Aspects of Grief after a Violent Death

People who have experienced a violent death tend to…

• Experience the impact of a sudden, unexpected, violent death with the possibility of a mutilated body, or no body at all.

• Feel insecure, fearful, and have concerns for their safety.

• Question their own basic beliefs and values about the importance of human life and behaviors.

• Experience tremendous family stress as each person is grieving differently and each needs additional support.

• Have a great deal of guilt over not having protected their loved one.

• Feel the stigma of having a family member murdered, with people believing that only criminal types are murdered.

• Lose their support systems because people don't know what to say and tend to stay away.

• Be ignored, mistreated and receive little information from law enforcement officials assigned to the case.

• Feel as though they are postponing their grief until after the trial and sentencing.

• Find that whatever the sentence the murderer receives, it is not enough to compensate for their loss.

• Become re-victimized as a result of media coverage, for months and sometimes years after the death.

• Experience intense anger, rage and sometimes revenge, which is overwhelming and produces within them fear of their own response.
Concerns for Children Impacted by a Violent Death

Children may experience the fear of death:
- Their own
- The death of those who protect them, such as a parent/caregiver
- The death of friends and loved ones

Children may have anxiety about:
- Being left alone, fear of abandonment
- Sleeping alone, someone may come and get them
- Leaving the surviving family members for fear that they may be killed
- The killer coming to get them

Sometimes children will regress:
- Clingy, irritable behavior
- Need for more holding, hugs and nurturance
- Possible bed wetting, thumb sucking
- Need help with skills they have already mastered

Often there are sleep disorders:
- Nightmares or night terrors
- Fear of going to bed, sleeping alone
- Not able to get to sleep or waking throughout the night

Often there are somatic complaints:
- Stomachaches, headaches, heartaches

There may be changes in eating habits:
- Loss of appetite, weight loss
- Bulimia
- Increased appetite, weight gain

They may relive the experience through talk or play:
- Violent play
- Retelling the story in great detail
- Intrusive memories

There may be changes in school behavior:
- Difficulty concentrating
- Poor grades, difficulty completing school work
- Increased absences
- Some children may perform better than they ever have
Affect change:
- Risk taking and more aggressive behaviors
- Hopeless, depressed, inhibited
- Intense feelings of rage, revenge, or anger
- Hyper-vigilance

Complications for People Dealing with a Violent Death

Psychological trauma
- Suddenness of the death
- Inability to say goodbye
- Intentional destructive nature of the act
- Willful disrespect for life

Last memory of person may be of a mutilated, bloody body.

Fear for own or others safety.

Conflict of values
- Value or worth of human life
- Shattered view of world being safe
- Won't happen to me

Feelings of powerlessness, guilt, anger and/or revenge.

Difficulty in understanding and accepting "why" because of the violent nature of the death.

True story not always known or shared honestly in order to "protect" the loved one.

Community reaction
- Stigma or criminal element associated with murder
- "Blame the victim" attitude
- Isolation of family, withdrawal of support

Media attention, sensationalizing, re-victimizing
- Families often hear the information for the first time on the news.
- Media does not respect privacy and grief of family.
- Story retold over and over for several months or even years after the death.

Law enforcement
- Transgressor sometimes not found
- Lengthy investigation
• Family not adequately informed of progress or lack of it
• Not being allowed to talk about the situation during investigation

Criminal and judicial system
• Proceedings often postponed/delayed for months or years
• Families required to tell and retell the painful story
• Accused person often plea bargains, getting a light sentence
• Sentence never enough to justify the death of the loved one