

## **A CHILD IS MURDERED – THE FAMILY AFTERWARDS**

**By Gary Rosenfeldt**

### **FIRST CONTACT – The Police**

The first person to come into contact with the family of the victim is the police. It is imperative that contact be in person, but this is not always the case. Police officers, in assessing the situation, should call a doctor if it is deemed necessary. It is essential that someone be with the family when the police leave.

After the police leave, the family is in a critical stage of shock, and sometimes disbelief, at what has happened. Anxiety, depression, anger and confusion are common problems among crime victims at this stage.

Just having someone to listen is extremely important. Inter-family relationships can become strained at this time. When a child has been murdered that parents tend to blame themselves and each other. The father will feel inadequate in that he was not there to protect the child. He may blame the mother for letting the child alone too much, or letting the child go to the store, or whatever. The family must be made to realize that they did not commit the crime.

The criminal is the only person who caused the tragedy, and nothing could have been done to prevent his dirty work. The criminal is the problem, not the family or their lifestyles.

The next few weeks are extremely critical in the lives of the family. Members of the family live in a state of chaos and disruption. At times they may believe that it did not really happen. The parents may find themselves looking out the window constantly, as if expecting the child to come home. Each child they pass on the street may look like theirs. They may chase after a child if he or she resembles their own, believing in their minds that it is their child. These situations can last for years after the crime.

Numbness can coincide with disbelief. The family can carry on living on a day-to-day basis, but totally forget other important things in their lives. They may even forget who came to visit the week before. It is an emotional state in which the individual is essentially withdrawing from the stressful situation. Sometimes the family will remain in this condition for a considerable length of time.

Denial may be a part of the shock and disbelief. Individuals may block out all or part of the terrifying incident. Other children in the family may react in a similar manner. Extreme anger is common with brothers and sisters of a murder victim. Younger children can feel guilty because they do not cry enough. With young children, the full impact may not really

hit them until years after the crime. They may also feel neglected because of the attention to their murdered brother or sister. They must be made to feel that they are still important in the family unit.

Other children in the family must be told in the best possible way if there was a sexual assault connected with the death of their brother or sister. They will hear the details on the news at some time – so they must be prepared in advance for it. It is a horrible shock for the brother or sister of a murder victim to hear the grisly details of a sexual assault on the radio, or read it in the paper. The parents are best suited to explain the situation, or help can be obtained from professionals.

Crime is intentional, and it is very hard for the family of the victim to accept an intentional crime as a random event. The senselessness of the crime increases the frustration and confusion. It is also sudden, arbitrary and unpredictable. This creates a sense of helplessness in the family of the victim. Fear for the safety of one's other children can also be a serious problem during the recovery process. Even if the killer has been caught, the family lives in fear that it will happen to another child.

The important thing to remember is that the parents, brothers and sisters of a murdered child want to talk about their loved one. The family may not want to look at family photos for years; but it is necessary to mention their loved one when talking about family events, holidays, etc.

It is not necessary to talk continuously of the crime to the family. Friends and close relatives can simply talk normally of events in their lives and should the murdered child's name come up, continue with the conversation. There may be hurt in the eyes of the family, remembering what has happened, but conversation can return to normal – and they will be alright. It is much worse to live in an atmosphere where it is wrong to even mention the victim's name. This is the part that usually really hurts the family.

## HOW TO HELP

Here are some ideas in dealing with the family of a murder victim:

1. Encourage the victim's family to talk to you about how he or she is feeling. Do not fall into the trap of assuming that men handle this kind of distress "better" than women.
2. Tell the family your feelings about the crime. Be open and honest of how you feel.
3. Remind them that their confusing emotions are normal.
4. Encourage the family to seek out professional help if needed. (Alcohol sometimes becomes a secondary problem)
5. Help the family find out what the public services are available to them.
6. Try not to project your own feelings on those around you. Be understanding of the fact that people cope in different ways, and at a different pace.
7. Be a good listener. Often crime victims simply need someone to share with.
8. Encourage the family to speak out concerning their feelings on the crime. If their child was murdered by someone on parole, encourage them to write their Member of Parliament and the Parole Board.
9. Accompany the victim's family to court, and try to provide them with as much information as possible.
10. Ask what you can do to help in the future, and take the time to call back on a regular basis for a while.

## THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

The family of a homicide victim must first suffer the loss of a loved one in the most horrendous manner, and then endure a lengthy criminal justice procedure. Some cases take years to eventually come to trial, and during this time, the family must often deal with uncaring or insensitive officials.

Each stage of the process may be routine to police and officials (crown prosecutors, coroners, etc.) but to the family the experiences can have serious, lasting, emotional impact.

The news media is frequently responsible for the family learning of their son's or daughter's murder, or sexual assault before the murder. In a large number of cases, the family must learn the grisly details of the murder in the evening paper.

At a trial or hearing, the family of a murder victim is often pushed out into the hallway because of overcrowding in the court room. The family feels that they do not matter in the Criminal Justice process.

The horror starts sometimes with a phone call. Someone tells you that your child's body has been found somewhere. The family is in a state of shock – and then they read in the paper that someone has been arrested for the murder. This is another shock to the family, making the situation so much more real. After following the trial in the newspapers, they hear that the murderer has been found or pleaded guilty. (Some families attend the trial; others cannot face the murderer). The “guilty plea” or hearing that the criminal has been found guilty, is another horrible experience for the family. Everything seems so real and final.

The family of the murder victim has become the forgotten, secondary victim to the crime. They are totally lost in the Criminal Justice system.

The Criminal Justice system in Canada does not involve the family of the victim of the crime, unless of course they must appear as witnesses in the court case. What usually happens, is the family of the victim is not even contacted when an arrest is made. In many cases the family will learn of the arrest, the preliminary hearing, and the actual trial in the news and never be contacted by police, prosecuting attorney's, or anyone involved in the Criminal Justice system.

The police would be responsible for keeping the family informed – at least until the trial. What usually happens in a murder case is that everyone simply does their job: the police make the arrest; the prosecutor prosecutes the criminal; and he is then turned over to the jails to serve his time. The family is left feeling empty because they have been totally ignored.

Victim Impact Statements are one way for the family to become involved in the process. After the jury has brought in a guilty verdict, a member of the family should be allowed to

read a statement to the court, before sentencing, to tell the court what the crime has done to their family. After sentencing, the Crown Prosecutor should take the time and explain the sentence to the family; (Exactly what does the term ‘life imprisonment’ really mean?).

Close relatives to the family may react in differing ways – but usually the attitude is to put the ugliness of the crime in the past. “Forget what has happened and carry on with living.” Parents of a murdered child cannot and will not normally do this.

Because of this, many close families seem to draw apart at a time when they really need each other. Visits can become further apart, and the family visits that do take place can become strained. The same problem can also happen with close family friends.

Families of murder victims must be kept informed of proceedings, from the time of the crime, until the person convicted of the crime has been sent to prison. Even then the family should be informed of exactly what the sentence means, and what type of security surrounds the criminal. They must be made aware of what really happens in the prison system, parole system, etc.

Victims of crime sometimes feel that society in general has let them down, to have allowed such a thing to happen. To then be treated in an inhumane manner by police and other officials, is another agonizing blow. Police, crown prosecutors, coroners, and others in the Criminal Justice Procedure must recognize that the family of a murder victim has suffered the most horrendous crime possible, and that the rights of these individuals must be fulfilled.

## **UNDERSTANDING GRIEF**

Grief, with its many ups and downs, lasts far longer than society in general recognizes. Be patient with yourself. Each person’s grief is individual. You and your spouse will experience it and cope with it differently.

Crying is an acceptable and healthy expression of grief and releases built-up tension for mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters. Cry as freely as you feel the need.

Physical reactions to the death of a child may include loss of appetite or overeating, sleeplessness, and sexual difficulties. Parents may find that they have very little energy and cannot concentrate. A balanced diet, rest and moderate exercise are especially important for the whole family at this time.

Avoid the use of drugs and alcohol. Medication should be taken sparingly and only under the supervision of your physician. Many substances are addictive and can lead to a chemical dependency. In addition, they may stop or delay the necessary grieving process.

Friends and relatives may be uncomfortable around you. They want to ease your pain but do not know how. Take the initiative and help them learn how to be supportive to you. Talk about your child so they know this is appropriate.

Whenever possible, put off major decisions (changing residence, changing jobs, etc.) for at least a year.

Avoid making hasty decisions about your child's belongings. Do not allow others to take over or to rush you. You can do it little by little whenever you feel ready.

Parents may feel they have nothing to live for and may think about a release from this intense pain. Be assured that many parents feel this way but that a sense of purpose and meaning does return. The pain does lessen.

Guilt, real or imagined, is a normal part of grief. It surfaces in thoughts and feelings of "if only". In order to resolve this guilt, learn to express and share these feelings, and learn to forgive yourself.

Anger is another common reaction to loss. Anger, like guilt, needs expression and sharing in a healthy and acceptable manner.

Children are often the forgotten grievers within a family. They are experiencing many of the same emotions you are, so share thoughts and tears with them. Though it is a painful time, be sure they feel loved and included.

Holidays and the anniversaries of your child's birth and death can be stressful times. Consider the feelings of the entire family in planning how to spend the day. Allow time and space for your own emotional needs.

A child's death often causes a parent to challenge and examine his faith or philosophy of life. Don't be disturbed if you are questioning old beliefs. Talk about it. For many, faith offers help to accept the unacceptable.

It helps to become involved with a group of parents having similar experiences; sharing eases loneliness and promotes the expression of your grief in an atmosphere of acceptance and understanding.

Bereaved parents and their families can find healing and hope for the future as they reorganize their lives in a positive way.