



Therapy after a homicide

When her sister was murdered 13 years ago, **Janet Nicholls'** life changed overnight. Now she trains others in the complex experience of people bereaved by homicide

Welcome to my world – a world that is often called 'bizarre' or 'surreal' by others who, like me, have been bereaved by a homicide and are searching for ways to describe life in a parallel universe. As a counsellor, I can appreciate more than ever the importance of our usual practice of listening and trying to understand the client's explanation of their unique experiences and feelings. As a victim who has met other victims, I can also appreciate that there are nevertheless some common patterns in those experiences and that it might help you to know what they are. But first you must empathise with us while not daring to claim that you can truly understand what we have experienced. Empathy takes imagination.

Thrust into a new galaxy

Imagine that someone you love does not come home to you and that, for many days to come, nothing about that person, or belonging to that person, belongs to you. Others are in control and you are excluded – even more so if you are under suspicion. You are aware that your behaviour and even your grief could be examined critically. You may find that the police separate family members from each other during the investigation and trial. Maybe you or one of your family members is a suspect or the police are trying to avoid contamination of evidence. Whatever the reason, you may be separated from people who could give you support.

If you are a suspect you will find that police cannot give you the reassurance or unconditional positive regard that is provided by grief counsellors. If there is a possibility that you may be called as a witness in court then there are even constraints on any early counselling sessions because defence counsel could claim that you have been coached. A police family liaison officer, the Crown Prosecution Service or Home Office can provide advice about such constraints, as can writers including Bond and Sandhu.¹

Your grief may turn to anger and may be frightening to you and to others. At the other extreme, your possible feelings of numbness can lead to feelings of guilt.

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I felt numbness and guilt when my sister Liz Sherlock died in 2001. Liz was unusual in being robbed and murdered on the street by two total strangers. No one in our family was under suspicion and therefore there was none of the blaming or taking of sides too commonly experienced by others.

Office for National Statistics figures for England and Wales published in February 2014 show that more than two thirds of homicide victims (69 per cent) in 2012/13 were male and most knew the main suspect.² Most female victims of homicide are killed by a partner, ex-partner or lover, and over half of all homicides are due to a quarrel, revenge attack or loss of temper. Among children and young people, infants under one year old are most at risk and over half of homicide victims under 16 are killed by their parents. Many of the bereaved knew both the victim and the accused, which means that describing your client's presenting problem as 'complicated grief' doesn't begin to cover it.

O'Neill³ writes that those bereaved by homicide are not constantly victims or survivors and prefers to describe them as 'orienteers... thrust into a new galaxy' in which they try to find their way around a new landscape or terrain. This landscape can include connections that have not previously existed – with the police, coroners, courts and other aspects of the legal system. In making those new connections, orienteers may have to develop new skills.

Who else can help?

It is surprising to discover the lack of a publically funded system of professional counselling for people who have been bereaved by homicide. Hence your client may even resent having to pay for long-term therapy. Police family liaison officers provide brilliant support for the closest family until

the investigations and trial are completed, but they are not a counselling service. Victim Support has a special Homicide Service run by trained workers who work closely with family liaison officers, and a caseworker can plan free tailored support to meet people's needs. They also help in practical ways, including claims for compensation and accompanying clients to a police station and to court for various hearings, as well as to trial. Although Victim Support cannot provide more specialist help, it can put clients in touch with specialist organisations or arrange professional counselling.

Support After Murder and Manslaughter (SAMM) is a self-help charity run by and for people bereaved by homicide. It provides advice, telephone support, an online forum for members and referrals to ASSIST Trauma Care, which employs experienced therapists trained to work with the after-effects of trauma. It will also inform members about annual memorial services at Manchester Cathedral and St Martins-in-the-Fields in London.

Common patterns

So what are the common patterns I alluded to? First, there are clear memories and possible resentments about how the client was notified of the death.

I have vivid memories from 13 years ago, waiting for Liz to arrive in Bolton for our father's birthday celebrations, hearing that she had died in an 'accident' at Euston station and later receiving confusing news reports of a robbery and death at the station.

Sometimes a body is not found. More commonly, a post-mortem may be carried out before loved ones can view the remains.

In our case, the accused's lawyers arranged for a second post-mortem and, when we were finally allowed to see Liz's body, we were not allowed to touch her. This was especially difficult for our mother.

The funeral is likely to have been delayed and media interest may interfere with your client's privacy.

Liz's funeral was delayed by five weeks and reporters wanted photographs of celebrity mourners.

If your client is not a close relative, they may not have been kept fully informed of the investigations and all court hearings. They may arrive at the trial with feelings of exclusion from the system or from other family members. They may have shared facilities in court with the friends and family of the accused, although that is less likely to happen nowadays. Prosecuting counsel may also have ignored them, although since 2006 'The Prosecutors' Pledge' has outlined a new approach by the prosecution in supporting victims in court.⁴

We had a separate room in the Old Bailey and were seated in court beneath the public gallery, in view of the press, lawyers and accused, but not the public.

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In general, your client may have felt painfully aware of the absence of the person at the centre of the proceedings and will probably have been disturbed by listening to strangers speaking about their loved one in a detached and objective way. The insistence on 'silence in court' also adds to feelings of powerlessness and possible trauma. Being in court is like attending a school meeting about your child at which you are not allowed to speak. Your presence is on condition that you don't influence the jury by showing emotion. So please appreciate the new empowerment a client feels in being able to say *anything* they like to you during your sessions.

As a chatty person, I found that silence was most difficult for me, particularly when defence counsel described Liz as 'foolhardy'.

Improvements in scientific and technical knowledge mean that forensic details will be reported in detail in court and this can have an impact on the bereaved. Yet lack of information (and even the lack of a body) can also be traumatic. Your client may want to know everything (no matter how gruesome) or little, or to have the evidence softened in some way, and may have been shocked by graphic descriptions.

I wanted to know everything and appreciated seeing what happened on CCTV, as well as having Liz's injuries described in a book of pictures, rather than photographs.

The closest relatives are entitled to supply the court with a statement describing the effect of the bereavement. Such statements are now being read in court and sometimes also to the media outside the court. This may have been your client's chance to have their feelings heard, although other members of the family could have excluded them. As with any bereavement, individual mourners respond in unique ways. Yet the therapist and client should be aware of the dangers of the self-fulfilling prophecy. It seems too often that individuals state that such a loss has ended their own life and then go on to ensure that their life is indeed as miserable as possible.

The end of the trial is a time when emotions start to become most acute, even if the client feels that justice has been done, and this can lead to a build-up of more (possibly hidden) stress. The loss of adrenalin can result in exhaustion and a sudden sink into deep depression.

In our case, my father had a heart attack and I finally started taking antidepressants and sleeping tablets.

Other complicating experiences

Media attention often intrudes on personal grief to the extent of causing secondary victimisation. Your client may feel that the media has misrepresented the person who died and it is also possible that your client may be criticised. People with less than salutary lifestyles may find that the media do not respect their victimhood.

My father had a second heart attack on the day that a newspaper article appeared with the headline 'Absent heroes are no use to anyone' and a photograph of Liz.⁵

Some relatives do not have positive experiences of the police or may resent the legal system in general. Grief will be compounded when a body is not found, when there is no trial, when a defendant has been found not guilty or when a sentence is deemed inadequate. The homicide victim may have previously been in trouble with the law or had a less than 'innocent' lifestyle. This can also affect compensation to relatives. The release of the offender(s) is likely to be a particularly difficult time for your client. An exclusion zone

can be arranged but there may still be the fear of meeting that person on the street.

In December 2001 a man was sentenced to life in prison for Liz's murder, with a tariff of 17 years.

Complicated grief and behaviour

Some feelings are shared with others who have experienced a sudden death. How could it happen to the person you knew so well, who you may have just argued with and who you assumed would be there tomorrow to make up?

I still sometimes think that Liz is away on location in her career as a costume designer.

As with any bereavement, the situation and stress may cause arguments within the family and between friends. Often this is about blame, guilt or disagreements about how to behave. Individual members of the family may follow different rules and be annoyed when others behave differently. People take sides when one family member has killed another. After her husband killed their children, Ann O'Neill's mother-in-law initially responded by blaming Ann for her son's actions.³ The large proportion of victims who have been killed by partners means that some children lose both parents, and families taking sides can affect children deeply. Some children lose their single parent. Do some family members feel threatened by the prospect of supporting the children? Do grandparents feel capable?

The word 'closure' seems meaningless to many people who have been bereaved – but particularly so if you have been bereaved by homicide. How could anyone wilfully take another person's life? Many years later you may be counselling someone who is still searching for explanations and for justice to be done to the perpetrator.

You have lost a person – what else may you have lost?

People who have been bereaved by homicide may have additional sensitivities because they have an uncertain status. If categorised as 'secondary victims', they may not be seen as having the status of someone who has been robbed of material

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property, even though what has been stolen is infinitely more valuable. Others may not be sensitive to your feelings. Other people may be uncertain about how to behave in your company; they may expect you to be emotional and erratic or not accept you as a normal person in an abnormal situation.

You may have lost your personal constructs and struggle with your previous beliefs, values and attitudes, including religious beliefs. The world may have previously been seen as a safe place or existing feelings of insecurity may have been reinforced. Research has provided evidence that almost half of those bereaved by homicide who were in employment subsequently left or lost their jobs.⁶ Attendance at a lengthy trial can impose more pressure on already delicate work situations.

In my case, I trained to be a counsellor and left my job as a sociology lecturer.

Other possible problems

Post-traumatic stress is common, including flashbacks, hyper-vigilance and the need to ruminate about what has happened. This absentmindedness causes confusion and forgetfulness. For example, after her daughter's death, Rose Dixon, Chief Executive of SAMM, lost her slippers and later found them in the fridge. Physical illnesses are often caused by trauma being somatised: eg as rashes, headaches, insomnia, chest pains, heart attacks and strokes.

My sister Sue had migraines and developed a thyroid problem. A year after Liz died, our father died of his third heart attack and mum had a stroke, which took her eyesight. My eczema worsened and I had the constant feeling of a lump in my throat.

Depression may become clinical depression and individuals may change their eating habits and/or sleeping habits. This could include anorexia, bulimia or other changes.

My chocolate cravings worsened!

Sometimes people can become dependent on drugs (legal or illegal), alcohol or smoking. The break-up of partnerships or marriages is very common.

My existing marriage problems worsened and my husband developed a drinking problem, which influenced his death in 2010.

Financial problems arise from expenses, loss of wages and so on. Compensation may be paid to the closest relatives, but it is a relatively small amount and is shared if there is more than one claimant. The long delay before payment may cause severe problems: for example in repairing damage to the home if it was the scene of the crime.

What can a therapist provide?

Be a rock! Provide a strong and reliable presence when all else is shaking. Acknowledge the person's right to feel that the world is a dangerous and frightening place – but also challenge such feelings and be careful to avoid collusion.

I have learned to emulate the police family liaison officers whose sturdy presence steadied my shaking ground.

Encourage positive experiences to overlay and interact with the negative. This is a common strategy when working with trauma.

After escorting my family to the morgue to view my sister's body, an intuitive police officer drove us around the main tourist sights of London. We were gradually able to speak.

Understand and accept individual circumstances and personalities. As always, you should focus on learning from the client. They may narrate the circumstances of the death many times, along with questions about why and how it happened. Help them to find answers, where possible, and to reach an acceptance that some questions cannot be answered. Help them to understand the physical reactions to grief and trauma and recognise that these may be normal consequences of an abnormal experience and may fade. Empower them as they try to retain some control. For example, some people bereaved by homicide have gained a sense of control by keeping a diary or otherwise writing down their feelings.

I maintained a detailed diary for two years after my sister's death and also found that my love of music helped.

Conquering orienteers

It is possible that your client will feel as though their life up to now has ended, in which case you can help them to find a positive meaning in life. In this respect you might like to refer to Viktor Frankl's logotherapy and his account of surviving Auschwitz: 'We who lived in the concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of his freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.'⁷

Parappully et al⁸ found that there could be some positive outcomes for those bereaved by homicide – which is not as outrageous as it seems. Some people learn to appreciate their own lives, and life itself, even more.

I started to travel more, taking out loans to finance new experiences.

Ann O'Neill went on to get an education up to PhD level, trained as a social worker, and set up Angel Hands, an organisation in Australia supporting others bereaved by homicide. She says that by continuing to breathe and survive, secondary homicide victims become 'conquering orienteers'.

But first your job is to listen to the bizarre and surreal before helping a new orienteer to realise that they still have freedom to choose their own long-term response. This means that, even when someone has been bereaved by homicide, you will be able to play an important role in helping that person to choose a positive way forward. ■

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Find out more

ASSIST Trauma Care

Employs experienced therapists trained to work with PTSD and the after-effects of trauma in line with current evidence-based practices.

www.assisttraumacare.org.uk

Child Bereavement UK

Supports families and educates professionals both when a child dies and when a child is bereaved.

www.childbereavement.org.uk

Cruse Bereavement Care

Volunteers are trained in how to work with those bereaved by homicide. www.cruse.org.uk

KnifeCrimes.org

Provides specialist support for knife crime victims' families. www.knifecrimes.org

The Moira Fund

Helps those traumatically bereaved by the murder or manslaughter of a loved one.

www.themoirafund.org.uk

Support After Murder and Manslaughter (SAMM)

Supports families bereaved by murder and manslaughter. www.samm.org.uk

Through Unity

Supports families bereaved by homicide.

www.throughunity.com

Victim Support

Gives free and confidential help to victims of crime, witnesses, their family, friends and anyone else affected across England and Wales. Delivers the Homicide Service to those bereaved through murder or manslaughter. www.victimsupport.org.uk

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