

# Frontline

*This newsletter is dedicated to professional caregivers. It is our hope this newsletter will help you give comfort and strength to those you serve.*

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## Helping Homicide Survivors Heal



By Alan D. Wolfelt, PhD

A family has experienced the sudden, violent death of someone they love. You want to help, but aren't sure how to go about it. This article will guide you in ways to turn your cares and concerns into positive actions.

### Traumatic and Violent Death

Death by homicide creates an overwhelming grief for survivors. Their world has been turned upside down. Nothing in life prepares survivors for the reality that someone they love has died a violent death.

Murder results in survivors grieving not only the death, but how the person died. A life has been cut short through an act of cruelty. The disregard for human life adds overwhelming feelings of turmoil, distrust, unjustness and helplessness to normal senses of loss and sorrow.

### Murder and Social Stigma

Survivors of murder victims enter into a world that is not understood by most people. A sad reality is that members of a community where a tragic murder has occurred sometimes blame the victim or survivors. Out of a need to protect themselves from their own personal feelings of vulnerability, some people reason that what has happened has to be somebody's fault. This need to "place blame" is projected in an effort to fight off any thoughts that such a tragedy would ever happen to them.

As a result of this fear and misunderstanding, survivors of homicide deaths are often left feeling abandoned at a time when they desperately need unconditional support and understanding. Homicide survivors suffer in a variety of ways: one, because they need to mourn the loss of someone who has died; two, because

they have experienced a sudden, traumatic death; and three, because they are often shunned by a society unwilling to enter into the pain of their grief.

### Allow for Numbness

Feeling dazed or numb is a good thing. This numbness serves a valuable purpose: it gives emotions time to catch up with what the mind has been told. Nothing in one's coping mechanisms prepares survivors for this kind of trauma. Shock is like an anesthetic – it helps create insulation from the reality of the death until the survivors are more able to tolerate what they do not want to believe.

Don't assume the family is "being strong and taking it well" when they are really in shock. They may appear strong, but early on in grief, their appearance reflects their numbness and disbelief. However, they need you now, and will particularly need you when the shock begins to wear off and reality sets in.

### Accept the Intensity of the Grief

Grief following a murder is complex. Survivors don't "get over it." Instead, with support and understanding they can come to reconcile themselves to its reality. Accept survivors may be struggling with a multitude of emotions more intense than those experienced after other types of death. Confusion, disorganization, fear, vulnerability, guilt or anger are a few of the emotions survivors may feel.

### Don't be Frightened by Rage

Anger and rage responses might make you – a caregiver – feel helpless. For survivors, the sense of injustice about the nature of the death turns the normal anger of grief into rage. Remember



– anger is not right or wrong, good or bad, appropriate or not appropriate. In fact, rage often relates to a desire to restore things to the way they were before the death. The person to be most concerned about is probably the one who doesn't experience rage.

The anger and rage may be directed at the murderer, at God, you, or even at the person who was killed. The survivors may even be frightened by the intensity of their rage. Be willing to listen to what they feel without judging them. And do not try to diminish the anger, for it is in expressing rage that it begins to lose some of its power. Healthy grief requires these explosive emotions be expressed, not repressed.

## Feeling Anxious and Fearful is Normal

Feelings of anxiety, panic and fear are normal after a murder. Threats to one's feelings of security naturally bring about these emotions. Fear of what the future holds, fear more murders might occur, an increased awareness of one's own mortality, feelings of vulnerability about being able to survive without the person, an inability to concentrate and emotional and physical fatigue all serve to heighten anxiety, panic and fear. The grieving family may feel overwhelmed by everyday problems and concerns. Your awareness of these common fears can help you anticipate some of what the family might talk about with you.

## Understanding the Need to Ask "Why?"

The unanswerable question "But, why?" naturally comes up for survivors of a traumatic, violent death. The family is searching to understand how something like this could happen. Understand this is a normal question to ask in a very abnormal situation.

Survivors probably don't want you to try to answer the "why" question. They often realize there is no rational explanation for the murder, yet still need to ask the question. While you can't provide explanations for what happened, you can stand beside them as they search for meaning.

## Be Compassionate

Give the family permission to express their feelings without fear of criticism. Learn from them; don't instruct them or set expectations about how they should respond. Never say, "I know just how you feel." You don't.

Allow the family to experience all the hurt, sorrow and pain they are feeling at the time. Enter into the family's feelings, but never try to take them away.

## Avoid Clichés

Clichés, though they are often intended to diminish the pain of loss, can actually cause more pain for a grieving family. Comments like "you are holding up so well," "time heals all wounds," or "think of all you still have to be thankful for" are not constructive. Instead, they hurt and make a survivor's journey through grief more difficult.

## Listen to Questions About Faith

If you allow them, homicide survivors will "teach" you about their feelings regarding faith and spirituality. Many survivors will express doubt about beliefs they held before the murder. If they cannot doubt, their faith will have little meaning. Whatever you do, don't tell the family that murder was "God's will."

Don't tell the family to forgive the murderer. No matter what their spiritual convictions, survivors of homicide should not be made to feel obligated to forgive someone who killed their loved one.

## Be Aware of Support Groups

Support groups are one of the best ways to help survivors of traumatic deaths. In a group, survivors can connect with other people who share their experience. They are encouraged to tell their stories as much, and as often, as they like.

Do be aware you should not push survivors to attend a group if they are not ready. We know if they find a group unhelpful because they aren't ready to share their grief in this way, they may be hesitant to make use of the group later, when it could help them very much.

## Work Together as Helpers

Remember the murder of someone loved is a shattering experience. As a result of this death, the family's life is under reconstruction. They will need to talk about it for years to come. Be the person who will encourage and allow them to share feelings about the homicide after other listeners have moved on.

Use the name of the person who was killed when you talk to the family. Hearing the name can be comforting, and it confirms you have not forgotten this important person who was so much a part of the survivor's life.

To experience grief is the result of having loved. Homicide survivors must be guaranteed this privilege. While the guidelines in this article may help, it is important to recognize helping a homicide survivor heal will not be an easy task. You may have to give more concern, time and love than you ever knew you had. But this helping effort will be more than worth it.

### About the Author

Dr. Alan Wolfelt is a respected author and educator on the topic of healing in grief. He serves as director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and is on the faculty at the University of Colorado Medical School's Department of Family Medicine. Dr. Wolfelt has written many compassionate, bestselling books designed to help people mourn well so they can continue to love and live well, including *Understanding Your Grief*, *The Mourner's Book of Faith*, and *Loving from the Outside In, Mourning from the Inside Out*. Visit [www.centerforloss.com](http://www.centerforloss.com) to learn more about the natural and necessary process of grief and mourning and to order Dr. Wolfelt's books.



# Loss and That Three-Letter Word ... Sex



By Dr. Earl A. Grollman

“Wouldn’t it be dishonouring my daughter if I laughed? She is now under the ground, so what right do I have to be happy? What I used to look forward to, I now dread. Especially sex. My husband’s touch makes me cringe. How dare I feel pleasure when my daughter is dead.” It is a subject that is rarely discussed.

Janice Lord, the former director of Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), wrote: “As I speak to support groups and mention inhibited sexuality, I can almost see a wave of relief through the audience, as if another layer of guilt has been lifted.”

As a grief therapist, my library contains a multitude of volumes on death, dying and bereavement. Recently I randomly selected a dozen of these books to check their indexes for the words sex or sexuality. Most did not have a single reference, except for the volumes that discussed sexuality only in terms of gender differences.

How does grief affect the physical and emotional aspect of people’s lives? And what happens when one partner’s sexual

needs are diminished or absent, while the other partner’s desires are left unfulfilled? Differing views of sexuality often become a source of marital difficulties that don’t just dissipate with time.

## The Death of a Child

There are no labels to accurately describe the death of a child. If a husband dies, the wife is called a widow; the husband becomes a widower. If the parents die, the child becomes an orphan. How then do we recognize the parents of a dead child?

Perhaps there is no term because no description can portray how unnatural and unfair is their loss. The chronology is wrong! Children are supposed to outlive their parents. The child is a link to the parents’ immortality; a realization of their future hopes and dreams.

After her child’s death, Anne Morrow Lindbergh wrote, “Contrary to the general assumptions the first days of grief are not the worst.” She called it “an amputation.” It is because love and

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attachment do not die nor are they transformed by time. Parents are forever the parents of the dead child.

Grief permeates every aspect of the parents' world. Physical symptoms are common – feeling tired and lethargic, lacking an appetite, losing weight or conversely eating too much, having difficulty sleeping or always feeling nervous and restless.

Grieving is an emotional roller-coaster. Confusion and disorientation are intermingled with numbness, panic, anger, guilt and depression.

Death also causes chemical and hormonal changes. Therefore, it is not surprising that grieving patterns often affect sexual relationships.

It is helpful for the therapist to acknowledge the temporary withdrawal from sexual intercourse should not be construed as rejection. Emphasize that needs of the partners may widely vary.

Point out intimacy also includes hugging and cuddling, just the desire to be with and enjoy the other, to hold and be held, to share and confide.

Most important is the necessity for patience and sensitivity. Even though it may be difficult to discuss this “embarrassing” topic, there is the need for honesty and open communication. Hopefully they will have gained a richer understanding and closeness both as individuals and as partners; a renewed union, but with deeper love.

The renaissance of the sex drive may be the life-affirming sign of gradual recovery from grief. As Toynbee wrote, “Love cannot save life from death, but it can fulfil life’s purpose.”

## Loss of a Spouse/Partner

The Book of Common Prayer reads, “Marriage is to have and to hold from this day forward ... to love and to cherish till death do us part.”

But what happens when death occurs, causing the partner “to part”?

The words widow and widower stem from the German *weidh*, “to separate.” When a spouse dies, there is a separation. It is no longer possible “to love ... have ... hold.” The sharing of dreams, hopes and their years together become shadows, mere memories.

There are so many changes, often accompanying new responsibilities.

- “I no longer have my partner to share the everyday joys, hurts and problems.”
- “I have sole responsibility for raising our children.”
- “I feel like a fifth wheel, no longer part of a couple.”

Gone is the friend, the companion, the confidant, the co-adventurer through the journey of life. Gone also is the sexual partner. Unexpected surges of grief may erupt at unanticipated times.

There are many responses to the loss of a partner explains Arthur Freese in *Help for Your Grief*:

- Losing interest in sexual expression (and, also possibly disengaging from other activities that brought feelings of fulfilment and pleasure).
- Avoiding future relationships after the death because of a fear of impotency or frigidity.
- Seeking sexual relationships with others that lack affection and tenderness.
- Becoming hyper-sexual, engaging in risky, sometimes promiscuous behaviours.
- Marrying quickly after the death, almost solely for sexual needs.

If the counsellee does not bring up the subject of sexual intimacy, the therapist might gently raise the topic. Not with, “How has your libido suffered since the death?” Rather, perhaps, “Many clients have shared with me how their loss has altered their sexual desires.” The topic has been raised; permission is given to talk about the unspeakable three-letter word. The ball is now in their court. If there is a response, thank the client for the courage to share this grief reaction that is often so difficult to discuss.

## About the Author

Rabbi Earl A. Grollman, a pioneer in crisis management, is an acclaimed writer and lecturer. In 2013, the Association for Death Education and Counseling presented him with its Lifetime Achievement Award, only the fourth time in three decades. This award honours “his national and international impact on the improvement of death education, caring for the dying person, and grief counseling.” His books on coping with bereavement have sold more than a million copies. For further information, visit [www.beacon.org/grollman](http://www.beacon.org/grollman).



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