound sadness, depression, extensive crying, and physical distress are some of the natural responses to grief as a result of homicide. One may feel that his/her parents' attention is centred on the dead sibling or they may become overly protective of the living sibling.

A sibling of a homicide victim has his/her own method of grieving. The parents have lost a child, a sibling has lost a brother or sister, and the relationship is completely different. The living sibling may experience a loss of identity as self-image is inter-related with his/her brother or sister. The vast array of emotions that are necessary to deal with the immense grief of the loss may be suppressed by the powerful effect of denial. The experience may be further complicated by the failure of others, including friends and colleagues to recognize the sibling's loss. The living sibling may be coping not only with the loss of a brother or sister, but also with the loss of functional parents. A survivor once stated "Everyone asks me about my parents and how they are doing, but nobody ever thinks to ask me how I am doing".

One of the most important things a person can do for himself/herself is to connect with a person or group with whom they can talk freely, and who are travelling on the same path of healing.

One must avoid the temptation to self-medicate feelings and emotions with the use of drugs, alcohol or any mood altering substance, or destructive behaviour that will only add to the grief already being felt. At some point, a person will have to face the reality of this horrific event. One must take the time to think about what is needed to help oneself through this challenging time. The need to express ones grief in a positive manner is imperative to getting to a better place than one is in today.

It's important to realize that the deep loss being felt is a reflection of the love one has for the person who has been lost. The grief and the expression of it are important.

When murder happens within a family, the potential to live happily is forever changed. The impact of murder directly affects the functionality of a family unit. To have one's child murdered is the ultimate tragedy in life. What word do we use for a parent whose child has been murdered? There is no word that I know of, to express that kind of pain. It is the most intense grief known. As a parent you feel that a vital and core part of your being has been ripped away.

What follows a murder is a grief like no other. There is a difference between natural grief and homicide grief. Natural grief in itself is not bad. It is a spontaneous reaction people have to any loss in life, a universal human experience following the death of a loved one.

Grieving is a deeply personal and painful experience. It comes with an array of mixed feelings, sensations, thoughts and behaviours. It is; however, a normal response to loss. It provides for the transition of the loss to be integrated into the person's life.

Grieving is a complex process and someone's capacity to grieve is influenced by the nature of the loss, their personal resilience and the context of the loss.

However, homicide grief, consists not only of the reactions we experience with natural grief, but by the nature and context of the loss, it now becomes a unique type of grief, that has a profound and lasting effect on the victim's family. The distress caused by having to deal with such horrific circumstances of the violence of the event itself, along with the fact that someone could purposely take the life of your child or loved one is unimaginable. As survivors we begin to question our values and beliefs about the world. Life as we once knew it disappears, and it becomes a struggle between moving on and hanging on.

We all face different experiences and circumstances as survivors of homicide victims. What if you are a single parent, widow, or widower, you may be facing the grief alone. Life as you knew it feels shattered, and you may believe that you will never be able to pick up the pieces and continue on. The feelings of loneliness, hopelessness, the anger, frustration, the anxiety, fear and sadness are all normal. How could you possibly feel anything else?

The National Organization of Victims Assistance (NOVA) in the U.S. suggests that many survivors will re-experience crisis reactions over a considerable period of time, following a loved one's murder, in response to "trigger" events. These events may elicit similar responses to those that were brought about during the death notification. Each survivor may experience different "triggers" such as:

1. Identification of the Assailant: At the time of seeing the murderer for the first time following the murder.
2. Sensing: An individual may see, hear, touch, smell or taste something similar to something that one was acutely aware of during the trauma.
3. Anniversaries of the Event: The date, time and hour of a crisis situation are imprinted in long-term memory. On these dates it is not unusual to observe as severe a reaction as experienced at the occurrence.
4. Holidays, and Life Events in the Family: Parents whose child has died report an overwhelming sadness at holidays, graduations and weddings of their friends' children many years later.
5. Hearings, Trials, Appeals and Other Criminal Judicial Proceedings: After a number of years, the lack of acknowledgement expressed about the victim as a real person creates additional stress. The criminal judicial system is a chronic stressor.
6. Media Articles about a Similar Event: Articles may draw attention like a magnet even when the person knows there will be an adverse reaction. The mind continuously seeks to comprehend the meaning of the psychological trauma. Survivors may relate exact details and similarities from television shows to one's own family reactions.

As mentioned earlier, the stress following a homicide may persist for years and often takes an emotional and physical toll on the survivors resulting in serious illnesses. Many survivors attribute heart disease, cancer, and other acute physical illnesses to the stress of dealing with the murder of a loved one.

As well, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is commonly diagnosed following the murder of a loved one.

From Wikipedia, PTSD is defined as a severe anxiety disorder that can develop after exposure to any event which results in psychological trauma.

Lula Moshoures Redmond in "Surviving When Someone You Love Was Murdered" explains that PTSD may be evident in survivors of homicide victims if the following circumstances persist for more than one month:

The traumatic event is persistently re-experienced in at least one of the following ways:

- Recurrent and intrusive distressing recollections of the event.
- Recurrent distressing dreams of the event.
- Sudden acting or feeling as if the traumatic event was reoccurring.
- Intense psychological distress at exposure to events that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event, including anniversaries of the trauma.

Persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma or numbing of general responsiveness (not present before the trauma), as indicated by at least three of the following:

- Efforts to avoid thoughts or feelings associated with the trauma.
- Efforts to avoid activities or situations that arouse recollection of the trauma.
- Inability to recall an important aspect of the trauma.
- Markedly diminished interest in significant activities.
- Feelings of detachment or estrangement from others.
- Restricted range of affect e.g., unable to have loving feelings.
- Sense of a foreshortened future, e.g., does not expect to have a career, marriage, or children, or a long life.

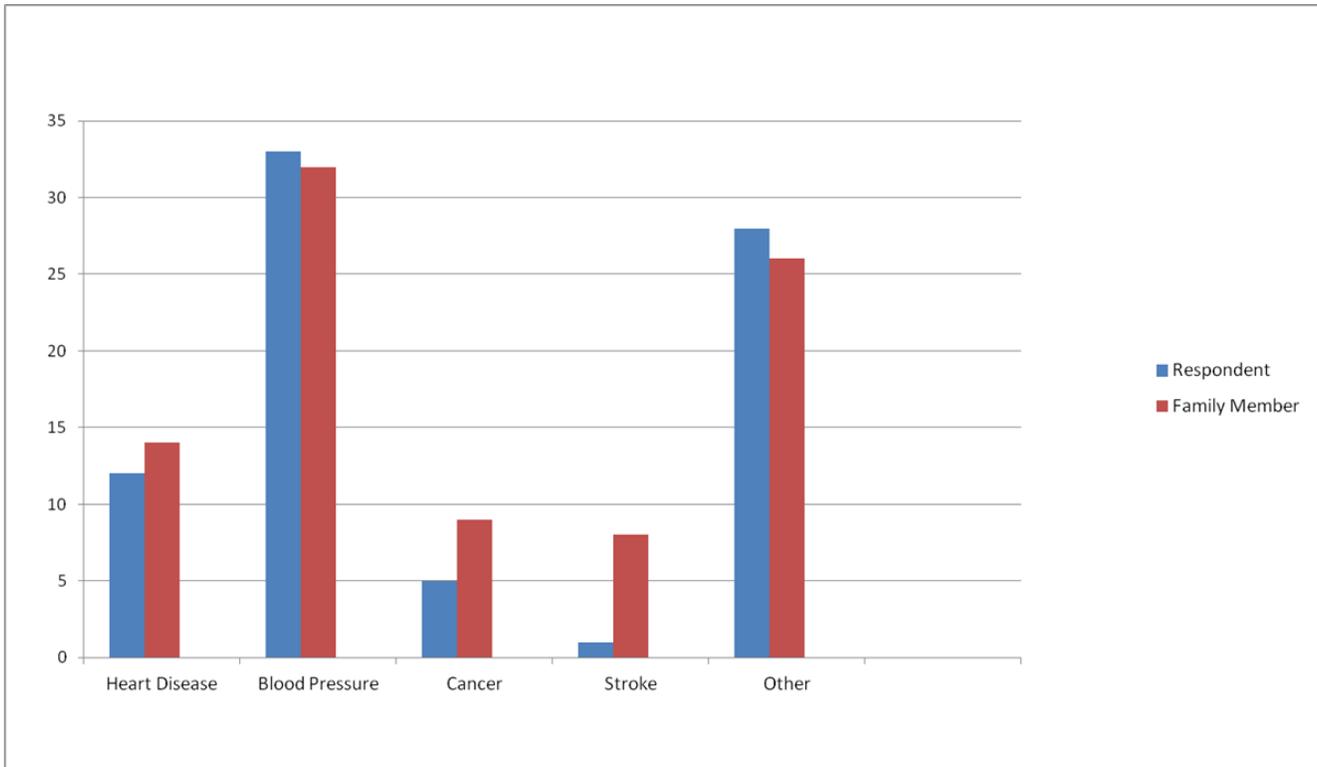
Persistent symptoms of increased arousal (not present before the trauma) as indicated by at least two of the following:

- Difficulty falling or staying asleep.
- Irritability or outbursts of anger.
- Difficulty concentrating.

- Hyper vigilance.
- Exaggerated startle response.

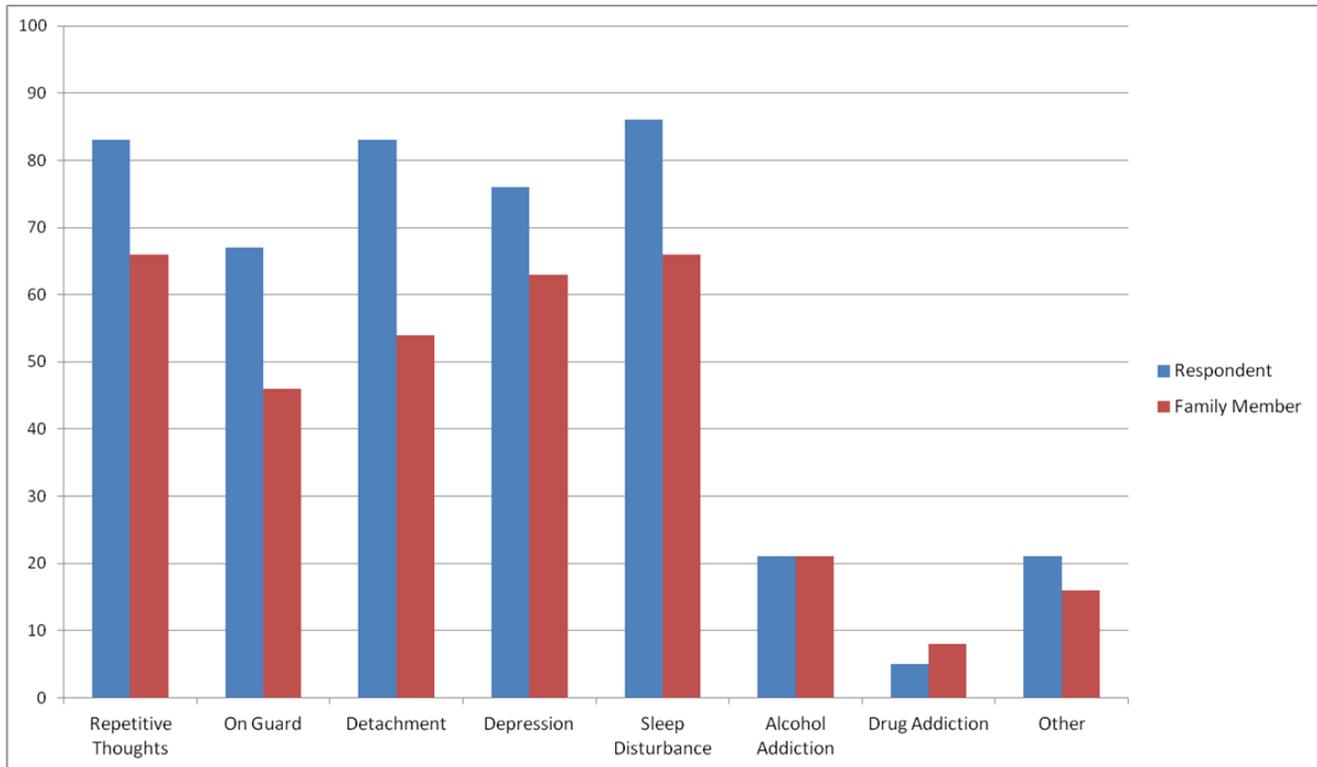
A 2011 review of those bereaved by homicide in England and Wales, entitled a “Survey of Families Bereaved by Homicide” was conducted by SAMM National (Support After Murder and Manslaughter) on behalf of The Commission for Victims and Witnesses. All respondents stated that the bereavement had had some kind of impact on their health and that of their family – whether physical or psychological.

Eight out of 10 (83%) indicated that their physical health was affected and three-quarters (75%) that of other family members. A third (33%) said they suffered from high blood pressure following the bereavement, while just over one-in-ten (12%) suffered from heart problems and over one quarter (28%) suffered in some other way (quite frequently stress, anxiety and depression).



Psychological Health Following a Murder

53% of respondents reported that the hardest thing to deal with, apart from the emotional stress, were physical and psychological health issues, including symptoms commonly associated with PTSD. 86% reported suffering from sleep-disturbance; 83% feelings of numbness or detachment; 83% repetitive thoughts/nightmares; 76% depression; and 67% feeling constantly on guard/startled. 21% suffered other problems including uncontrollable anger, an inability to communicate, and panic attacks. 21% also reported experiencing alcohol addiction and 5% addiction to other drugs. 66% of respondents reported that they had children left bereaved by homicide and that a high proportion of the children were affected psychologically and were perceived to need professional help.



Many respondents referred to the on-going isolation of traumatic bereavement and the sense that they were “changed forever” by the experience. Many said they experienced difficulties in their relationships following the murder. Most commonly this was with their spouse, followed by children, siblings, parents and other family members.

In the aftermath of murder we experience what some refer to as “collateral damage”, in addition to the destruction of family relationships, often one encounters a dysfunction in personal and working relationships. When you experience a homicide in your family, you often turn to people who have always been there for you; your friends and colleagues. In some cases casual acquaintances will become very close friends and will rally others to provide support in your time of need. However, one year, two years later and beyond, while you still need to talk about it and continue to experience unresolved issues, some of those friends will want to change the subject during conversations or move away from you all together because they feel uncomfortable, unable to help, or, in some cases think, if it happened to you, it could happen to them.

And, if that is not enough to deal with, then there also exists “a tendency to blame victims” for the misfortunes that befall them.

It is a cruel and insensitive secondary victimization that has challenged the endurance of many survivors of homicide victims. Blaming the victim for their own demise is a cruel and callous belief by some individuals that stems from theories of blame and stigmatization. In some cases, the stigmatization is inadvertent, but at times, it is a blatant act, as in the case of some types of media reporting. Being more informed about the issue of victim blame will give us all, including victim service providers, police services, the criminal judicial system and friends and family the opportunity to learn and to understand the roots of this phenomenon, and hopefully avoid inflicting secondary victimization on already traumatized survivors of homicide victims.

Why do people blame victims, and what exactly is it?

Victim blaming occurs when the victims of a crime, an accident or any type of abusive maltreatment are held responsible or partially responsible for the indiscretions committed against them.

Cruelly this term is applied, in some instances, to murder victims. Murder victims may be blamed by members of the legal profession, health profession, the media, family members, close acquaintances and unwitting members of society. Some murder victims receive more sympathy from society than other murder victims e.g. children, victims of an act of terrorism and mentally or physically disabled individuals. While other murder victims, such as prostitutes, drug addicts and individuals with a sexual persuasion other than heterosexual, are more likely to be accused of "asking for it" because of misconceptions surrounding those individuals and their actions.

There are two main concepts behind victim blame. They are the Just World Hypothesis and the Invulnerability Theory.

The Just World Hypothesis suggests that we live in a just world where everyone gets what he or she deserves and deserves what he or she gets. For example the victim contributed to his or her demise. In the case of murder, this concept overlooks the murder as an injustice and reinterprets it as a consequence of one's lifestyle or action. In the Invulnerability Theory blaming the victim is a way of distancing oneself from an unpleasant occurrence and thereby confirming one's own invulnerability. Blaming the victim most often arises from the need to deny that we ourselves could be vulnerable. In order to avoid confronting our own dread of powerlessness, we assume that the victim had the ability to prevent what happened. Since they did not, we are wiser, stronger, more together and more fortunate than they are, and so what happened to them would never happen to us. This gives us a sense of control over our lives. We can then become arrogant and judgemental, feeling superior to the victim. Tragically, these assumptions are psychologically shattering to survivors of homicide victims. Self-righteousness and narrow mindedness does not make us unlikely or invulnerable to becoming a victim. In actual fact, we live in a world in which bad things can and do happen to good people. Denial of this only serves to re-victimize and augment the pain and grief of the already suffering survivor.

Some cultures practice so called "honour killings", carried out in the name of protecting or preserving family honour. In these instances victims are blamed for bringing dishonour upon the family or community. These murders are not just confined to Middle Eastern countries. Canada as well has experienced a number of these horrific slayings.

According to the United Nations there are 5,000 instances annually of women and girls being shot, stoned, burned, poisoned, and buried alive, strangled, smothered or knifed to death by family members.

Another term closely associated with victim blaming is victim facilitation, which was coined by criminologist Marvin Wolfgang among others. Victim facilitation implies that one is not blaming the victim; however, it does suggest that the victim made himself or herself more available or susceptible to an attack. This can be attributed to a number of factors such as a person's lifestyle (example the amount of time he or she spent interacting with strangers); a victim's location at the time of or prior to the murder (example a bar); the clothing the person was wearing (example something 'provocative'); the victim's excessive use of drugs or alcohol.

When someone is murdered, the death is often sudden, violent, final and incomprehensible. The survivors' world is abruptly and forever changed. Life has suddenly lost meaning and many survivors report that they cannot imagine ever being happy again. Add to this society's thoughtlessness by blaming the victim and you can well imagine the sickening impact it has on surviving family members. As an example, defence lawyers may resort to implying that a murder victim's disreputable or careless lifestyle contributed to his or her demise. While reporters and news media can be acutely persistent in their endeavours to obtain "the story" they may print inaccurate information or appear to blame the victim, which not only re-victimizes the family, but can have devastating effects on their emotions, mental and physical well-being.

Particularly in the case of homicide, it is critically important to shift any notion of blame from the victim to the perpetrator where it rightly belongs. Survivors of homicide victims have suffered enough as a result of the violent act against their loved one in addition to being subjected to various forms of re-victimization. Of all the instances of victim blaming, media coverage can be the most damaging because it is instantaneous and has the ability to influence a broad segment of society. Preoccupation with the accused and the horrific details of the offence can romanticize the crime and the murderer and can make "the story" one-dimensional which is an injustice and disservice to our society.