NCTSN The National Child Traumatic Stress Network

The Power of Parenting:
Helping Your Child After a Family Homicide Loss

OVERVIEW

When families experience the death of a loved one through homicide, their lives are forever changed. Caregivers, even while grieving, can support their children after a family homicide loss. Caring for and supporting your children while dealing with your own pain can be difficult. Remember, there is no right or wrong way to grieve, but some of these ideas, drawn from the experiences of caregivers and young people who have experienced family homicide, may be useful to you on your journey.

> *"The power of parenting in this resource is to validate that this isn't "fixable."*
>
> *- Linda P., surviving spouse of community violence homicide victim and parent to two children under age 5.*

Below are:

- common reactions and feelings of families dealing with homicide losses
- descriptions of tools and coping strategies
- other helpful resources

1 Common Experiences With Family Homicide Loss

For children and adults, losing a family member to homicide can be traumatizing. It may cause a sense of ongoing danger and uncertainty which can affect normal child development. Each child's experience is unique. Posttraumatic stress, grief, guilt, anxiety and depressed feelings are common reactions. Some may respond with sadness and crying while others use humor to cope. Children may also have uncomfortable physical symptoms, such as problems with sleeping, reduced appetite and stomach aches. The response to such a loss may also show up through actions like risk taking behaviors or social withdrawal from others.

To reduce unpleasant feelings, children may try to avoid the scary or sad memories. A common reaction, especially if a child has posttraumatic stress, is to avoid talking or thinking about anything related to the person or how they died. Even happy thoughts and memories about their loved one may cause distress. This may lead to avoiding people, places or things that remind them of the person. Some children get "stuck" on the traumatic aspects of the death which gets in the way of being able to work through their grief.

Common responses to homicide loss include anger, shame, hopelessness, and even resentment.

"My daughter's homicide was related to drug use, so there was so much stigma and blame. She did not deserve to die because of her addiction. Now I'm left to raise her children."

– Ellen S., mother of homicide victim and caregiver to her daughter's children, ages 5 and 7

"It has been 10 years and to this day I still can't believe that my son was killed over 20 dollars. How someone could do that continues to haunt me. There are days I feel it still overwhelms me."

– Eliza L., mother of homicide victim killed at age 24.

"My cousin D'shawn was murdered by someone he knew from the neighborhood. I went home for the funeral, and we were not that close, but I remember seeing him at family get-togethers. It affected me for weeks after his murder. I thought about him, and finding out he had passed made me cry because he was on my mind all the time. I did not need support because murder in my family was not new. A lot of my cousins have been murdered, and it has just become a thing that happens sadly."

– 15-year-old cousin of a homicide victim

2 When Grief is Not Respected or Acknowledged

Homicides within poor communities of indigenous, racially and cultural diverse people are often ignored by society. The sad truth is that the more minority identities a person carries, the less likely it is that their death will be openly acknowledged. This is sometimes referred to as "disenfranchised grief," and can make the circumstances of the death even more painful for surviving family members. Homicide victims, especially indigenous, racially and cultural minority individuals, are often blamed by society for their own deaths. This can cause even more anger, shame, and intense distress among grieving family members.

When homicide deaths are ongoing, people in these communities may find that society is not understanding or empathic with regard to their grief.

Individuals from marginalized communities where homicides are common may find themselves angrily asking questions about why they are experiencing such intense suffering. As a caregiver, it is important to validate this reality and create a safe space for children to talk about it.

This always happens to my people. My people are dying. I am gonna be all alone! I can't take it no more and my Mom is gonna break. I asked her, who is gonna be next?! I am breaking down and I know my Momma is too."

- 17-year-old sibling of a homicide victim

"My teacher couldn't understand when I started crying in class after my cousin was killed. She said, isn't this normal for you by now?"

- 16 year-old cousin of homicide victim.

"You don't get it. It's how my life is. It's always gonna be this way so what's the point? Like how am I supposed to care about this world when all I see is people dying? What is the point when I can't get nothing done right now? I can't think about my future when it's a struggle to get through every day. All I think about is, 'Am I next?'"

3 Ways to Help Your Child

Getting your children to talk to you about their experiences, feelings, memories is one powerful way that you can support them. But coming to you may be difficult for them, especially when they know you are grieving too. Letting your children know you are interested in what they have to say and willing to listen to whatever is on their mind, no matter how painful, can make it easier for them to open up. Below are some approaches that may help them:

1. **Be honest with your children about details regarding the loss, while recognizing they may not be ready to hear it all.** Tell the truth about what happened, using simple language, as you receive facts about the situation leading to the death, and ask your children if they have more questions. Let them know they can keep asking you questions. This allows them to feel in control of the information they're receiving.

2. **Acknowledge that you and your children may feel angry for good reason, and give your children permission to feel enraged.** For many children of color, being openly angry can feel "dangerous," as they have often been taught by caring adults in their lives that angry emotions can be misinterpreted and even punished if you are a person of color. Finding a safe space for them to express their anger and rage is key. For example, allow them to scream, swear, hit pillows, or hit a punching bag within the safety of your home. You might also encourage them to adopt other coping strategies such as exercising, listening to music, art, or playing. These are ways they can express their feelings safely.

3. **Model and label emotional expression.** Sometimes children have an easier time expressing how they're feeling if they observe how their caregivers are responding. Sharing emotions with caregivers and in other safe spaces can be an important part of the healing process. In other words, sometimes we have to "feel it to heal it," and childen may need some guidance to name what they're feeling. For example, a caregiver might say, "I'm still feeling so shocked and sad about what happened. How are you feeling right now?" Talk through any reactions they may be having, letting them know that whatever feelings they have are okay, and if they don't feel like talking at all, that's ok too.

"Your life is changed forever, so I had to learn to be gentle with myself. You have all these complicated feelings and then you have to know your children are having them too."

-Liliana D., surviving parent raising children after her husband's homicide.

4. **Help them to feel safe.** After a homicide death, it is common for children to feel like the world around them is out of control. Consistency and predictability can help to restore their sense of safety. This can include keeping up with the same daily routines and reminding them of things they do have control over that help them feel safer.

5. **Don't be afraid to ask for what you need.** You would be surprised how many people just want to know exactly how they can help after a tragic death. Call on on community members and neighbors to support you with your family's daily needs and emotional responses. This can take some pressure off you and give you more time and space to grieve. You can also ask for support from family, friends, mentors, coaches or others who know your children well. They can provide activities for children who may need time and space just as you do.

6. **Many families who experience homicide have also experienced years of systemic oppression that make their losses feel invisible.** If you find your family's grief is being ignored by the larger community or legal system, you can consider sharing your experience more publicly. Before doing so, ask your children what they want people to know and how they want it shared. Seek out trusted community leaders, organizers, churches, or organizations to support you in finding ways to share your experience and connnect with others who have similar experiences.

"Most of these kids are raised on the streets and know there would be no justice served."

– Clifton F., 54-year-old, community activist.

7. **Because so many families of homicide victims are made to feel as if the victim did something wrong or somehow "deserved" to die, it can be helpful for caregivers to remind children of all of the positive traits and behaviors of the person who died.** Praising the deceased person and talking about what you loved about the person can help to counter any negative messages that children might be hearing from others.

8. **Invite your children to be a part of any community awareness action you participate in.** For example, if there is a vigil or protest related to anti-violence protest in your neighborhood, allow your children to participate and even lead when appropriate. Community awareness activities offer the chance to receive support, and control how the experiences are shared with others. Community accountability and justice processes can also offer the chance to be in control of how individual experiences are shared and to feel heard by others. Although the terrible event can't be undone, being part of a larger community with shared experiences and concerns can be helpful.

4 Seeking Professional Support

A family homicide loss is one of the most traumatic experiences a family can go through. In addition to dealing with their grief, family members often have to deal with reminders about details of the death through contact with law enforcement and court dates. This may include hearing statements that the homicide victim somehow caused the death because of something they said or did. This adds more pain for children and adults in the family.

> "I am ok, but my little brother needs to talk to someone. Can you talk to him because my dad doesn't know how? I think he needs a woman to talk to him about how much he misses mom and how much he blames himself. I saw my brother walking across the bridge and I was thinking he was thinking of doing something stupid."
>
> *-Darnell S., 12-year-old, talking to his therapist, about his mother who was murdered in a domestic violence incident.*

Local grief support services, crisis counseling, school counselors, or other forms of therapy can be helpful to children and families who have experienced a homicide loss. It may feel overwhelming to figure out what services are available to you. Consider asking a friend or member of the faith community to find information for you about help that may be available.

Many families find that they need even more support in the second year after the homicide loss. This is because the reality of the loss sets in after all the "firsts" have passed and there may be less support on hand. Sometimes society can make you feel like you should be "over it" after a year, which is simply not true. There is no timeline for grief, and there is no such thing as "getting over it." In fact, grief is a reflection of the love we had for the person who died, and that love never ends.

Remember that not all therapy is the same, and the first therapist you or your children try may not be a good fit. It is ok to stop meeting with a therapist that doesn't feel right and try other therapists until you find one that does.

> "Therapy is like a pair of jeans. Sometimes they don't fit. You have to keep trying them until you find your fit."
>
> *– Grace P., 28-year-old whose sibling died in domestic violence incident.*

5 Resources

NCTSN Resources you may find helpful include:

- *The Power of Parenting: How to Help Your Child After a Parent or Caregiver Dies*
  https://www.nctsn.org/resources/power-of-parenting-how-to-help-your-child-after-a-parent-or-caregiver-dies
- Community Violence Resources
  https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/community-violence
- Intimate Partner Violence Resources
  https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/intimate-partner-violence

Other resources you may find helpful are:

- *What to Do When the Police Leave: A Guide to the First Days of Traumatic Loss.* Bill Jenkins. (2001) Written by a victim for other victims and their caregivers, this book offers authoritative and invaluable advice, guidance, and resources for families dealing with the traumatic loss of a family member or friend.
- The Dougy Center https://www.dougy.org
- Trauma and Grief Center at Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute https://www.tagcenter.org
- Parents of Murdered Children Website https://pomc.org/
- Homicide Survivors, Inc. https://homicidesurvivorsinc.org/
- Resilient Parenting for Bereaved Families https://bereavedparenting.org

This resource sheet was a collective effort of NCTSN's Partnering With Youth and Families and Bereavement Committees along with community members. Combining the experiences and knowledge of family survivors of homicide, mental health professionals and researchers, the developers include Jeanette Koncikowski, Julie Kaplow, Chris Foreman, Diane Lanni, Shannon CrossBear, Brandon Roiger, John Hill, Irwin Sandler, Marcy Melvin, Sarah Gardner, Melissa Griffin, Anthony Brown, Yvonne Livingston, Liam Spady, and Megan Clarke

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