

**You're not alone.  
We're here to support.**

**There is no timeline for grief.  
Knowing there are supports  
and resources available can  
give hope as you move through  
your grief.**

# Grief From Homicide

Grief resulting from the murder of a loved one is always complicated. This sudden violent death leaves survivors of homicide with intense feelings of pain and unanswered questions. Although individuals have unique internal coping skills, nothing can prepare a person for the sudden agony and suffering that follows the homicide of a loved one.

## Survivor's Thoughts and Feelings



### Shock, Numbness, and Denial

Shock, numbness, and denial can feel concerning and you may wonder if you are processing your loss. These emotions are common and protect your mental well-being as you begin your grief journey; they are part of your coping mechanisms that occur naturally. The feelings and pain connected to loss would be too overwhelming to process all at once.



### Fear/Helplessness

During grief, intense feelings of fear and helplessness are often experienced. Fear is a natural response for survivors of homicide loss; your sense of safety for yourself and loved ones may be greatly impacted, leaving you feeling vulnerable and viewing the world as dangerous. As a survivor, your fears are not irrational; with support, these feelings can lessen over time.



### Guilt

The murder of a loved one may cause intense feelings of guilt for things left unspoken or said, things done or not done, or feeling that in some way you may have been able to prevent the death. This guilt may also be intensified when hearing how others would have managed the situation differently. It is important to remember that comments made by others in this regard, come from a person's own fear and desire to feel safe.



### Blame

Feelings of blame are often connected to a desire to feel a sense of control in life again, resolving the "unanswerable question of Why?" (A. Wolfelt). As a survivor, you have a right to understand who is responsible for your loved one's death. Self-blame (or guilt) does not make sense in this case, because the events leading to, and the actions of others were not in your control.



### Anger

Anger is a typical reaction and plays an important role at different times during your grief journey. Anger can provide a sense of control, enhance motivation, and push you to complete tasks. It can present as frustration, aggravation, irritability, etc. Anger plays the role of a secondary emotion, protesting what has happened, and against injustice. Anger is protecting you from feeling depressed, helpless or demoralized.

Rage is also a normal emotional response for grievers of homicide loss. It is important to know that rage tends to come from a place of longing. Although this emotion is anticipated, receiving support to learn how to manage the intensity of the emotion is recommended to prevent violent outbursts or reactions.



### Depression and Loneliness

Depression and loneliness may seem to last forever. Outside factors, such as court delays, difficulty accessing or gathering information about your loved one's death, may cause you to feel that you are unable to progress forward.

Depression can disturb sleeping and eating habits. It can negatively impact your energy levels, causing day-to-day tasks or caring for yourself to feel overwhelming. Depression can lower your interest in pleasurable activities or connecting with others. Distancing from supports can increase loneliness and survivors may feel that they are on their own. Suicidal thoughts or actions may also occur. In this case, it is recommended to seek professional intervention immediately.

## Homicide Grief Reactions/Responses



### Mental Conflict

This may last for months or years, depending on the events leading up to and after your loved one's homicide.

#### *What can occur:*

Your loved one's death does not make sense; you are unable to mentally and emotionally process this information. Your mind is trying to replay events over and over again as a way to work through unanswerable questions. You may be searching for information to challenge this new reality or may be repeating questions to others to receive clarity, although the answers you receive may not meet your needs.



### Retaliatory Thoughts and Impulses

This response can cause distress for you as a survivor; you may feel like "you are going crazy". It includes vivid imagery of your loved one's death and what you would do to the murderer. These types of thoughts can have you second guess your own beliefs and values.

#### *What can occur:*

You may be experiencing feelings of rage and having thoughts of what you would do to the person who killed your loved one. Fantasizing about your reactions is normal, but one must recognize this as an emotional response and not utilize this to cause pain or to hurt another person. These thoughts can be scary for you as a survivor and may cause you to feel that you are unsafe to be around. Although you may want to withdraw from others, being connected to supports, either personal or professional, can assist in your healing.



### Struggles to Return to Routines

You are a changed person, life as you knew it was altered with no warning. It may seem that others are moving forward and you may feel like people don't understand your grief as well as the pain you are experiencing.

#### *What can occur:*

Since your loved one's death, you may be unable to concentrate and feel that completing the smallest tasks depletes all of your mental and emotional energy. Things you held as important may not hold the same value right now. Waves of grief appear at any time, often without warning, and those around you may feel that you are not "moving on". Grief is unique to each person, although there may be similarities, your grief will not look or feel like anyone else's. Grief following a homicide is complicated; it takes time to work through and does not follow a schedule. Trust in yourself and the steps you are making, no matter how large or small they may feel in the moment. Your process is your progress.

## Physical Symptoms of Distress

- Tightness in throat or chest.
- Shortness of breath.
- Exhaustion.
- Headaches, stomachaches, digestive-related concerns.
- Muscle tension or weakness.
- Oversensitivity to noise.
- Panic.
- Heightened startle response.



The Victim Advocates and Assistant U.S. Attorneys United States Attorney's Office District of Columbia (n.d.). Coping after a homicide: A guide for family & friends. VAWnet.org. (n.d.). Retrieved January 15, 2023, from <https://vawnet.org/material/coping-after-homicide-guide-family-friends>

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