

Dealing with Insensitivity

The following article by Homicide Survivor, Shirley Bostrom is taken from the Spring 1998 Survivors of Homicide Newsletter

Ironically, what I need most is a smile, a hug and an, "I'm so sorry." However, our culture doesn't teach us how to approach someone who has suffered the devastating trauma caused by a homicide. Our natural tendency is to avoid dealing with us either out of fear of doing something wrong or being inadequate for the task.

The reality of what happened to us may pose a threat to your own family. If it can happen to us, it can happen to you so it is safer to cling to the myth that murder only happens to strangers. Murder is happening more and more to people like us, but it is not contagious. You can't catch murder from comforting the victims. A thoughtful choice of words can prevent an awkward or senseless remark intended to give comfort from provoking more grief, guilt, or anger in the victim.

People tell me: "I think about you all the time." Don't think about me. Call me. Write to me. Ask me to spend some time with you. Even if I refuse, you have told me you care. Don't tell me to call you. I'm much too tired to do that. Please call me. Don't tell me you will call, write or keep in touch if you can't do so. I expect you to keep your promise and feel betrayed when it doesn't happen.

"I don't know what to say." You don't have to say anything. Just being here is enough. Listening to me is even better.

"You're so strong." No, I'm not! I have shed more tears than I knew I had. I weep mostly in private, in my car, in the shower, in my bed at 2 a.m., with caring friends and while writing. Watching me cry may make you feel uncomfortable and inadequate. Remind yourself that I need this release if I am to heal. Expect me to be irrational. I'm not thinking clearly. I feel guilty when told I'm strong. I wonder if you are really telling me that I'm doing better than you could. Why? Do you think I didn't really love her? Did I? Of course I did. I could agree with the slightly different comment, "It must take all your strength to keep going."

"I don't know how you do it." Of course you don't. Neither do I. I do it because I have no real choice. Life is still precious. I have people I love and things I still want to do. Your thoughtfulness and prayers give me strength.

"You look so good." What? And I shouldn't? I feel guilty. My daughter's dead — I should look awful. Maybe, if you said, "I'm glad to see you are taking care of yourself. Margie would want you to." Then I'd feel validated.

"Having other children must make it easier to bear." You'd think so, but this doesn't feel easier. Siblings are often reluctant to discuss their pain and loss, but certainly, having other children to love and to love me is a comfort.

"Time heals all wounds" People really do say this! I'm not going to heal — at least, not without lots of scar tissue. Should I wear a bracelet saying "I get keloids when I'm opened up - see my appendix scar for confirmation"?

The most insensitive remark I've had to deal with was, "It has been three months. You must be over it by now." It is my daughter who is dead, not a friendly squirrel that lived in my yard. I'll never be over it.

The worst example of insensitivity that I have heard is the spiritual leader who actually tried to console the father of a murdered teenager by telling him, “At least now you won’t have to worry about his behavior problems.” Dealing with teenager behaviors is a natural part of life. Burying a child is not.

In a murder case, the wounds keep being reopened. There is no chance to heal or move on. A state of limbo exists. Lawyers, courts, judges and a live criminal blessed with civil rights control your life.

“You must be strong. Larry, your daughters and grandchildren need you now.” “You need to support each other now,” would be helpful.

“You need to take care of yourself.” Why do you think I eat, try to sleep, take showers, brush my teeth and get my hair cut? Have to. I know even with all my strength I’m not going to deal well with my loss. “How are you doing?” How do you think I’m doing? The best I can. My daughter was murdered by a man she loved enough to marry. She spent 11 years of her life with him and he stabbed her 16 times. Would you like to see how crazy a grieving mother can be? Or hear my primal scream?

“What can I do?” Be specific. If you are too general, I will tell you I need nothing or ask for what I really want — to bring her back.

“Did you know Mitch was capable of murder?” No. I feel terribly guilty and inadequate as a mother. I should have known and done something to keep her alive. I hate being a failure.

“I can’t think of anything more horrible than losing a child.” Well, I can. What if Mitch killed her and we couldn’t prove it because she just disappeared? If there were no body or its various parts, the uncertainty would gnaw at me. Or what if I lost more than one family member to brutality, Ruth, Kathy, Larry, or my grandchildren? Or what if I was responsible for a terrible accident that took the lives of those I love? How could I deal with the kidnapping or disappearance of a grandchild? — Not knowing if they were tortured and raped. It is a very violent world we live in. I know.

Margie’s death was horrendous, but I have learned not to ask how it could be any worse. I know it could be and ghastly things can still happen to those I love. Margie’s murder has not given us immunity from more such tragedies. It has forced me to acknowledge that my world isn’t safe anymore. When I see newspapers and television reports of other people’s tragedies, I comprehend their loss and pain. I experience the first sharp thrust of mine again. I know it can happen to my family, so I don’t ask why me, but why not me? And I wait.

Don’t avoid me. Being ignored hurts deeply. I know being around me is uncomfortable, but I’m doing the best I can. I need all the support you can give me. If you don’t feel strong enough to help, please tell me. I’ll accept that. I know what it is to feel weak.

Holidays are difficult. Pray for us. Make plans to get together. Let us know you remember her birthday and the day she died — that she existed. We need to celebrate her life and acknowledge her death. Your call, card, or visit helps us through these tough times.

It is I who must work to heal. I can not escape the pain. I must acknowledge it and decide to live the rest of my life with purpose and meaning. Caring friends make that a possibility. The people who have chosen to be my friends are special. They want to be here for me. Please keep trying. Sincere effort counts the most.