

When we lose a person in our community to a violent crime, the ripple effects are felt throughout families, friends, and social media networks. Often times, when violent, immediate loss strikes, we don't have something or someone at hand to help guide us through it.

Following the death of my brother, John, in August of 2013 to an act of gun violence, and witnessing other people I know lose their siblings to violent crime, I wanted to create a support organization for people like us.

The Sibling Support Network Support Guide is designed to help you assist and/or support someone who has lost a blood-related or fictive kin sibling to a violent crime. This is not an exhaustive guide and is meant to offer helpful suggestions. The guide is not a substitute for professional help or medical attention. If you or a person you care for is in crisis, please contact professionals in your area who can serve you.

This guide has also been developed to make the mission of Sibling Support Network tangible: *To assist individuals in healing the mental, and emotional wounds brought on by the violent loss of a blood related or fictive kin sibling, by providing tools, resources, and spaces for individuals to live whole, again.*

Thank you for your support and the support you give to others.

Cheeraz Gormon

Founder and Director, Sibling Support Network



Learn more at: www.siblingsupportnetwork.org

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SIBLING SUPPORT NETWORK



SUPPORT GUIDE

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HAVE YOU LOST A SIBLING TO VIOLENCE ?



For many people, losing a loved one is not an easy thing to experience. Losing a sibling to a violent crime can be one of the most life altering events a person endures.

Due to the constant occurrence of such losses in our communities, we've created a guide to assist family members, friends, and even the community with how to best to support a person who has lost a blood related or fictive kin (chosen family) sibling to violent crime.

IN THE FIRST 72 HOURS AFTER A VIOLENT CRIME:

1.

RESIST THE URGE TO POST AN R.I.P. MESSAGE, PICTURE, OR VIDEO

Posting about a death by violent crime on any social media platform is potentially one of the worst ways for someone to receive news about the death of a sibling.

It is a show of respect to allow the IMMEDIATE family of the deceased to be the first to confirm and report the death of their loved one. Based on your spiritual and/or religious practice, we recommend you take a moment for yourself to mourn, pray, and/or send positive energy to the family.

2.

DO NOT CALL OR TEXT THE BEREAVED FOR DETAILS

Calling or texting to get details about how someone's sibling recently died is insensitive. The inquiry can cause a great deal of pain to a person who may be highly traumatized from loss. Instead of asking for details, we recommend you simply ask the person how they are doing. Give your undivided attention as you listen. Allow them to tell you how they're feeling and do not give unsolicited advice.

Remember, your goal is to be supportive. This requires listening, even if the person can't get the words out.

Be present. Give them time to form their thoughts. If they don't have anything to say, do not force them to talk. There's a strong possibility that the person who has just lost their sibling is in shock.

Giving unsolicited advice to someone in great pain may cause them to lash out at you. Stay focused on being supportive, and allow the person who has lost their sibling to dictate what that looks like.



Kayla Thompson, sister of Tyrell Thompson

3.

ASK PERMISSION IF YOU'D LIKE TO BE PRESENT IN PERSON

If you would like to be physically present for a person who has lost a sibling to a violent crime, ask permission. In such a stressful time, consent is key.

If the person who has been harmed is hospitalized, do not invite yourself to be at the hospital with the family.

In the case of violent crime, many hospitals will not allow those who are not the patient's immediate family to be there. If you want to be present, ask the family if there's a designated meeting place for visitors. If the family gives you permission to be present, do not bring intoxicants of any sort for them. The time following a homicide is volatile. **DO NOT BRING ANY SUBSTANCES THAT COMPROMISE A PERSON'S JUDGMENT OR CAUSE THEM TO REACT VIOLENTLY.** With the person's body potentially under significant stress, the consumption of drugs and/or alcohol could cause great harm to the person, and those around them.

Chances are, the person who has just lost their sibling will need to eat, so it would be best to bring water and food that's within the person's diet. When you are arrive, be caring. If the person doesn't want to eat at that moment, let them know the food is there, and be present in a non-judgmental or intrusive way.

Words are powerful. In times of great stress, words can lead to harmful behaviors. **DO NOT USE WORDS THAT COULD POTENTIALLY LEAD TO SOMEONE COMMITTING A CRIME.** Also, **DO NOT SUPPLY A PERSON WITH A WEAPON OF ANY KIND.** If you know the person has access to a weapon, use your words to reason and redirect the person in a non-threatening or sensitive way.

If the person is "worked up", and you are unsure of how to stabilize them, we recommend following these steps:



- ~ Make eye contact
- ~ Speak in a lower tone of voice
- ~ Listen
- ~ Let them know that you know they're hurt
- ~ Get them to sit down and breathe
- ~ If the person appears to be in distress DO NOT restrain them in a violent manner
- ~ Get assistance if you cannot calm the person
- ~ Pay attention and keep yourself safe

While a lot of us want to be there for people we care about as they endure tragedy, we recommend that you check in with yourself first. Taking care of your own mental and emotional health is important.

If you feel at any moment that you cannot support a person who has lost their sibling to a violent crime, do not feel guilty.

4. *DO NOT ASK THE PERSON IF THEY'RE OKAY*

Do not ask the person who just lost their sibling to a violent crime if they're okay.

This may seem like an innocent question, however it could cause some people to behave in a way that masks how they feel. Even in the most heartbreaking times, a lot of people don't want to appear weak, lose control, or have others worry about them.

A few helpful questions to ask are:

What do you need? How can I help you? Would you like to eat something? Can I get you some water? Would you like for me to pray with or for you? *

*Only ask this question if you are sure that prayer is a means of comfort to the person.



Vincent Saletto, fictive kins sibling to Ray Henry Ulrich

5.

ASSIST THE FAMILY IN MAKING FUNERAL ARRANGEMENTS OR HELP WITH THE REPAST

In the days following loss, the family may be under pressure to get funeral arrangements completed. If the family is open to it, ask permission to assist. If you have the mental, physical, emotional, or spiritual capacity, and/or the financial means to assist the family, do so. Listen to what the family is requesting and only do what has been asked of you. If you do not have the mental, physical, emotional, spiritual capacity, or financial means to assist the family, do not feel guilty. Assist in a way that's within your means.

If the family would like to take care of things alone, respect their decision. If you are also mourning, give yourself the space and care you need to process the events.

6.

ALLOW THE PERSON SPACE TO MOURN AND GRIEVE

Funerals are difficult. If you want to be present and supportive to the person who has lost their sibling to a violent crime, be sure to center that person's needs and feelings. Allow them space to mourn and grieve. **DO NOT RUSH OR HUSH THEM IN AN UNLOVING MANNER, AND DO NOT SPEAK TO THEM IN ACCUSATORY WAYS.**

Sadly, some people say harmful things like, "Stop performing," "Be strong," and other things to get a person to manage their behavior. This does not help.

When a person is mourning, there's a good chance they are not in full control of how their emotions are presenting. They are processing, and their body and mind may be altered by stress.

POST FUNERAL OR MEMORIAL SERVICE:

1.

ESTABLISH A WELLNESS PROTOCOL

Depending on your relationship to the person who has lost their sibling, help them create and consent to a wellness protocol. Allowing the person to set their own boundaries and to decide what care looks like for them is key.

A plan could potentially look like:

- ~ Making sure the person eats food and drinks water every day
- ~ Asking them to communicate their emotions
- ~ If they're sleeping a lot, ask them to call/check in occasionally
- ~ If they're not sleeping, asking them what they think would help them sleep, and assist if it's safe
- ~ Making sure they're getting fresh air
- ~ Get them to exercise or to engage in physical movement
- ~ If the person is experiencing thoughts and exhibiting behaviors of self-harm, create an emergency plan that includes the services of a trained professional.

2.

DO NOT DIAGNOSE ANY CONDITIONS OR TREATMENT

If you are not a trained mental health professional, you cannot and must not diagnose any conditions or prescribe any medications or treatments. Speak up if you believe the person may do harm to themselves or others, and notify a professional to get the person assistance. Following the death of a sibling to a violent crime, a person may want to self-medicate with substances to numb the pain or escape the reality of what has happened. DO NOT JUDGE THE PERSON FOR WANTING AND/OR ENGAGING IN SUCH BEHAVIOR. THEY ARE ATTEMPTING TO COPE. INSTEAD, LET THEM KNOW THAT YOU KNOW THEY ARE HURTING. IN A NON-JUDGMENTAL WAY, GET THEM TO RECONSIDER EXCESSIVE SUBSTANCE USE.

Cheeraz Gormon, sister of Javon Mitchell and John D. Gormon, Jr.

A full-length portrait of a woman with dark skin and long, dark dreadlocks. She is wearing a bright blue sleeveless top, a long necklace of orange beads with a silver pendant, and dark jeans with a silver belt. She has a tattoo on her right arm and is looking down. The background is dark and out of focus, with a potted plant visible on the right.

3.

Upon consent, ask them what is the best way for you to support them. Establish solid boundaries, so as not to agree to things that will harm you.

[illegible]

LONG TERM SUPPORT: ASSISTANCE IN HEALING.

A lot of people offer aid in the wake of tragedy.

When it comes to losing a sibling to a violent crime, having long-term support is necessary for healing.

Here are a few things we'd like to suggest to assist a person who has lost their sibling to a violent crime.

After the actual event, viewing, funeral, and repast:

1.

RESPECT A PERSON'S FEELINGS ABOUT BIRTHDAYS AND HOLIDAYS

Birthdays and holidays can be exceptionally difficult for people who have lost siblings to violent crime.

Ask the person what they would like to do in advance of the meaningful days.

If a person doesn't want to celebrate their own birthday or the birthday of their sibling, do not judge them.

Allow them space to be with their feelings, and support them in the way that they would like to be supported.

2.

IN THE CASE OF AN ARREST, STAY VIGILANT

If a person or persons are apprehended for the death of a loved one, know that this may come with a feeling of temporary relief.

We recommend that you pay close attention to the person's behavior, and offer caring support.

Arrest does not mean conviction, so stay informed of the facts, and check in with the person to see what their needs are.

3.

HOW BEST TO SUPPORT SOMEONE IS DIFFERENT CASE BY CASE

If a person or persons ARE NOT apprehended for the death of a loved one, know that this may have negative impacts on a person's behavior.

We recommend that you ask a person how they need to be supported in this matter, and consult a professional if necessary and/or requested. Whether or not there has been an arrest for the crime, know that this may impact a person's behavior in a negative way. This may cause a person who has lost their sibling to a violent crime to become hyper-vigilant, to feel unsafe in what seems like a "normal" situation, or activate anxiety.

It is always best to ask the person to communicate how they are feeling AND TO RESPECT WHAT THEY ARE COMMUNICATING TO YOU.

The world as they know it has changed significantly, so do not pass judgment. At times, one of the best things we can do for a person in such stressful situations is to listen and help them get professional help.

4.

RESIST THE URGE TO POST ON SOCIAL MEDIA DURING A TRIAL

In the event there is a trial, know that this is a time of great stress in which a person could potentially be re-traumatized.

This is an extremely sensitive time, so be mindful not to post related items on social media unless you have been permitted to do so by the immediate family.

If you would like to be present at the trial, ask the family's permission first. Trials can be graphic and highly emotional so

be clear about your mental, emotional, and physical well-being, and your ability to be supportive in the courtroom environment.

Do not feel obligated to be at the trial. Talk to the person you intend to support, and be very honest with them about your capacity to do so.

5.

KEEP THE LINES OF COMMUNICATION OPEN

For many, losing a sibling to a violent crime marks a long road ahead. Every person processes loss differently, so allow the person to tell you what they need and how they would like to be assisted.

Most importantly, give the person SAFE SPACE TO MOURN AND GRIEVE. If you're unsure how to make someone feel safe and secure, ask them what it means for them. Be prepared if the person doesn't have an immediate and/or clear answer. This could be an opportunity to help them discover what works best for them.

Whether they were blood-related or fictive kin, the immediate loss of a sibling to a violent crime can leave people vulnerable. WE URGE YOU NOT TO INTRODUCE BEHAVIORS OR SUBSTANCES THAT COULD CAUSE A PERSON SHORT OR LONG-TERM HARM.



Photo credit: Matthew Boyd