

How Society Reacts to Survivors of Homicide

Margaret states that, "To me the best thing that could ever happen is that somebody would say, "Do you have a picture?" When it's your child you feel like you want to talk about them. But when I talk about John, I will cry. Then there's this thing about murder. If I tell people that John was murdered, then I have to take care of them. It's hard to decide whether or not to mention it. In fact, one person did say, "Why did you mention it?" I say, well, I did have three children. I hate to leave him out of my life. I had him for seventeen years and I was very proud of him. I still want people to know that he was very good looking and that he had a good personality."

Though murder is the focus of so many Television shows, movies, and newspaper articles, we never imagine that it could possibly happen to someone we love. Although statistics tell us certain types of people are more frequently the victims of murder, we are all vulnerable to drunk drivers when we are on the highway and we may all be prey to wanton murder.



Murder is commonplace in the fake reality of the mass media. However, the drama of murder that we witness on our TV screens focuses on investigations, arrests and courtroom scenes. These programs rarely give us any view of the terrible emotional impact on the survivors of murder and often even the victim is given little attention.

It was only when the Oklahoma City Bombing occurred on April 19, 1995 that the stark reality of such a loss was brought home to us through television and newspapers. Our first reaction was to blame foreign terrorists, attesting to our desire to hold on to the assumption that our world is safe and that we are somehow exempt from such senseless killing. Since September 11, 2001, society as a whole now realizes, at least for a period of time, that none of us are truly safe any longer.

Because murder is such a distasteful subject, survivors often suffer additional pain from the reactions of their friends and even from the religious community. Their friends may be distant or may even avoid them. Some members of the clergy unintentionally minimize their anguish by either saying that, "your loved one was called by God" or by advising them to forgive the murderer. Survivors need support in their struggle with these emotions, rather than what often seems like a cavalier dismissal.

People don't like discussing the painful subject of murder and may try to distance themselves from the event by blaming the victim or the survivors. People feel that if they can somehow place the blame on the victim or on the victim's family, they will be invulnerable to murder themselves.

Survivors also learn firsthand that the justice process is lengthy, that many murders are never solved, and that the killer can be acquitted or receive a very light sentence. Even if the killer is convicted and receives a life sentence, survivors don't always feel the emotional relief that they expected.

The trial can be postponed or delayed for months or years, leaving survivors suspended in their grief and outrage. As survivors sit through the trial they must also face the relatives of the defendant, a terribly upsetting experience that may be compounded by the hostility sometimes displayed by that family. However, survivors are not permitted to show emotion or the judge will dismiss them because their feelings may "influence the jury."

Survivors must face other painful choices during the trial - like whether to leave or stay when evidence is presented, such as grisly photographs of the crime, bloodstained clothing or other personal property of their loved ones.

If the victim was a young woman who was raped during the murder, the trial will likely focus on her reputation, not on the question of whether she was assaulted. A professor of evidence and ethics at New York University School of Law has stated that not only is it not unethical to question or malign the victim's character, but it's the defense lawyer's duty to do so if it will render a not guilty verdict.

During the trial, public opinion and the media might be concerned more with the suspected killer than with the victim.

Even if the murderer receives what survivors feel is a just sentence, they may be surprised at their response. Many expect that a just sentence will lessen their pain - but their loved one is still dead. When the trial is over, many survivors' emotions surface with full force, for they are no longer focused on that external event. They are left with the terrible emptiness created by the murder and the knowledge that they have to live with it.

There is always the prospect of endless appeals and the overturning of the conviction or even an acquittal in a second or third trial. Such dealings with the court system draw out survivors suffering even longer.

Ralph Myers states, "Those of us in society that are surviving victims are unique. Even though violent crime greatly disturbs most decent and law-abiding people, my perception as a crime survivor is that we have become almost callused to the terrible tragedies that constantly take place. Even myself, the father of a son whom I loved very much and miss beyond what I have even yet begun to fully realize, often times think back to the constant reporting by the media, of hearing or reading about a family's struggle in trying to cope with the murder of a loved one."

"Crime victims and their survivors are soon forgotten by the public and the media. If they are murder victims, their voices have been forever silenced. If they are victims of domestic violence or rape, they soon become the accused rather than the victim. After all, they must have done something that would justify why they were beaten and abused by their spouse, or raped by someone they knew or provoked an action being taken upon them by a total stranger because they looked or dressed in a certain way."

Ralph goes on to say that, "It is uncomfortable being around someone that is a victim or surviving victim of crime because most people have never, and hopefully will never

become a victim. We are not taught how to deal with events that happen, or persons that experience being victimized."

"How many times have we all watched a local or national newscast wherein the person reporting a particularly tragic story or gruesome murder end the report with an obvious look of sympathy, and a statement of outrage - only then to go on to the next story by stating, "Now, for some lighter news?" Their whole demeanor is completely transformed to one of cheerfulness - like the story they had just reported was to be cast aside."

"From a victim's perspective, that appears or seems to be our duty or plight for the rest of our lives. The life of our murdered loved one has been reduced to a ten to thirty second sound byte. Hurriedly reported on and just as quickly cast aside. The attention then usually focuses on the person or person that committed the heinous act against our loved one. In future newscasts, the victim's names are not even mentioned. Instead, all commentary centers around such topics as to whether the person that is accused of the violent crime will be able to get a fair trial because he or she may be a member of a particular race, color, or creed. However, their victims that have been murdered have forever lost those same considerations. Their voices have been forever silenced. They cannot participate in the arena of public debate or discussion. Any constitutional rights they ever had were stripped away from them the very instant they became a victim. All that is left for them is for their voices to be heard through those that loved and survived them. The criminal justice system is only concerned about the rights of the accused, even after they are proven guilty and convicted." Ever since Tom was murdered, I consider our involvement as parents as an extended act of parenting; looking out for the interest of our child the same as we would if they were still living and depended upon us for protection."

As a surviving parent or family member of a loved one that has been murdered, you become their voice since they are no longer able to speak for themselves.