Note to Departments and notifiers: You may copy this "Guide to Survival" and give it to homicide survivors. The Guide also is available in pamphlet form, at no charge to survivors or others, from the Crime Victim Assistance Division of the Attorney General's Office, 1-800-373-5044.

A Guide To Survival

For Family and Friends of Homicide Victims

Iowa Department of Justice

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A Guide To Survival

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Introduction

Someone you love has been murdered, or was killed by a drunk or reckless driver. It is an understatement to say that your life has been changed. Your anger and pain are deep, and it will take a great deal of hard work and time to recover. You may never feel as if you have "recovered." However, many persons who have been in your situation learn to "manage their grief." You will need time, determination, and, often, the support of a caring listener.

The feelings you experience are likely to be very difficult and foreign for you, but, most likely, they will be similar to what others have felt. This booklet was written for you by counselors from Polk County Victim Services who work with survivors -- with help from people who have lived through the loss of a loved one to homicide.

The Most Common Feelings of Grief

Shock

In the beginning most people feel a profound numbness. Some liken it to "being in a fog." It may be this fog that allows you to accomplish the necessary arrangements for the funeral and other duties.

Turmoil

When the fog clears, most people's emotions fall into turmoil. You may have flashbacks of the moment you were notified of the death, or of the last time you saw your loved one alive. You may dream of your loved one, or believe that he or she will soon "walk through that door." Part of you will deny that your loved one really is dead.

You may experience many grief spasms at first, crying as if you couldn't stop. The spasms gradually will come farther apart. You may have panic attacks and feel afraid for your life or the lives of other family members. You may be filled with restlessness and unable to concentrate on anything. You may be unable to sleep at night or find it very hard to get out of bed in the morning.

As the reality of death sinks in, depression usually is not far behind. The world may seem to lose its meaning for you. Activities that you once enjoyed may seem like a burden. You may feel as if there is little point in going on, or you may want to withdraw from everyone.

During all of these emotions and phases, you need to keep talking with someone you can trust and with someone who will listen with a non-judgmental ear. It is the only way we know to keep from getting stuck in one of the phases.

Searching for Understanding

You will probably experience a great need to understand why this tragedy happened. In your search for understanding, you may feel the need to know everything there is to know about what happened, where it happened, and who did it. If someone is arrested, you may want to know as much as you can find out about the person.

You may expect the criminal justice system to work more quickly and keep you informed better than it does. (For information about how to register to receive information about the progress of a case through the legal system, please see the end of this booklet.)

Rumors and opinions of many people may come your way concerning the crime, the motivation, and the criminal. You may decide to attend the trial, if there is one, as part of your search for why this happened. Oftentimes you will not find answers to all of your questions. (If a survivor is a witness at the trial, he or she could be barred from attending the remainder of the trial, if witnesses are sequestered. You can ask the County Attorney for information on this.)

Guilt

Each survivor lives with *"what-ifs.."* "Why did I let her go home alone?" "What if I had been there with him?" This is a normal reaction. Please remember that no one can predict the future or recreate what might have been. We can't change the events that took place, and to continue blaming ourselves will only be destructive.

Anger

Anger can be both frightening and motivating. Sometimes it may feel as if anger will overwhelm you. It may be directed at the murderer, society, the criminal justice system, family members, or friends. It is not uncommon to be angry at God. Many people feel *guilty* about their anger, but it is a completely normal feeling that many people experience.

Anger may immobilize you or move you to relentless activity. It is a natural reaction to severe loss. Your anger will never completely go away. With time and

support your anger can be managed and may even contribute to helping you gain back some control in your life.

Revenge

For the first time in their lives, many survivors find themselves thinking of ways to kill another human being, the killer. Understandably, some people are deeply disturbed by this emotion. You may wonder if you are losing your mind. You aren't. You are normal. Counselors of survivors find that almost every person they work with thinks about revenge. Having these feelings does not mean you are going to act on them.

Some people will tell you that wanting revenge is unhealthy and that the only way you can find peace is to forgive. If forgiveness is in your heart, fine, but do not allow people to place unnecessary guilt on you. Chances are they have never been through what you are experiencing.

Coping With the Reactions of Others

Each of us is an individual. We like different foods, wear different clothing, and choose unique lifestyles. It stands to reason that, at the most painful time in our lives, we would also grieve in our own way, How we choose to grieve is determined by three things -- our personal view of death, how society views death, and our individual personalities.

Family

When a homicide happens to a family, you might expect it to pull the family together. This is not always true. It is not unusual for counselors to see families separate, both physically and emotionally. At this time, communication is very important. Work hard to express your feelings within the family and with supportive friends.

Friends

When you hurt, you turn to people who have always been there, your friends. But where are they a month, six months or a year after the murder? Often, they have gone back to their lives, but you still need to talk.

If you bring up the homicide, some people will change the subject. Many people do not want to listen to the details of the tragedy, even though survivors often need to talk about details. People often can't bring themselves to talk about homicide. They may feel they do not have the words to say or the ability to listen. They may feel hopelessly inadequate. And the loss of your loved one probably hit them with a stark reality: If it happened to you, it could happen to them.

You may notice that people you have known for years avoid you on the street or in a store. Your co-workers may avert their eyes and "not see you." They usually have no idea that this feels like rejection and only adds to your grief.

You can face this problem in various ways. You can write these friends off and stop seeing them. You can continue contact but avoid the subject you most need to discuss. You can raise the issue directly with your friends, which may allow you to deal openly and honestly with each other. You can add to your circle of friends other people who have lost loved ones or who are willing to share your experience. Many people are ready to respond when they understand how important it is to talk with you about the experience rather than avoid it.

Coping with Holidays

Holidays can be very difficult. They usually are an accumulation of traditions or customs created by families to be shared with family members. When a member of the family is no longer there to share a cherished tradition, the holiday can become a painful reminder instead of a time of joy.

The first time you celebrate a holiday after a death, it may become a nightmare. Holiday gifts that once were ripped open immediately may sit for days. Thanksgiving is hollow. ("What do I have to be thankful for?" shouts the survivor.) New Year's Day and birthdays, which celebrate another year of life, become reminders of death.

You may find the need to develop new traditions. For some, a trip out of town at holiday-time is beneficial. A birthday can be observed by donating to a charitable organization or doing something that is meaningful to you. There is no rule to follow on how to "get through" a holiday. You will grieve. Allow yourself to grieve. It is a key part of the healing process.

Coping with the Criminal Justice System

Most victims are new to the workings of the criminal justice system. As you progress through various stages, you may become angry and frustrated because your impressions of the justice system are false. People naturally want to see justice done swiftly so that they can heal from that part of the trauma. But the criminal justice system often seems to prolong people's grief.

For example, you may find that justice does not always prevail. Sometimes, the guilty are released on procedural grounds. Many homicide cases are never solved or do not result in convictions, even if the identity of the offender is known.

Sometimes, the only ones serving a “life sentence” are the victim and the victim’s loved ones. Cases may drag on and on. Many cases never go to trial or take years for a conviction. If there is a conviction, it likely will be appealed, and a small fraction of cases find their way back to court for another trial.

Those who administer our laws -- law officers, prosecutors, judges, and others -- must deal every day with the most brutal crimes. Sometimes they build self-protective barriers which come across to victims as insensitivity.

To help you through this ordeal, seek out supportive friends, counselors or advocates.

Remember, too, that Iowa law gives survivors of homicide victims certain rights to information about pending cases, and other assistance. Please see the end of this booklet for information.

Epilogue

The rest of your life is the epilogue. The widow of a homicide victim said recently, “My life has been permanently changed. I don’t know who I am anymore.” This is a common reaction for most homicide survivors.

Your life *has* changed. You will see things differently now. You may never again want to watch violence portrayed on TV. You may have to struggle with new or stronger prejudices for the rest of your life. You may feel irritated by “the little things” in life. Or, incidents that once seemed to be a catastrophe will be only minor aggravations because you have already survived the worst.

Your faith may be shaken. You may find it impossible to trust strangers. You may feel that laws you thought were designed to protect you are really designed to protect criminals. You may wonder if the victim has any rights.

But most *survivors slowly heal.* Meaning comes back into their daily activities. They find people to stand by them and give them support, Some find sensitivity for others they never experienced before. Most find joy in the treasured memories of their loved ones. Many join others who want to carry on the vigil for all of those who have died as a result of violence.

This booklet was written by Polk County Victim Services, Des Moines, Iowa, based on material from Families and Friends of Missing Persons and Violent Crime Victims, of Seattle, Washington.

POLK COUNTY VICTIM SERVICES

Sources of Assistance or Information for Survivors

Victim Compensation:

Survivors of homicide victims may be eligible for compensation for out-of-pocket expenses relating to the crime, such as: compensation for cleaning up a murder site (up to $1,000); compensation for funeral and burial expenses (up to $2,500); compensation for reasonable charges for counseling of survivors of a homicide victim (up to $500 per survivor or a total of $2,000 per claim); and compensation for loss of support for dependents of homicide victims (up to $2,000 per dependent or a total of $6,000 per claim.) (Compensation limits as of July 1, 1992; subject to change by the Legislature.)

The compensation program, which is funded entirely by fines and penalties paid by criminals, never can erase the painful memories of a crime, but it can help people in recovery and help ease financial burdens faced by survivors.

For information or an application, please contact the Attorney General's Office, Crime Victim Assistance Division, Old Historical Building, Des Moines, Iowa 50319. Telephone 1-800-373-5044 or 515-281-5044.

Information about a criminal case, and "victim impact statements":

Iowa Code Chapter 910A gives victims a right to be notified by authorities with information about the progress of a case, and the right to file a "victim impact statement" to assist the court in sentencing if there is a conviction. Immediate family of homicide victims are considered victims under this law.

To register as a victim or for information, contact the county attorney in the county where the crime occurred.

Other aid for homicide survivors:

In Iowa, there are services for survivors in some communities, such as support groups, court advocacy and referrals to counseling. **For information on possible resources, please call the Attorney General's Crime Victim Assistance Division at 1-800-373-5044 or 515-281-5044.**

For additional copies of this booklet:

Call or write the Attorney General's Crime Victim Assistance Division, Old Historical Building, Des Moines, Iowa 50319. Phone 1-800-373-5044 or 515-281-5044.