

The Search for Meaning in the Aftermath of Homicide
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Nearly 425,000 Americans have been murdered during the past two decades. While this figure is sizable, the number of family members affected by a homicide is substantially larger. Indeed, a national prevalence survey found that 9.3 percent of the adults sampled had close friends or relatives who had been murdered. Attention to the needs of this group, however, is limited. The author found only a handful of empirically based studies with an exclusive emphasis on the post homicide experience of family members. The purpose of this research was to expand understanding of the needs of this vulnerable yet invisible population by illuminating the subjective experience of family members who have lost a loved one to death by murder.

Fourteen families, who had experience the homicide of a family member, were recruited from three sites and interviewed as families. The total number of participants was 38. The average length of time since the homicide was 7.5 years (range 18 months to 23 years). The results of this study reflect the “essence” of rather than the exact experience of families who participated in this study. People will identify, therefore, more strongly with some of the results than with others. The results represent only the experience of the research families and may or may not be applicable to other homicide survivors.

Results

Six themes comprised the core constructs of the participants’ experience. Their seemingly linear sequence is misleading because

there is no order to their emergence. Rather, any one theme may be present at any point in the experience of a family member of a homicide victim. Moreover, the themes interacted with each so that the presence of one theme could stimulate the occurrence of another.

Theme 1: This Is A Nightmare You Don’t Wake Up From

Learning a loved one had been murdered was a defining moment that plunged family members into a netherworld from which there was not escape. The news left an indelible imprint. A mother vividly recalled her response after being awakened by the police at 3:30 in the morning and told of her son’s murder. “I walked around the house and around the house, screaming and screaming until daylight. You know, until people came.” The news reduced family members to a primal state. The recognized that their screaming, howling, banging, and mindless pacing were behaviors normally reserved for lower forms of life. A family member described her alien impulse to throw a cup of coffee. “Just out of nowhere, I am...sitting there...and all of a sudden, I will feel like I want to pick it up [a cup of coffee] and just throw it against the wall.”

The news of the murder was only one in succession of onslaughts that appeared without warning, thwarted the ability of family members to regain a firm footing, and left them feeling defeated. A father described his fall after he later learned that his 14 year old daughter had also been raped. “Now the only good thing of her dying a virgin is

gone. Now I'm mad...I mean I've sunk another level lower...You're just, you're falling and...you can't catch yourself. I'm just – God, I'm drowning." A mother talked about going Christmas shopping and encountering the murderer who remained at large:

Mother: I am seeing all those things that I would have loved to have gotten [my deceased daughter]...and I turn the corner and here is...that piece of garbage Michael.

Interviewer: What do you do when you see him?

Mother: Shake, smile, and keep going on. And pray. Believe me I pray a lot.

Family members could not fathom why someone would take the life of their loved one. One mother sought out the bar owner where her son had been shot. "I'm goin' to him. An I wanna know what happen'd." A sister went to the courthouse. "...I read all the documents. I...read every page because I had to. I had to see everything that was said and piece it all together. I was looking for more people to blame (laughing) and hold responsible." The 'why' question provoked quilt and left family members adrift in an ocean of infinite possibilities. The constancy of the 'why' question became a poignant statement about having no control, resolution, or relief.

Family members waited for the pain to pass but it never did. A father could not speak his son's name for 18 years. A mother felt robbed of her son's future. "I'll never get over the hopes that we had, that

he never got to come home." A wife said to her husband, "I don't know if it is ever going to go away or if it is something that I am going to have to live with the rest of my life..." Her husband answered, "I don't think that it is going to go away." A mother described her realization that her daughter's murder would be a permanent nightmare. "[E]very parent has a nightmare where your child dies but you wake up. This was something you cannot wake up from. This was permanent. This is real."

Theme 2: I Feel Betrayed By Those I Thought Cared

Family members felt continually betrayed by people who did not live up to their expectations. They also felt hurt and disenfranchised by the actions of others who mistreated them. The Oxford English Dictionary defines betrayal as "a violation of trust or confidence, an abandonment of something committed to one's charge" (p.150). It defines betray as "to be or prove false to; to be disloyal to; to disappoint the hopes or expectations of" (p. 150).

The sense of abandonment from friends and/or members of extended families exemplified the feeling of betrayal. A mother who felt deserted by her family said, "No one has ever said anything. None of them have ever even asked me, 'How are you making it through?' I know they always said....'You're the strong one.' ...I think they just view me as...'[S]he's strong an' she'll pull through.' Because for five years, they have never ever called an' asked me how I was doin'. Being ostracized estranged family members from their social groups.

They no longer fit. They do longer felt secure. A wife said, "I went [to my old church] last night for the first time in a long time. It felt cold like I don't belong here anymore. (voice quivering and crying) It's not my home." Family members rationalized the disappearance of their families and friends. "They all disappeared because they couldn't handle it." "They may be afraid to bring up his name because of the tears." While these explanations made sense of the abandonment, they also reminded family members that they were alone and should not look to family and friends for what they needed.

The sense of betrayal was exemplified by the deceptive practices of others. A niece whose uncle murdered her sister exclaimed, "This murder has...kind of broken my faith in people. I thought there would be enough...goodness left in him, some decency, humanness that even [my uncle], who I knew was mentally ill, would never go so far as to do something so heinous." A mother described how the murderer twisted the truth to portray her daughter's murder as a mercy killing. "He tried to say, when he confessed to the police, that [my daughter] asked him to render her unconscious because she was so upset about the rape and didn't want her parents to find out. That's how sick he is! He's trying to justify what he did. It was like... 'she gave me the o.k. to do it.'" The disregard for the truth also came from people who were suppose to act with integrity. A father described the rebuff he got from the police when he called to report that his daughter was missing. "[T]he police

said, 'Sorry, we do not have time to go looking for every kid that skips school...Go check the mall...She's probably there with her girlfriends."

The sense of betrayal was exemplified by the insensitive responses from others. Instead of receiving care and consideration, they were given perfunctory and cursory treatment. A chaplain lectured one family on the subject of forgiveness.

Wife: [H]e delivered the notice [of the death] and just told us briefly, very briefly what had happened. Then he said, "...I need to tell you now that as you go though this whole process that you[v'e] got to think about forgiveness. Forgiveness is very important. You don't want to be angry."

Daughter: "And maybe not right now but somewhere down the line, ya gotta think about forgiveness." We all wanted to plaster the man.

Family members were also annoyed by inappropriate and thoughtless condolences. "Anyone who says, 'God never gives us anything that we can't handle' hasn't been through shit. That all I can tell them. 'You haven't been through it cause you would never say that.'" Family members felt betrayed because their trust in the benevolence of others was broken. Family and friends drifted away. People were no longer trustworthy. Those who were supposed to care made only minimal efforts to connect. These experiences taught family members that the world they had known was

no longer there for them. A family member echoed the sentiments of many other participants when she said, “And doesn’t the world know? Doesn’t the world care?”

Theme 3: What Rights Don’t I Have Anymore

Family member quickly discovered that their individual rights were subsumed by the public agenda. They felt invisible in the criminal justice system because murder is a crime against the state rather than a crime against them. Yet they were thrust into the limelight by the media who claimed that the public had a right to information. The also felt marked as an object lesson in the community about what can go wrong in someone’s life. Changes in their status happened overnight. Indeed, the rights they had assumed as private citizens became rights the no longer had.

Family members, for example, craved information about the suspect, the progress of the police investigation, or the autopsy. Instead of getting what they needed, they felt barred, patronized, or discriminated against. A mother declared, “I’m really tired of being placated and patronized: ‘Oh well, ...[W]e aren’t at liberty to talk about that.’ ‘Well, when will you be?’ It’s been four years and I have seen absolutely nothing.” A daughter hounded the coroner for information about her father.

There was nobody to even know to go after. I didn’t know to be pissed off at the coroner’s office and that they should have told me what the hell happened and told me where to get a report. The just didn’t want to tell me and they didn’t want to

deal with it. And they admitted that afterwards when I called them and confronted [them] ...”Lady, it is not our job to tell you. We don’t have to. We don’t want to. Her sister added, “[T]he information about my dad [who] was killed with 75 wounds and...butchered would probably have been a good thing to tell us at some point. Rather than finding out at the trial three months later.”

Besides having no right to know, family members also learned they had no right to have justice done. The state’s procedures, protocol, and agenda took priority and family members felt like bit players who could only endure lengthy court delays, courtroom shenanigans, and unjust verdicts. A mother explained, “All that delay stuff is very intentional yet [defense attorneys] call all the shots. [Since murderers] have a right to a speedy trial, they use that and manipulate that to get things done. Then, when they don’t want it they can waive [it]...yet we don’t have any of those rights.”

While family members were unsure of what was allowed them, representatives of the media has no trouble asserting their rights, on behalf of the public, to gather, print, and broadcast all information and speculation about the murder. A mother described how the cameras from every news channel faced her as she walked down the church steps after her daughter’s funeral. “...[T]he next thing you know, we were in the funeral procession and the media’s trying to cut in there to get to the cemetery before us.” Another mother felt the injustice of the media’s efforts to expose her

son's past. "They went and got his records and wrote up everything that was in them." Families felt violated and exposed. How loved ones were portrayed distorted who they had been. Accordingly, families felt they lost control of their truth about the victim.

Family members also lost their right to control their standing in the community. They felt marked. "I felt I had a big M on my forehead for Murder." They also felt typed as bad luck families. A daughter explained, "There has to be a reason why somebody gets murdered. Either they are in a bad neighborhood, they are involved in a drug deal, they are a different color than me, or they are poor and lazy. There has to be a reason why it can't...happen to...me." Whether they were subtly dismissed or blatantly disgraced, family members felt the erosion of who they had been. They also felt impotent to stop the judgments that distanced them from their communities.

Theme 4: Belonging Relives My Alienation and Loneliness

Homicide rips families away from their loved ones and the community that does not share their grief. In some select situations, however, they experience a belonging that affirms their common humanity with others. The sense of belonging can derive from various sources – the family, those who have been or are going through pain, loving companions, or the memory of a loved one.

Family members, who otherwise belong to each other, felt more intensely joined by what had

happened to them. A family banded together after a funeral director treated them insensitively.

Daughter: Not only are we doers..., we are bargain hunters (laughs). If you can't use a coupon or...get it on sale, you just don't do it.

Mother: [The funeral director] was bugging me...He had this long list and he said [rotely], "This [item] will cost this much. This [item] will cost this much." And he kept his head down. He never looked at us. I finally said, "Do you take coupons?" (family laughs). It just came out.

Daughter: All of us are laughing. I mean we just busted a gut because this is the mode of our family.

Family members also felt a sense of belonging when others understood their suffering or they became involved with the suffering of others. They felt received in support groups where they didn't have to meet anyone else's agenda but their own. A mother remarked, "You don't even need to talk to these people [support group members]. You know they know." Indeed, the 'right' questions helped to open up the suffering that festered inside.

Sister 1: They [the group leaders] said, "Talk about the violence and trauma to your loved one's body. They didn't say, "I don't want to hear it. I'm not ready for it. Oh, that's horrible." [They said] Tell me about the nightmares? Tell

me what you'd like to do to this guy? And do you have revenge fantasies?

Sister 2: [Yeah], they weren't shocked by "I want to chop his head off."

While family members treasured the opportunities to be heard, their suffering opened them to the suffering of others. A father who helped another father said, "People just need somebody there. Most of the time you're better off saying nothing. Just be there"

Family members felt a sense of belonging from unexpected 'companions' that shared their burden and tended them with loving guidance. A son recalled how "Margaret", the director of a program for homicide survivors had tried to spare his family from pain by anticipating their future. "The book of Margaret. She told us about a number of things. It sounds like a cliché but [she said] we would be rewriting our address book." A mother used the words of an old childhood friend to guide her through her sorrow. "He said, 'They were given to us on loan. They don't belong to us. And when that man says, "I want my kids back," he calls them [back].'"

The pain of remembering also tied family members to their loved one. A father described his visits to his daughter's grave. "You go to the graveside and...go, 'That's my 13 year old daughter. She'll never get any older.' You know she's safe. You know she's good. You know she's in heaven. You don't spend a lot of time because it hurts. But you come away smiling." The pain of

remembering also reminded family members that they belonged to something larger than their pain. A mother described the transcendent feeling she had after talking to troubled teens about her son. "I just get warm affirmation and always say to myself, 'Have you ever had such a good felling? Genuine feeling? And I say that every time after a [group]. I'm high on life driving home through the ghetto.'" When family members belonged, they felt seen. Feeling attached affirmed their common humanity with others. Being cared for affirmed their worth.

Theme 5: I've Stopped Waiting For Things To Go Back

The murder of a loved one psychologically stretched family members. Instead of landing at a final destination, they found themselves in a state of continuous change and emergence. They also discovered aspects of themselves they had not known before. Specifically, they became keenly aware of their environments. They felt strong and overwhelming emotions. They saw through to the core of things. They focused intently on what really mattered and they responded with immediacy to the problems at hand. A brother, who used to be impervious to shooting scenes in movies, said, "I am completely aware of it now and...I will avoid a movie if I think it will be violent." A mother talked about her ability to see things from a different perspective. "Most people I know are looking here (pointing downwards). I'm here (pointing upwards). I can't go back down there...Even if I wanted to, I couldn't."

While some of the changes were viewed positively, some were disabling. A son described the permanence of his mother's depression. "I think the day my Mom heals is probably going to be the day she dies." A sister recalled that her father began drinking heavily, landed in a nursing home, and eventually died. "He couldn't get up...but there was no physical reason...he couldn't walk."

Family members were cognizant that they had choices about how to respond to the homicide but their decisions did not feel voluntary. Rather, they felt compelled to go in particular directions. A daughter said, "I know the two ways we could have gone but I don't understand why I went one way. I can't say that it's because I am stronger than somebody else that went another way." Family members were also cognizant that their changes separated them from persons who had not experienced homicide. A daughter declared, "I feel like we know something other people definitely do not know. ..And if I had to go through something like that ever again, I can fight my way out of it, I guess."

In addition to realizing that they were different from whom they had been as well as different from others, family members were forced to recognize that their prior assumptions and beliefs about order in the world and control over events were archaic. They accordingly developed, through their living, a different set of assumptions that gave them more control over the definition of what was real. While these new beliefs stripped away old

illusions, they also provided family members with more reliable truths on which to base their living. These new beliefs resulted in a 'new normal'.

The 'new normal' consisted of the following beliefs: 1) It could happen again. Family members agreed they never could have predicted the murder of their loved one. Since it had happened once, it was not improbable it could happen again. A mother said, "I really hope I never have to see someone go through that pain. But I know it's probably going to happen." 2) I don't control anything anymore. Family members learned that being in control of events and conditions was a fantasy. They could not stop the suffering they saw around them. They recognized the limits of their power to make anything happen. 3) They're [homicide victims] not coming back. Family members acknowledge their reluctance to fully accept the reality of the murder and the finality of their loved one's death. A mother explained that holding on was natural because there was no goodbye. "[T]hat's what bothers a lot of people. 'I never go to tell him goodbye'." 4) There's no closure. Family members recognized they would never feel a sense of completion or resolution. Rather, the real challenge lay in working with the consequences over time. "It's never going to go away. It's never going to go away. It's just another pot you have to attend to." 5) Suffering is natural. Family members learned that having intense feelings did not demolish them. They learned to respect their pain and to view suffering as normal, rough, and necessary for their health. "Out of no

trauma comes lackadaisical living.”
6) I draw my own conclusions. Family members determined for themselves what they believed. They stated their beliefs as proclamations of truth. A daughter proclaimed, “That phrase ‘time heals all wounds’ is a bunch of shit. It doesn’t heal anything. It just makes it more in the past.” 7) I don’t believe past tomorrow. Family members placed their faith in what they had today. They used their belief to motivate themselves to take action. A mother said, “We’re not promised tomorrow. But you never think about it...until you’ve lost somebody.” 8) Everyone does it differently. Family members were resolute in their conviction that each person needed room to grieve in his or her own way. A brother said, “You’ve got to respect [people] for what they are doing. Let them heal the way they are going to heal and don’t try to force your opinion upon [them].”

These new beliefs encompassed the randomness of events and allowed for individual differences. They also normalized suffering and provided for a more accurate interpretation of time. A daughter evaluated her life for now by saying “things have returned to their new normal. I don’t know that [life] is any better or worse. I feel I know a whole lot more and [am better] prepared for the rest of my life.

Theme 6: The Intense Pursuit Of What Matters Is The Meaning In My Life

The homicide threw families into an abyss of chaos and desolation. While family members believed that

the act of murder was needless and senseless, they also found that they had intense feelings about what mattered to them. By following the dictates of these intense feelings, they created meaning in their lives. The Oxford English Dictionary defines matter (in the sense of what matters) as “to be of importance, to signify.” It defines meaning as “intention” or “purpose.” Hence, the pursuit by family members of what they deemed significant gave some purpose to their otherwise shattered lives.

The process of reacting intentionally occurred throughout the post-homicide experience and family members used a myriad of ways to express ‘what matters’. For example, family members made pronouncements about the hypocrisy they saw around them. These pronouncements declared what was true and mattered as they saw it while exposing the pretense of others. The pronouncements also appeared to be guided by an internal sense of integrity, which gave strength, direction, and coherence to their journey. A father laid out the evidence that made the government responsible for his daughter’s murder. “[The murderer] never went to the halfway house and the police never looked for him. So he...broke his parole...They didn’t even post that he was missing. Because the government screwed up, I lost my daughter. That will never settle with me.” A mother exposed the dishonest motives of the press. “[W]henever there’s media around,...I have told them...absolutely never, no way would you hear a word from me

because you're not 'doing it for my good.' You're doing it to sell papers."

Family members pursued 'what matters' by fighting for what they deemed was right. Sometimes they demanded what was due them. Sometimes they admonished others for their poor performance.

Sometimes they sought to enlighten people who were ignorant. A mother decided to sing at her son's funeral as a way to reach young people and address the violence in her community. "I let them know that there was nuthin' that I could do for my child. But I could let them know that they've got a chance and they need to stop all the killing. The song that I sung was "Stop Going Through the Motions." A mother castigated a reporter for the erroneous information that degraded her son. "I just said, 'You don't even know me... You don't even know my son! The only reason you can do this is because he's dead. He can't even defend himself... What you've done is absolutely wrong... I hope you never loose anyone.'" Family members often felt strengthened by the sense of moral purpose that accompanied these efforts. A father, who challenged a member of the prison staff for her leniency toward hard core criminals, said, "That helped me to let out that this hurts. This is not over."

Family members felt strongly that their loved one's death not be in vain. They carried their loved one forward in the decision they made about their own lives. They used their experiences to educate others. They also used their loved one's death as a base of direction for their own lives. A couple who lost their

daughter decided to devote time to Parents of Murdered Children. "'Gail' will not be forgotten. She won't be a statistic. We've always said, 'Number one, this is for 'Gail' and number two is for other survivors of homicide.'" A mother decided to attend every hearing for the eight boys who kidnapped, raped and killed her son. "I have always wanted to be there for my kids and this was my last time for 'Claude'. He would expect it. ..The attorneys do a lot of things ..if they don't have to look 'family' in the eyes. [I believed] that if they had to look at me and explain to me what they were going to do, we probably would get the best outcome we could get."

The intense pursuit of what mattered was expressed through declarations of truth, fighting for what was right, and living in ways that recognized the significance of the family's loved one. The pursuit had important implications for family members. It allowed them to be self-determining when they felt little control. It forced them to take risks in unknown situations. It created the meaning off of which life could go on. A daughter spoke about the need to pursue what matters fully. "[I]f you don't get out of this [experience] that life is worth living – you have got to live in each moment, you have got to enjoy it, you have got to laugh and you have got to cry, and you have got to do what you have got to do – then, you haven't learned a dang thing."

Six themes comprised the "essence" of the experiences of family members who participated in this study. The themes showed what was significant in their journey from

the time of the homicide to the present – a life-shattering nightmare, a sense of betrayal, a loss of rights, being different, alienation and loneliness, and the delineation of what matters and the pursuit of it.

Implications for Homicide Survivors

The results of this study begin to name the unique experience of homicide survivors. They show that death by murder is different from other deaths because what is otherwise private becomes a public event. Indeed, violent death is considered a public issue where the need for justice takes precedence over the needs of homicide families. Consequently, the family's experience will be colored by the interface between the public's response and agenda and the family's need. Family members will feel regularly challenged by the power of others to decide their fate. They will also feel an ongoing struggle for control over the meaning assigned to their loved one's murder. Family members can counter the erosion of their control by delineating what matters and going after it. Deciding how to respond to insensitive and ignorant comments, how to honor one's loved one, how to live now, how to engage with family members, how to fight for what's right are only a few of the many ways that homicide survivors can reclaim their lives and their right to determine things for themselves.

The results of this study also show that homicide survivors fit differently in the world as a result of having survived the murder of a family member. Relationships

change. Beliefs change. Homicide survivors, therefore, have a double task. They have to create a 'new normal' for themselves and they also have to learn to 'fit' in nontraditional ways. While this task is arduous, homicide survivors can emerge as 'knowing', wise leaders who have the clarity to see through the nonsense, i.e. the non responsiveness of others, and determine for themselves what is important now.

When events shatter assumptions about meaning, order and justice in the world, people generally work to make sense out of what happened in order to integrate the loss. The results of this study, however, suggest that homicide survivors are not able to make sense out of a senseless act. Rather, homicide survivors move forward with their lives by intensely pursuing what matters. The family members in this study pursued what mattered by working to discern and declare their truth, fighting for what they believed was right, and acting to ensure that their loved one's death shall not have been in vain. While the content of the pursuit varied from person to person, family members felt compelled to follow the dictates of their inner truth. Pursuing what matters helps create a degree of order out of chaos and gives family members some control over what otherwise is uncontrollable.

Implications for Therapists

The results of this study suggest that homicide survivors have unique needs that do not fit within predetermined diagnostic categories, i.e. bereavement, post traumatic stress, depression, etc. Indeed,

efforts to subsume or reduce the post homicide experience into categories will be experienced as disrespectful, insensitive, insulting or as evidence of ignorance about homicidal grief. Consequently, mental health professional need to think out of the box in order to understand and respond effectively to family members. For example, homicidal survivors do not experience closure relative to their loved one's death. While the post homicide experience may manifest itself differently over time, it has a life of its own that is ongoing.

The results of this study also suggest that homicide survivors need to feel 'accompanied' on their journey in order to feel less alienated and lonely. Mental health professionals accompany family members when they normalize their intense feeling of rage and terror, their expressions of primal emotions or fantasies of revenge. They accompany them when they

rehearse court appearances, encounters with ignorant co-workers, and giving victim impact statements. They accompany them when they are witness to the devastation and immense pain that is inherent to this journey.

In this study, the pursuit of what mattered gave meaning to the lives of family members. It created continuity between what had gone before and what is happening now. It contributed to a sense of coherence that gave them purpose and direction. Family members pursued what mattered from the time of the homicide until the present. Mental health professionals need to watch for indicators of this pursuit from the beginning so that they can highlight, encourage, and support it. Responding to these opportunities assigns significance and credibility to what matters. It strengthens the resolve of family members to move forward.

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