

Helpful things to do

- Allow expression of emotion. Share experiences and talk about the loved one. Allow survivors to go over events as often as they need, and allow plenty of time to work through their emotions.
- Communicate with your partner, children, family, friends, workmates, talk about how you feel and what you need from each other.
- Help with practical things but NEVER pack up personal belongings of a loved one - survivors need to do that *in their own time*.
- Help protect survivors from media and other intrusions.
- Encourage viewing of a loved one where possible as this helps to accept the death. The 'last goodbye' is very important.
- Be active in seeking help wherever possible from counsellors, support groups, or anyone who can help work through the problems.
- Do things together, encourage outings and recreation as sharing special time together is important.
- Don't tell people to 'get over it' or 'get on with life'. This is impossible until you work through many other feelings and take time to deal with the trauma.
- Don't say 'I understand' - You cannot fully understand because people are different and experiences vary.
- Not only immediate family members are affected. Extended family and friends are also seriously affected. Be there for them too, they need all the help they can get.
- Be there for as long as it takes, don't set limits or have unreasonable expectations, there is no time frame. People differ with how long it takes us to come to terms with homicide.

- Be patient and sensitive. You can't take the pain away - journey with someone - be ready to listen, don't judge them, but help them to face reality.
- Talk about the person who has died and call them by name. In time you and others will learn to cope with what happened, but there will always be many reminders such as birthdays, anniversaries, Christmas etc. that are very difficult times. Be there for us no matter what our reactions are, we need family and friends if we are able to recover and rebuild our shattered lives.

For more information

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A guide to help family and friends cope after a homicide



Unlocking a better future for families and friends of victims of homicide



Government of South Australia
Attorney-General's Department



A guide to help family and friends cope after a homicide

Homicide is the most sudden and shocking form of grief inflicted on anyone, and generally takes longer to cope with than any other experience.

Due to the many and varied emotions suffered, such as shock, disbelief, fear, anger, helplessness and depression experienced by survivors, many struggle to cope. People are often surprised at the intensity of their feelings and the amount of time it takes to work through the grieving process. Further, many expectations placed on survivors add to their problems.

The physical effects of grief are often ignored or misunderstood. At times survivors may be labelled as 'not coping' or 'dwelling on events' if they don't fit the 'normal' grieving patterns. Homicide is not a 'normal' death and it takes a lot of patience and understanding by all who come in contact with survivors to help them come to terms with their loss.

Survivors' values, habits, feelings and behaviour can change forever and this is difficult for those close to them. They feel isolated and insecure and are often over sensitive, even about little things. Sometimes people in society even blame the victim's family and distance themselves, as they are afraid to admit this could happen to them. Look for reasons to help them accept these shocking events.

Grief is not just a temporary state of mind and it may take many years before they find the ability to cope with what has happened.

The support of family and friends can greatly help our ability to cope and rebuild survivors' lives. People cannot, however, avoid the grief, sooner or later survivors must work their way through it.

Many survivors comment 'we just want to be treated as normal', but don't stop us talking about our loved ones.

People are all different and so are their reactions to grief and loss of a loved one. The effects vary in time and intensity. For most it is not a smooth passage and is often described as a roller coaster ride, or one step forwards and two back. For many, the feelings of guilt, anger, frustration and hate are very foreign and threaten to overwhelm their lives. They may become very tired trying to control these feelings, which are normal reactions in such circumstances. It is helpful when people are understanding and tolerant of our needs, and encourage us to talk about our feelings rather than pretend they don't exist, just to make others feel better.

Don't expect survivors to be like they used to be - their lives have been changed forever. Help them to accept what they cannot change and let them know that you will still 'be there' for them no matter what. Try not to be judgmental as they are doing the best they can under the circumstances.

Encourage them to seek help from counsellors or other survivors for support.

Recognise reactions and effects

- Shock - disbelief
- Emotional release - crying. This is an important reaction, tears allow the body's natural endorphins to cushion the shock and help us cope.
- Physical symptoms, eg nausea, headaches, constipation, sleeplessness, backache, asthma, memory loss, lack of concentration.

- Emotional turbulence, anger, short temper, irritable, upset, guilt, sadness.
- Unpredictable or unreasonable behaviour. Naughtiness and nightmares in children.
- Spouses/partners fear safety of loved ones and tend to be over protective.
- Due to poor concentration, work patterns and school work in children can be greatly affected.
- Beware of excessive use of alcohol and drugs.
- Family members may become preoccupied with personal problems and seem detached.
- People often suffer feelings of loneliness and isolation even in close families.
- Many people feel they are going 'crazy' but this is a normal reaction to abnormal grief situations.
- Guilt is a common feeling, and the many 'if only's' associated with death.
- Lack of interest in normal activities, it is easy to become apathetic, and because of lack of energy even simple tasks become difficult.
- People loose trust and confidence in others, the world doesn't seem safe.
- Children become grizzly, clingy, and teenagers may rebel so become demanding. Some turn outside the family for support.
- Many of these effects remain for a long period of time or recur after other losses, future crises are harder to handle.
- Sexual relationships may change.

