

## How You Can Help

### Suggestions for helping Survivors of Homicide Victims

#### Suggestions for family & friends:

- In the first days and weeks after the murder, offer help aggressively and concretely. The family may not know what help to ask for.
  - Prepare meals
  - Child care
  - Answer the phone
  - Help make calls or arrangements
  - If media is involved, run interference
- Support is most needed after a few months. Allow time to talk about their grief and be prepared to listen. Ask how you can help. Grief shared is grief diminished. Each time a survivor talks about their loss, a layer of pain is shed.
- Be mindful of anniversaries, holidays or the birth date of the person who was murdered. On these difficult days, people want to know that their loved ones are remembered.
- Families may be involved for years in legal proceedings. Offer help and support during these critical times.
- A funeral is a necessary part of the healing process and those who do not have this opportunity may not face the reality of the death.
- Most importantly, accept their grieving for what it is - a process following a loss.

#### Suggestions for Professionals:

- Information must be delivered accurately and with extreme sensitivity. No information should be withheld, regardless of the professional's feelings, especially if the family requests it. If you cannot answer a question - say so. But let the family know why the question cannot be answered.
- Listen to the needs of the family
  - The need to know what happened
  - The need to see the body or touch the body bag
  - The need to know how much their loved one suffered (and be honest, because they will eventually find out)
  - The need to see crime scene photos. Many professionals, in fear of causing additional trauma, are reluctant to show families the photos.

#### Verbal and Non-Verbal Statements that may be helpful

- Silence
- "You can go on with life, but you can't get over it"
- "Just sit with me. Listen to me. Don't give me advice"
- "I'm sorry"
- "I don't know what to say"
- "What do you want me to do for you?" - and DO it
- Refer to the deceased by name
- Ask about the deceased
- Ask to see photos of the deceased

As Pamela says, "No one has the right to put a limit on grief. It is the only thing we have left of our children and no one can take that from us. Grief does not mean that we are weak or crazy or selfish. It means that we are missing something that was taken from us."

## What to Say to the Grieving

Although many people want to comfort and help the bereaved, the stress and anxiety of the encounter sometimes makes it difficult to know what is actually helpful. Often, the phrase that is meant to help actually produces more pain and distress. What follows is a partial list of phrases that have been found to be helpful in comforting the grieving person.

- I'm sorry
- I'm sad for you
- How are you doing with all this?
- I don't know why it happened
- What can I do for you?
- I'm here and I want to listen
- Please tell me what you are feeling
- This must be hard for you
- What's the hardest part for you?
- I'll call you tomorrow (and do it!)
- You must really be hurting
- It isn't fair, is it?
- You must really feel angry
- Take all the time you need
- Thank you for sharing your feelings

The following list of small gestures and thoughts can mean a great deal to survivors as they struggle with their grief and anger:

- Allow survivors to grieve in whatever way they wish and for as long as they wish
- Allow survivors to cry freely. It is a healthy expression of grief and it releases tensions
- Allow survivors to talk about the victim and the situation. Allow them to talk about the good times and the bad times. Allow them to keep the victim in the family
- Allow survivors to get angry with you, the victim, the murderer, the justice system or simply the unfairness of life. Anger needs expression (not repression) and sharing
- Remember the survivors and victims at holiday time, the anniversary date of the horrific event, and birthdays - let the survivors know you remember too
- Reassure the survivors that the murder was not their fault, the victim's fault or God's fault - put the blame right where it belongs - on the murderer(s)
- Tell survivors that you are sorry the murder happened and that it is horrible that someone killed their loved one. Validate their feelings
- Support survivors in their effort to reconstruct a life, even (or especially) if it means a major change in their lifestyle, or work, or place of residence
- Let survivors know that you will remain their friend and that they mean a great deal to you
- Encourage survivors to seek additional emotional support, whether from mental health professionals or through grief support groups. They should be reassured that their feelings are normal and that these feelings are overwhelming for most individuals

## What Not to Say to the Grieving

*"This happens to all the survivors I know, including myself. The ignorant or unknowing can say things that are sometimes stupid, sometimes insensitive and sometimes both. At one time those remarks would really upset me. But now I try to think that these people don't know what to say because they've never experienced what you have. They just don't know! But then I also try to remember that for those people to know and understand this, that would mean another victim and more survivors. So I try to tell myself they are just lucky and don't know it."*

~George

1. The number one "No No" word is the word "closure." "Closure is simply a media buzz word with no substance", according to Philip Shults, whose 22-year-old son Craig was brutally murdered and whose 18-year-old son Scott committed suicide one year later. The traumatic death of a loved one will never be "closed."

EXAMPLE: The murderer is caught and convicted and receives a sentence of life in prison. Life in prison doesn't usually mean "life" and in some states, the murderer may be eligible parole after a certain number of years. In most cases survivors face a long struggle for justice as murders appeal their convictions or sentences. The surviving families must continually fight to keep the murderer(s) of their loved one(s) behind bars.

EXAMPLE: The murderer is never caught. The surviving families spend the rest of their lives searching for the murderer - living in fear - living with possible anger at law enforcement officials for not solving their loved one's case.

EXAMPLE: The murderer is another family member or loved one.

2. **"Your loved one is in a better place"** - surviving families feel that the "better place" is home with them.
3. **"You need to go on with your life - let it go"** - Jutta, whose daughter Nicole was murdered, says, "That one burns me up. It is difficult to be a non-survivor. Thank God they don't know how we feel. I think they are shocked at the fact that we have a murdered daughter - they don't know how to put their feelings into words because really, how can they understand the shock, guilt, hate, anger, revenge? I mean we have all these feelings bottled up and ready to explode inside."
4. **"I know how you feel"** - unless you have lost a loved one to murder, you will never know how a Survivor feels.

Linda, who lost her brother to murder, says, *"For someone who has not lost a loved one to say to you, "I know how you feel" is not the right thing to say. I don't want anyone to tell me that they know how I feel about losing my brother the way I did, because they don't, and I pray they never have to. If you haven't "been there," you can't know. For some people, "I know how you feel," or "I know what you are going through" is just something they think they are supposed to say, or that they are expected to say. They should say that they don't know how you feel, but would like to do what they can for you. I know that you lost your child, but I really don't know what you went through because I have not been there. I am sorry and sad for you, but I do not know how you feel. I am here for you when and if you want to talk about it. I can listen to what you have to say about it, but I can't tell you that I know how you feel. I can't tell you that you will get over it."*

5. **"He is up with God looking down on me"** - As Mary who lost her son Kyle to murder says, "He needs to be down here with ME."
6. **"Things happen for a reason"** - what possible reason could there be to murder anyone?
7. **"God needs him more than we did"** - who can speak for God?

Erica states that she is sorry for how she feels, but she says, *"I have some questions for good ol' God. Where was He when Hunter's father was violently shaking him and bashing his head into a 'hard object?'" "Where was He when I prayed that my baby would live?" "Where was He when all of this crap was happening?" "Would it have changed so much stuff in the world if He had let my precious angel live?" I know it says that the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, but sometimes I think He is a little misguided in who He takes and when."*

8. **"He will no longer be in pain"** - most loved ones who were murdered weren't in pain to begin with.
9. **"It will be all right"** - how can it be all right? Their loved one has been murdered.
10. **"It will get better"** - things may get easier, but it takes many months and even years - too far in the future for families to find comfort from these words.
11. **"It was God's will"** - what does that make the murderer - God's little helper? Calling a tragic loss the "will of God" can have a devastating impact on the faith of others. Consider Dorothy's experience: *"I was nine years old when my mother died and I was very, very sad. I did not join in the saying of the prayers at my parochial school. Noticing that I was not participating in the exercise, the teacher called me aside and asked what was wrong. I told her my mother died and I missed her, to which she replied, 'It was the will of God. God needs your mother in Heaven.' But I felt that I needed my Mother far more than God needed her. I was angry at God for years because I felt he took her from me."*
12. **"He was in the wrong place at the wrong time"** - this statement places the blame on the victim.
13. **"Time heals all wounds"** - time doesn't heal anything - it's what you do with that time.
14. **"You are so strong"**
15. **"I admire your courage"**
16. **"No sense in crying over spilled milk"**
17. **"Life goes on"**
18. **"Count your blessings"**
19. **"Only the good die young"**
20. **"You still have your memories"**
21. **"What doesn't kill you, helps you"**
22. **"God didn't give you anything you cannot handle"**
23. **"God has something better for you in store"**
24. **"This will pass"**