

Homicide

Confronting the Issues

While you are trying to deal with the emotional impact of homicide on you and your family, other issues are likely to emerge. You will deal with them at the time of great vulnerability, therefore information and support from people who can respond to your needs with compassion is important. The following overview touches on some of those issues you are likely to confront.

Dealing with Police

Dealing with the police can be difficult for families of homicide victims, particularly in the early stages where people are in shock, confused and trying to cope with their loss. The police may have arrested someone for the murder or may still be investigating. Either way, they will need to have contact with the people closest to the victim to provide or gain information to assist with their investigations. This may mean that family and friends may be treated as suspects until ruled out and understandably, this can be enraging and distressing.

The police may not be able to give out details of the homicide because of their continuing investigations and this too may be difficult to cope with. Not having answers, while imagining what might have happened, can be distressing for homicide survivors. The police may also need to keep the victim's clothing and other possessions as evidence and these may not be returned for some time.

It is important that you identify someone within the police who can provide accurate and clear information. The Major Crime detectives are the police officers most likely to be involved and you can direct your questions to them. However, if you are unable to contact a detective investigating the crime you may phone the *Victim Contact Officer (VCO) at Major Crime on 8463 7840 (or in your police local service area)* for information.

Dealing with the Coroner's Office

The police may need someone to identify the body of the victim; this is usually a family member or close friend. This identification usually happens at the Morgue or Forensic Science Centre. This can be a difficult experience as nothing can prepare you for it. The victim may have physical injuries and the body cannot be touched or only limited time can be spent with the deceased.

An autopsy or post-mortem will be performed to find out the cause of death. This can be traumatic for families and can mean a delay in the body being released and therefore, the funeral being delayed.

Other issues to be considered include learning about the cause of death, getting a copy of the post-mortem report and the possible retention of organs for further testing and investigation. *The social workers at the Coroner's Office can help with these matters and you can contact them on 8204 0600.*

Dealing with the Funeral

Funerals are an important part of the grief process. They provide an opportunity to say goodbye to the deceased. In the case of homicide, people may be discouraged from viewing the body because of injuries. However, doing this may be important for some people as it is the last opportunity to see the deceased and to say a personal goodbye.

This fact sheet has been developed to provide general information to victims of crime. It is not intended as a replacement for medical, therapeutic or legal advice. If you have particular concerns please contact your general practitioner, counsellor or Victim Support Service.

Careful consideration should be given to this decision and funeral directors can often arrange ways for this to happen even when there are severe injuries.

Although you may be experiencing shock and numbness it is important to carefully consider what you want to happen at the funeral, so it has meaning and says something about the person who died.

If no offender has been arrested the police may be present at the funeral and may videotape the service as part of their investigation. The media may also attend. This may feel like an invasion of privacy and be difficult to cope with.

Dealing with the Media

The media will want to report the details of the homicide to the public. This can mean the family is approached for comment, for photographs of the deceased and for further information about the crime. The media can be persistent, including phoning and visiting you at home, following you and so on. The media often sensationalise a story and can print inaccurate information about the case and may present information in a way that blames the victim. This can cause further trauma to the victim's family and friends.

Sometimes the media need to report on a case to help the police with their investigations or to appeal for public help. The media may print further stories about the case after court hearings and even many years after the event, which may bring back feelings of grief.

Some people refuse to talk to the media; others find it helpful to choose a person to be the media spokesperson and liaise with the press. You may decide not to give the media a photograph of the victim; however, they often manage to get them from other sources so you may wish to be involved in deciding which photograph will be used.

Dealing with the Courts

If someone has been charged with murder, there will be court hearings and possibly a trial. Most people have never had to deal with courts and may find it confusing and frustrating. You may feel distanced from the process as the Prosecutor will represent the Crown, not the victim or their family. The language and processes of court may add to your sense of exclusion. Be prepared for a series of delays and adjournments.

The accused can apply for bail and sometimes can be successful in getting it. The accused will be in court and this may raise many emotions. Expressions of natural emotions are restricted in the courtroom. After court, your grief reactions can sometimes be revived.

If you wish to attend the court or even the whole trial it may be helpful to meet with the Prosecutor beforehand. Victim Support Service can arrange for a Court Companion to attend this meeting and the court hearing with you if you wish. A court tour before the hearing can also be arranged. If you are a witness and need to give evidence, you are prevented from being in the courtroom until after you have given your evidence.

During sentencing you have the opportunity to present a Victim Impact Statement to the court outlining the impact of your loss. For further information on this or any of the court process, please contact Victim Support Service on 8231 5626 (country toll free 1800 182 368) or Witness Assistance Service at the Office of Director of Public Prosecutions on 8207 1529 (toll free 1800 505 404).

Further Information

If you would like more information, please contact Victim Support Service on (08) 8231 5626 or view our website at www.victimsa.org