



# **Survivors of Violent Death**

**T**his statistic, as do all statistics, had a name—Delbert—and a mother. And that mother's world changed forever on August 12, 1994. That was the day Delbert, the youngest of her children, was killed by a drunk driver—a driver who later would be convicted of reckless homicide.

Delbert, who was 17 when he died, was one of the more than 45,000 victims of criminal homicide annually in the United States. A criminal homicide occurs when one person is suspected or convicted of causing the death of another—either intentionally, as in many murder cases, or because the killer has acted in a reckless or negligent manner. More than 130,000 survivors are left each year to cope with the deep and bitter grief of a loved one's violent death.



**W**hen a loved one dies violently, you are almost certain to feel shock, disbelief and confusion. A kind of numbness may envelop you. That's nature's insulation, cushioning the blow. A sense of intense turmoil may alternate with the feeling of numbness. If you are a survivor of violent death, the days and months to come might bring:

**Immediate physical and mental reactions to the crisis.** These may include inability to sleep, lack of appetite, anxiety, numbness, nausea, fatigue, feeling alienated from the world, a sense of isolation, anger, fear, intense sadness, or an inability to concentrate.

Survivors commonly feel hopeless and helpless. In addition to the loss of a loved one, they may experience a sense of loss of control over their lives, loss of security, or loss of trust in God or people around them. With adults and especially for children,

reactions may include loss of well-being, a lost sense of fairness, and a feeling of vulnerability.

**Longer-term physical and mental reactions.**

These may include intrusive thoughts, nightmares, terror attacks, a continued sense of isolation, difficulty in communicating, sleep disturbances, depression, inability to feel emotion, disruption of sexual activity, startled reactions, irritability, and poor concentration.

**Memory-triggered crisis reactions.** Everyday events might trigger crisis reactions in survivors similar to those they suffered because of the death. Anger and rage are normal. You might become angry at physicians and nurses for not saving your loved one, or at the person who caused the death, even if it was an accident. You might be angry at the one who died for being careless. The anniversary of the death is a painful reminder. Holidays, birthdays and other once-happy occasions are marred.



## **YOU'RE GOING TO MAKE IT**

You are in a major crisis. But you will get through it. With time, and with help from family and friends, and with a combination of struggle and surrender, you will see daylight again. You will learn and heal and grow. In your heart there will always be an ache for your lost loved one, but your incredible pain will gradually ease. You will get better.

## **REACH OUT TO FRIENDS AND RELATIVES**

Let people know what has happened. Reach out for support. If you have to go to the police station or morgue, take others with you. The supportive presence of those who live on and care about you will give you the strength to face the trauma and keep going. This will be true throughout your painfully slow journey through grief to healing. Allow friends to help out. Accept both emotional support and assistance with daily tasks. Ask for what you need.

## **ACCEPT AND EXPRESS YOUR FEELINGS**

Whatever your emotions and thoughts, they are part of the difficult and healing process of grief work. Stay open to your feelings as they arise. You are grieving not only the death of your loved one, but also how he or she died. Accept the intensity of your feelings. Be very compassionate and kind to yourself. Realize that your anguish, rage and confusion are the beginnings of a natural healing process—a process you cannot rush, a process that will have a variety of ups and downs.

You might feel guilty for having allowed your loved one to go out that evening, for having moved to a city with more crime, for having not spent more time with the victim. For simply surviving.

Guilt, regret and rage are normal. Fear and panic are also common after the trauma of violent death. Remember that the only feelings that don't heal are the ones we push away or hide. Express yourself. Let it out. Talk. Cry. Scream. Pound with your fist on a pillow or sofa. Run laps. Just don't bottle up your anger; it causes stress and can affect job performance

and relationships. You have to deal with your sorrow and anger. The only way out of your pain is through it.

## **BE PATIENT WITH YOURSELF**

No matter what form it takes, a violent death makes the grieving process more difficult.

As bad as it is in the beginning, your sorrow and sense of loss will probably intensify as the weeks roll by. You will eventually feel better, but it will be a gradual process marked by unexpected flare-ups of grief. Don't defeat yourself by having unrealistic expectations. Be patient with yourself, and the healing process will move along much more smoothly.

## **WHEN TO SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP**

If you find yourself feeling consistently hostile, depressed or fearful; if your thoughts keep dwelling on the details of the violent death; if you're having regular nightmares; if your health has suffered markedly; or if you simply want an objective person to talk with—reach out for assistance. Hospice bereavement counselors, the clergy, mental health professionals, and family therapists are among the trained professionals who can assist you. At times we all need a helping hand. Reaching out for professional guidance is a mark of courage and intelligence.

## **ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS FOR YOUR JOURNEY OF HEALING**

As you move into and through your grief, these guidelines may ease your way:

- **Breathe!** In the stress of grieving, we often tighten our muscles, particularly in the lower stomach area. Thus we fail to breathe properly, de-energizing and stressing ourselves. Occasionally take in a slow, deep breath: Allow your belly to expand as if it were a balloon filling with air. Then relax as your breath gently, naturally flows out. As you go through the day, notice your breathing. Avoid tensing the muscles of your belly. Breathe with a soft belly.
- **Be kind to yourself.** You have been brutally



wounded. You need to give yourself special care. Tune into and respond to the needs of your body. Get some exercise, such as a walk in the fresh air, and take plenty of time for rest and sleep. Do your best to eat food that comforts you and properly fuels your body. Remember to drink enough water and other fluids. And be very accepting, understanding and gentle with yourself—just as you would to a dear friend if he or she were suffering.

- **Share your grief.** Though you will need time to yourself, it's also essential that you talk about your grief. Find at least one person whom you like and trust, and pour out your heart and soul. Do this regularly, as long as you feel the need. The violent death of a loved one is a devastating experience; you will probably need to periodically talk about it even well into the future.

- **Consider joining a support group.** Like many before you, you may derive invaluable assistance from a bereavement support group. It helps so much to share with and support those who, like yourself, are grieving the death of someone close. To find out about local support groups, check with your regional hospice or mental health center.

- **Write your grief.** Daily, or perhaps several times a week, record your thoughts and feelings in a journal, diary or notebook. Let your pen do the talking as you express yourself to your deceased loved one, to the person who caused the death, or perhaps to God if you are a person of faith. Or you can write “Dear Diary” letters, “talking” to your diary as if it were a trusted and wise friend; and then letting your diary respond back to you through your own pen. It's a creative way of dialoguing with your inner self. Putting your genuine thoughts and feelings on paper is a therapeutic, healing experience.

- **Say no to persistent negative thoughts.** You are probably struggling with a variety of repetitive negative thoughts, perhaps mental flashes of the death scene or thoughts of revenge. Acknowledge and face these thoughts. However, once you have felt them, and learned from them, it's time to release these troublesome thoughts. When unhealthy picture or word

thoughts start to crowd in, mentally say “Stop!” while visualizing a large stop sign. Then immediately put your mind on more positive, constructive thoughts. Doing something physical, like taking a walk or talking to another person, can also help you to break loose from self-defeating thoughts.

- **Forgive and let go.** In the aftermath of a violent death, it is common to harbor feelings like blame, guilt, and a desire for revenge. At some point you need to let go and do your best to forgive. **Forgiveness does not condone wrong or hurtful behavior**, but *it can free you* from self-defeating blame, resentment and guilt. Forgiveness also brings peace of mind, freedom of spirit, and an opportunity to make fresh starts. For your own well-being and for the benefit of those around you, try to extend forgiveness to others and to yourself.

- **If you are spiritually inclined, draw on this resource.** Your relationship to God or a guiding power can bring immense comfort in the wake of violent death. Nourish yourself spiritually in whatever way works best for you—prayer, being with nature, meditation, or the drinking in of sacred scripture. Pour out your heart; express your heartache, rage and frustration; ask questions. Then trustfully, patiently open to the inner guidance you receive. Listen to the whispers of your heart and soul.

- **Look for bright spots.** To complete your healing you must continue to stay open to your pain as it arises. But gradually balance that pain by embracing the small, simple gifts of delight that come your way—a beautiful sunset, the laughter of children at play, the caress of a gentle breeze, a co-worker who makes you chuckle, or a warm hug from a dear friend. The more you look for bright spots, the more they will find you and bless you.

- **Make some fresh starts.** After you've given yourself plenty of space to grieve and heal—and only you can know how long that will take—it's time to begin making fresh starts. What would you love to do? Let yourself dream; then follow your heart and step out in some new directions. Travel, take an enjoyable class, make some new friends, or launch into a hobby that fascinates you. Bring your visions to life.

**SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS**

The national headquarters of most support organizations can provide information on local chapters, members and resources. Here are some organizations that may be of interest to you:

- **Parents of Murdered Children.** 100 East Eight Street, Room B-41, Cincinnati, OH 45202, (513) 721-5683.
- **Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD).** Support for those who have had someone killed by a drunk driver. 511 East John Carpenter Freeway, Suite 100, Irving, TX 75062, (800) 438-6233.
- **The National Organization for Victim Assistance (NOVA).** 1757 Park Road, NW, Washington, DC 20010, (202) 232-6682.

**REFERENCES**

Fitzgerald, H. (1994). *The Mourning Handbook: A Complete Guide for the Bereaved.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

*Survivors of Homicide Victims: Network Information Bulletin*, National Organization for Victim Assistance. Vol. 2, No. 3, October 1994.

Wolfelt, A. *Helping a Homicide Survivor Heal*, Batesville Management Services, 1993.

Young, M. *Crisis Intervention.* National Organization for Victim Assistance.

*Prepared by Don Blue, Fayette County Public Schools; and Sam Quick, Human Development & Family Relations Specialist. For his editorial assistance, we extend appreciation to Robert L. Kaiser, Jr., Journalist, Lexington, Kentucky.*

This GriefWork publication is one of a large series of fact sheets on topics related to death and dying. Educational programs of the Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service serve all people regardless of race, color, age, sex, religion, disability, or national origin.

Copyright© 1998 University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service, 206 Scovell, Lexington, KY 40546-0064.

Made available in Iowa by Iowa State University Extension.

... and justice for all  
The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital or family status. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Many materials can be made available in alternative formats for ADA clients. To file a complaint of discrimination, write USDA, Office of Civil Rights, Room 326-W, Whitten Building, 14th and Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410 or call 202-720-5964.  
Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Stanley R. Johnson, director, Cooperative Extension Service, Iowa State University of Science and Technology, Ames, Iowa.

