

Grief associated with the murder of an emergency services worker

Murder is a crime that has a profound and lasting impact on the victim's family, friends and community. The sudden and violent nature of murder can lead to particularly intense grief for those directly, and indirectly, affected by the loss. Loved ones and colleagues of the victim can experience additional distress as they work through the process of dealing with the media, court and coronial processes and other organisations seeking information about the death. The fact that someone has taken the life of the victim can evoke strong feelings of anger and a desire for justice.

Losing a family member or friend to murder is one of the most violent and cruel forms of death a person can experience. The sudden and unexpected loss of a colleague or loved one through violence may create a complicated grief that not many people understand.

Grieving

Every individual's experience of grief is unique, although several common experiences have been identified. For example, the family, colleagues and friends of murder victims may:

- feel isolated and alone
- face persistent, unsettling grief
- feel as though no-one understands the depth and special nature of their grief
- have unrealistic expectations of the time it takes to heal

Managing contact with the family

Whilst there is, of course, a desire to reach out to families, it is important to be respectful of their needs at this difficult time. Aside from dealing with their own grief, they are also needing to prepare for the funeral and interact with investigating police and the coronial process. Rest assured that the organisation and Wellbeing Support are proactively in contact with the family and, if you would like to reach out, consider doing this through the Family Liaison Officer or Wellbeing Support. If you already have contact numbers for the family, sending a text and letting them know you are thinking of them is often helpful and allows them to respond in their own time and way.

The Funeral

Funerals are an important part of the grieving process. They can provide a comforting ritual that allows family, colleagues and friends to farewell their loved one in a meaningful way. In situations such as this, emergency services worker funerals are significant events, attended by dignitaries from across Australia and New Zealand. This banding together is a sign of intense unity and demonstrates the significant respect for the deceased member and their colleagues. Often accompanied by a Guard of Honour, the funeral can be an emotional event and will undoubtedly attract considerable media and community attention. You need to be prepared for this. The decision to attend or not rests primarily with you.

Traumatic Grief

A murder may simultaneously elicit a trauma and grief response. These two responses will vary based on many factors, including your connection to the person who died (i.e. what type of relationship you had with the person), how you are able to process the grief and trauma you may be experiencing, and what supports you have, or are offered, to help you.

Upon hearing of a death by murder, you may have a physiological reaction including; physical shock, numbness, disorientation, hyper alertness, increased adrenaline, heart palpitations, nausea, vomiting, sweating, hyperventilation, panic attacks, constant crying or the inability to cry.

Make yourself the priority

The range and level of emotion that is experienced at the time of hearing of a murder of a colleague, who may also be a friend, will be dependent on many factors. There is no 'right or wrong' way, as every person's grief is unique to them. Emotional responses may last for weeks or longer.

As with any loss, emotions can feel extreme, irrational and unfamiliar. Some of the emotions you may experience can include; anger, rage, fear, terror, frustration, confusion, guilt, blame, self-blame, shame, humiliation, sadness and a general overwhelm.

It is normal to experience dreams and nightmares involving your colleague, particularly in the early months following the murder. This is part of your body trying to process the enormity of what has happened. If these continue beyond 6 weeks, it may be helpful to reach out to Wellbeing Support to enable further processing of the death.

You may also notice your emotions are triggered by certain events, dates or conversations. For example, when the legal process begins, this may trigger some raw emotions regardless of the time passed since the death of your family member, friend or colleague. It is important to allow your emotions to be expressed and supported.

Look out for your colleagues

**GET
HELP
NOW**

24 Hours **6173 2873**
wellbeing@dpfem.tas.gov.au

You can access a range of confidential services, which are designed specifically for the Tasmanian emergency services community from Wellbeing Support.

Coping Strategies

With time, people can learn to cope with a traumatic event such as a murder and say their own farewells to a valued family member or colleague. Support is often the key to helping people get through this experience, and can be provided by the organisation, by trusted friends and family, and through accessing the services of Wellbeing Support. Be patient and gentle with yourself as you grieve and make time to deal with the emotional impact of the loss. Reach out for professional support if your feelings become overwhelming.

What is important in dealing with a sudden or unexpected death is the ability to feel and express grief, which is the normal response to loss of any kind. It takes time and patience to navigate the event and its impact on your life. It is also important to recognise that your work group may be grieving in their individual ways, so take the time to look out for your colleagues.

Remember to care for yourself as you care for others.

Supporting your grief and trauma responses

Having someone close or connected to you lose their life as a result of a murder is a traumatic experience. It is important to note that a traumatic event in a person's life does not necessarily lead to a person becoming traumatised, nor does it mean that their trauma will become embedded within them (PTSD). Trauma only becomes an entrenched condition when it is not processed adequately after the event. Ways in which to support the trauma that you are experiencing can include:

- Expressing your reactions and responses when you feel ready to do so. This can be with a person you trust (friend, family member or someone offering services), or through a more internal and private process e.g. writing or allowing yourself to articulate your thoughts and feelings within you.
- Engaging in some type of physical exercise or movement on a regular basis. This will assist in creating routine and processing the trauma itself through the movement of your body.
- Recognising what your grief needs and try to accommodate it. For example, if you need time to rest or if it feels too soon to return to work, listen to what you need. Find ways of being able to work with your grief, particularly in the early days and weeks.
- Reaching out for further supports. Sometimes, family and friends are difficult to talk to in times like this. Find someone that you are comfortable to talk to, and remember if you want someone independent, Wellbeing Support can assist you with that.
- Being patient and gentle with yourself. Trauma and grief take time to process and work through. These experiences are not something that we 'get over', rather we learn how to live with loss.

Remember there is no 'right or wrong' way to react in times like this. Everyone has a different way of responding and that must be respected. It is important to know that every reaction is valid, and everyone is deserving of an equal level of support. Every person's grief is unique.

REFERENCES

<https://grieflink.org.au/factsheets/grief-after-homicide/>

<https://www.vocal.org.au/types-of-crime/homicide/>

<https://www.victimsofcrime.vic.gov.au/homicide#understanding-the-traumatic-effects-of-crime>

Homicide Victim Support Group of SA Inc



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