



Provided by
The Victim/Witness Advocates
Polk County Sheriff's Office

VICTIM/WITNESS ASSISTANCE PROGRAM



POLK COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

PCSO FORM 683 (REV 03/15/2018)

***POLK COUNTY SHERIFF'S
OFFICE CONTACT
INFORMATION***

***EMERGENCY 9-1-1
NON-EMERGENCY
863-401-2226***

***OR
1-800-226-0344***

***ADMINISTRATION
863-298-6200***

***NORTHEAST DISTRICT
863-236-3900***

***CENTRAL DISTRICT
863-297-1100***

***SOUTHEAST DISTRICT
863-678-4115***

***NORTHWEST DISTRICT
863-577-1600***

***SOUTHWEST DISTRICT
863-499-2400***



Polk County Sheriff's Office:

Incident Number: _____

Notes

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Victim/Witness Assistance Program
Services Offered by the Victim/Witness
Advocates 4

Domestic Violence..... 5
Leaving a Relationship..... 6
Some Important Safety Tips 8
The Criminal Justice System 9
The Injunction for Protection 9

Sexual Assault 11
Rape Recovery Resource Center..... 11

Dealing with Trauma 12

Dealing with the Death of a Loved One 14
Coping with the Criminal Justice System.. 14
Suicide 16
Grieving Guidelines 17
Grief Support Groups 20

Bio-Hazard/Crime Scene Cleanup 21
Alternatives to Professional Companies..... 21

Crime Victim Compensation Program 22

Community Resource Information..... 25
Important Telephone Numbers..... 27

VICTIM/WITNESS ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

The Polk County Sheriff's Office recognizes that initial help can be crucial in a victim's recovery process. The Polk County Sheriff's Office, in conjunction with the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA), is committed to assisting in this process through the Victim/Witness Assistance Program. The primary goal of the victim/witness advocate and VOCA is to provide a support system to victims. This system provides information and referrals that will minimize the frustration a victim may experience while moving through the criminal justice process. Recommended services will be geared to the specific needs of the individual.

We realize that for many persons, being a victim of crime is their first experience with the criminal justice system. In an effort to inform victims of help that is available to them, the following information is offered.

Services Offered by the Victim/Witness Advocates

- Provide referral information for counseling, financial assistance, housing, etc.
- Provide moral support for victims during any court proceedings.
- Provide transportation when necessary to emergency shelters or the courthouse.
- Provide assistance in the completion of forms for benefits from the Crime Victim Compensation Program for expenses incurred as the result of a crime.

Compassion House	863-682-0163
Frostproof Care Center	863-635-5555
Habitat For Humanity	863-292-2256
Help of Fort Meade	863-285-6600
H.O.P.E. Counseling Center	863-709-8110
Lakeland Volunteers in Medicine	863-688-5846
Lake Wales Care Center	863-676-6678
Mulberry Community Service Center	863-425-1523
Polk County Elderly Services	863-534-5320
St. Joseph Catholic Church (Food)	863-682-0555
St. Joseph Catholic Church (Clothing)	863-682-2757
St. Vincent De Paul (Winter Haven)	863-293-6133
St. Matthews Thrift Shop	863-299-0300
The Mission (Winter Haven)	863-299-2348
United Way of Central FL	863-648-1515 or 211
WIC (Women, Infants, and Children)	
Bartow Office	863-519-7542
Wings of Eagles	863-665-7700
(furniture, clothing, household items)	

MENTAL HEALTH AND COUNSELING (See Also Page 20):

Anchor House Ministries (boys)	863-665-1916
Behavioral Health Division	863-294-7062
Blind Services	863-499-2385
Catholic Charities:	
Lakeland	863-686-7153
Winter Haven	863-299-7983
Children's Advocacy Center	
Bartow Office	863-519-3906
Fla. Sheriff's Youth Villa	863-533-0371
H.O.P.E. Counseling Center	863-709-8110
Lake Wales Care Center	863-676-6678
Lake Wales Drug Awareness Council	863-676-1949
Neighborhood Service Center (Seniors)	863-294-5860
Peace River Center/Admin Office	863-519-0575
Polk County Veterans Services	863-534-5220

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE COUNSELING PROGRAMS:

Consumer Credit Counseling Service	
Dept. of Children and Families	
Food Stamps, Medicaid	1-866-762-2237
Adult Protective Services	863-578-1749
Child Protective Services	863-499-2222
Social Security Administration	1-800-772-1213
Worker's Compensation	1-800-342-1741

LEGAL SERVICES:

Dept. of Revenue (child support)	1-800-622-5437
Heart of FL Legal Aid Society (divorce)	863-519-5663

HOUSING, EMERGENCY, TRANSITIONAL:

George W. Harris Youth Shelter	863-595-0220
Lighthouse Ministries (men)	863-687-4076
Lighthouse Ministries (women)	863-687-4076
Talbot House Ministries	863-687-8475
Salvation Army Winter Haven	863-291-5109
Salvation Army of East Polk	863-291-5107
Women's Care Center	863-534-3844
Youth & Family Alternatives	863-499-2430
Lake Wales Care Center (families)	863-676-1949
Tri-County Human Services	863-701-7373

GENERAL ASSISTANCE: (medicine, food, financial aid, etc.)

Auburndale Relief Association	863-967-9711
Catholic Charities - Lakeland	863-686-7153
Catholic Charities - Winter Haven	863-299-7983
Church Service Center	863-533-5822
Haines City Adult Day Care Center	863-421-3369

DOMESTIC/DATING VIOLENCE

“Domestic Violence” means any assault, aggravated assault, battery, aggravated battery, sexual assault, sexual battery, stalking, aggravated stalking, kidnapping, false imprisonment, or any criminal offense resulting in physical injury or death of one family or household member by another family or household member.

“Dating Violence” means any assault, aggravated assault, battery, aggravated battery, stalking, aggravated stalking, kidnapping, false imprisonment, or any criminal offense resulting in physical injury or death of an individual who is having or has had a continuing and significant relationship of romantic or intimate nature that has existed in the past 6 months, with expectation of affection or sexual involvement and the frequency and type of interaction between the people involved must have been over time and on a continuous basis.

Domestic/Dating violence can begin as a pattern of behavior used by any family or household member to establish and maintain coercive control over another. Some warning signs that potential problems may exist are that the family or household member:

Tracks your time; Accuses you of being unfaithful without cause; Discourages relationships with other family members or friends; Prevents you from working or attending school; Angers easily when using alcohol or narcotics; Controls all finances without involving you; Humiliates you in front of others; Destroys personal property or sentimental items; Uses or threatens to use a weapon against you; Threatens to hurt you or the children; Forces you to have sex against your will; or Hits, punches, slaps, kicks or bites you or the children.

Please note the above are possible warning signs and if these signs are evident, there are resources in the community to assist you.

Peace River Spouse Abuse Hotline (Intimate Partner Only):
(Shelter, Relocation and Counseling) 863-413-2700

Florida's Domestic Violence Hotline:
(24-hour Counseling and Information) 1-800-500-1119

EMERGENCY 9-1-1

Leaving a Relationship

It is always best to plan for emergencies before there is one. Too many people who have to leave their residence quickly are not prepared, either for themselves or their children. Plan where you will go if you are forced to leave. If you have nowhere to go to, there are shelters available in the area. The victim/witness advocate can assist you.

Emergency Shelters are available to victims of intimate partner relationships and dependent children who have no other safe place to go. The deputy on scene will put you in contact with the victim/witness advocate to make the arrangements.

Ensure your own financial security Get a job, return to school, or get some training, so that you will be able to provide for yourself (and your children) should the need arise.

Who will give you support? (Enter phone numbers of those you can call. Keep this information with you.)

Family: _____

Friend: _____

Co-worker: _____

Neighbor: _____

Church: _____

Doctor's Office: _____

IMPORTANT TELEPHONE NUMBERS

THE SHERIFF'S OFFICE:

Non-emergency	863-401-2226
or	1-800-226-0344
Administration	863-298-6200
Northeast District	863-236-3900
Central District	863-297-1100
Southeast District	863-678-4115
Northwest District	863-577-1600
Southwest District	863-499-2400

State Attorney's Office	863-534-4800
Domestic Violence (for injunctions)	863-534-4180
Domestic Violence Shelter	863-413-2700
Polk County Courthouse (Bartow)	863-534-4000
Attorney General's Office (Victim Compensation)	1-800-226-6667
Rape Recovery Resource Center	863-413-2707
Florida Abuse Hotline (Child & Elderly)	1-800-962-2873
Citrus Connection	863-534-5500
Pre-Trial:	
Monday - Friday 8:30 - 5:00	863-534-4617
Evenings and Weekends	863-534-6312

CRISIS INTERVENTION:

Behavioral Health Services	863-294-7062
Gulf Coast Community Care	1-727-538-7460
Peace River Crisis Line (24 hour) Toll-Free	863-519-3744 1-800-627-5906
Tri-County Human Services	863-709-9392

CHILD CARE SERVICES:

Head Start	863-648-3047
------------	--------------

Notify the insurance agent and the bank(s) where the deceased has accounts.

Notify the deceased's employer. Also inquire into employee life insurance benefits, a 401K or a pension plan.

You may contact Social Security Benefits by calling 1-800-772-1213. The local Security Office in Lakeland is located at 550 Commerce Dr. (863-701-2150) and in Winter Haven at 1395 Havendale Blvd. (863-293-0242). Social Security benefits MUST be applied for within a specific time frame; they are not paid automatically.

You may contact the Regional Office of the U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs in St. Petersburg at 1-800-827-1000 or locally at the Bartow Office at 863-534-5220. Benefits are not paid automatically, you must apply.

If there is a criminal case pending, contact the State Attorney's Office at 863-534-4800 for more information.

If the death was the result of a crime, you may be eligible for victims compensation. Contact the victim/witness advocate in your area for an application and assistance.

Transportation: _____

Child's School: _____

Lawyer: _____

Public Assistance: _____

Food Stamps: _____

See back of this booklet for additional phone numbers.

Plan what you will take with you when you leave. Keeping these items in a container away from home is best. Avoid putting these in your handbag or vehicle, where an abuser can get to them.

- Identification for yourself and your children (driver license, passports, green cards, work permits, etc.)
- Birth certificates for yourself and your children
- Extra set of keys for car, house, and/or storage area
- Checkbook, ATM card and cash
- Lease/rental agreement, house deed/mortgage payment book
- Credit cards, bank books, check books, etc.
- Address book/phone numbers
- Social Security cards
- Welfare identification, food stamps, Medicaid cards, etc.
- Vehicle registration
- Car, health and life insurance papers
- School and medical records
- Divorce, custody or injunction papers
- Proof of income for partner (check stub)
- Prepaid long distance card
- Copies of bills you owe with your partner
- Change of clothes
- Medicines for you and the children
- Personal hygiene products (tampons, tooth brushes, deodorant, etc.)
- Diapers, formula, toys, blankets
- Pictures, jewelry, keepsakes

Some Important Safety Tips

Have a safety plan. Review it often.

- If you move, put the rent, phone, and utilities in someone else's name. Relocation funds are available from the State of Florida. Call the Peace River Shelter at 863-413-2700 for more information.
- Check with the Peace River Shelter or a victim/witness advocate about the Address Confidentiality Program. Do not file a change of address card with the post office; it is not safe.
- Make sure all locks (doors and windows) and lights (inside and out) work properly.
- Install alarms on doors and windows. Install smoke alarms, metal doors, or other safety items.
- Make special arrangements to pick up children from school.
- Get an unlisted phone number. (Change old number, if necessary.)
- Get an injunction for protection from the Domestic Violence Department at 863-534-4180. (See next page for more on this.)
- Keep copies of the injunction for protection with you at all times.
- Have another person deliver and pick up the children if a judge orders visitation.
- Use a post office box instead of a street address. Check it during busy hours.
- Report suspicious things to the police or Sheriff's Office. Report all violations of the injunction for protection.
- Keep copies of the divorce, custody orders, etc., at school.
- Ask the school to call about any unusual contact by the abuser. Make the same arrangements with child care and babysitters.

COMMUNITY RESOURCE INFORMATION

Following a Death

Contact family, friends and clergy. If you do not have a clergy, a chaplain from the Polk County Sheriff's Office can assist you upon your request.

Select a funeral home. In doing so, use family and friends for recommendations; other options would be online or your local phone directory.

If your loved one was taken to the Medical Examiner's Office (863-298-4600), contact the funeral home and provide them with this information. The funeral home will need signed permission from you to receive your loved one.

To inform the Medical Examiner of the funeral home you wish to use or to obtain autopsy reports, call: 863-298-4600. Allow several weeks before you make your request for a copy of the report.

The funeral home you choose will provide you with copies of the death certificate. You can obtain additional certified copies from the Bureau of Vital Statistics by calling 863-519-7900.

A copy of the Polk County Sheriff's Office Offense Incident Report can be obtained by calling our Records Processing Unit at 863-298-6300 (please wait 7-10 business days). See inside back cover for the incident number.

You may obtain medical records from the hospital where the deceased was taken.

Information Needed When Applying

The victim/witness advocate will help you with the claim forms and provide a copy of the law enforcement report. The victim or claimant must supply, if applicable:

- Proof of crime-related expenses (e.g., itemized statements from doctors, hospital, mental health counselor).
- Proof of third-party payments such as insurance restitution, judgments or settlements.
- Proof of time lost from work due to the crime and a doctor's statement certifying disability.

Toll-free Victim Services Information and Referral Line: 1-800-226-6667

Internet Web Site: <http://myfloridalegal.com>

TDD Users Can Call Through The Florida Relay Service at: 1-800-955-8771

The Criminal Justice System (Pre-Trial Release)

If the abuser has been arrested, you should call the Pre-Trial Services Office at 863-534-4617 before the defendant goes to court. First Appearance Court is held on weekdays at 1:00 p.m. On weekends and holidays, call the Polk County Jail at 863-534-6312, 863-534-6346, or 863-534-6123. The First Appearance hearing is at 8:30 a.m. **It is important that your opinion is known to Pre-Trial Services as to whether the defendant should be released.**

The Injunction for Protection (Restraining Order)

Whether you have filed a report with law enforcement or not, the rules to apply for an injunction for protection are the same. There is no charge for this service. The Domestic Violence Department is located on the 1st floor of the Polk County Courthouse in Bartow. The telephone number is 863-534-4180. Bring with you any paperwork related to this case. You will apply for a temporary injunction for protection by completing a questionnaire and giving the clerk all the facts of the case. If approved, the judge will then issue a temporary injunction for protection which is effective for a period of two weeks. **Remember, this injunction for protection will be in effect only after it is served on the abuser, so if the abuser has not been arrested, it is vital that you know their exact whereabouts.** You will be given a court date for the permanent injunction for protection hearing wherein the abuser/suspect will be ordered to appear. If the judge agrees to the injunction for protection, it may be in effect for one year or on a permanent basis. A victim/witness advocate can accompany you to court if there is a criminal case and can help you in obtaining this injunction for protection including transportation, if necessary.

The injunction for protection may include, but is not limited to:

- Provisions which restrain the abuser from further acts of abuse;
- Direct the abuser to leave your household;
- Prevent the abuser from entering your residence, school, business, or place of employment;
- Award you custody of your minor child(ren);
- Direct the abuser to pay support to you and the minor child(ren) if the abuser has a legal obligation to do so.

If the abuser disobeys the injunction for protection and threatens or physically abuses you, call the police or Sheriff's Office. Show the officer/deputy the certified copy of the injunction for protection. In some cases the officer/deputy will arrest the abuser. If the officer/deputy does not arrest the abuser, you can file a Petition for an Order to Show Cause at the Polk County Courthouse in Bartow.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION,
BE SURE TO READ THE PAMPHLET
"YOUR RIGHTS AS A VICTIM OR WITNESS"
THAT THE DEPUTY GAVE YOU.**

Who Qualifies

- Victims who suffered physical, psychiatric or psychological injury as the result of a crime.
- Survivors of a victim who was killed as a result of a felony or misdemeanor crime punishable under federal law, including homicide, DUI (motor vehicle, boating, or aircraft) and hit and run.

Qualification Requirements

- Crime incident must be reported to law enforcement within 72 hours.
- Application must be filed within one year of date of the crime.
- Victim must not have been engaged in an unlawful activity and not have contributed to his or her own injuries.
- Victim must cooperate with law enforcement, the State Attorney's Office, and the Attorney General's Office.
- Victim or claimant must not have been in custody or confined at the time of the crime.
- Victim or claimant must not have been adjudicated as a habitual felony offender, habitual violent offender, violent career criminal, or adjudicated guilty of a forcible felony offense.
- **A criminal background check will be conducted on all victims and/or claimants who submit a claim.**

For more information about proper disposal of crime scene material, please contact the Polk County Hazardous Waste Facility.

Hazardous Waste Facility

10 Environmental Loop S.
Winter Haven, Florida 33880
863-284-4319

CRIME VICTIM COMPENSATION PROGRAM

Financial assistance is available from the Office of the Attorney General, Tallahassee, Florida. The Polk County Sheriff's Office victim/witness advocate has the claim forms and will assist you in filing for compensation. There is no application fee.

Benefits Available

Financial aid is available for expenses related to the crime, including loss of wages, loss of support, disability allowance, funeral, burial and related expenses, medical or non-medical remedial care, prescriptions, eyeglasses, dentures or prosthetic devices, mental health counseling, domestic violence relocation assistance, and property loss reimbursement for elderly (age 60 and above) or disabled adults.

SEXUAL ASSAULT

Sexual violence is a hostile expression of anger, hate or insecurity. Gratification comes from overpowering and degrading the victim. The perpetrator's need is to dominate and humiliate, not to obtain sexual pleasure or gratification. **It is not your fault.**

Victims of sexual violence include men, women and children of all races, ages and incomes. Victims have been sexually assaulted by friends, intimates, family members, acquaintances and strangers.

All victims of sexual violence, regardless of their previous sexual experience, indicate that sexual assault is a violent attack upon them that deeply affects their lives.

Rape Recovery Resource Center

The Rape Recovery Resource Center offers 24-hour crisis counseling for rape victims. They can be reached at 863-413-2707. The center is part of the Peace River Center that serves Polk, Highlands, and Hardee Counties.

There is no charge for the Forensic Examination (rape kit) provided by the Rape Recovery Resource Center. However, if the client requires professional counseling at the center, they will be charged for services according to their ability to pay. Fees may also be collected from the client's private insurance company that pays for mental health services. Services are provided regardless of ability to pay.

DEALING WITH TRAUMA

Trauma is described as “Something that severely jars the mind or emotions” (Webster’s II Riverside Dictionary). The symptoms of this severe stress require immediate attention. Even though you may expect any of the following reactions, most signs of stress lessen within a few weeks. These and other symptoms are described by people who have gone through a traumatic or out-of-the-ordinary event. If you experience any of these symptoms, you may want to contact a physician.

Behavioral – Anger, crying spells, over-activity, and significant changes in speech patterns, changes in interaction with others such as withdrawal or excessive silence, changes in your usual pattern of activities such as increased alcohol intake, a decrease or increase in food intake, increased smoking, or a change in sleep habits.

Emotional – Feelings of panic, fear, denial, guilt, depression, grief, anger shown by irritability, anxiety, excessive worry, over-sensitivity, losing control, and emotions you cannot explain.

Physical – Chest pain, problems breathing, a rise in blood pressure, dehydration, dizziness, nausea, upset stomach, tremors, feeling uncoordinated, profuse sweating, chills, diarrhea, rapid heart rate, sleep disturbance, fatigue, and over or under-activity.

Cognitive – A decrease in alertness, hyper-alertness, confusion, slowed or disruptive thinking, and having difficulty making decisions.

BIOHAZARD/CRIME SCENE CLEANUP

Biohazard/crime scene cleanup companies are not part of the Polk County Sheriff’s Office or Medical Examiner’s Office. They are private companies that can remove blood and/or other potentially infectious hazardous material from the scene. Contaminated items that cannot be cleaned will have to be removed from the location. This may include carpet, padding, linens, upholstered furniture or mattresses.

Costs vary depending on the amount of cleanup and decontamination that is required. As part of the service, the company will obtain the insurance information from you and then bill the insurance company directly. Financial assistance is also available through the Attorney General’s Office. Assistance with applying for this program can be obtained through the Polk County Sheriff’s Office victim/witness advocate.

The company should be equipped to respond 24 hours a day, not request payment from you prior to starting work, be properly licensed to transport biohazardous waste, carry standard liability insurance, have unmarked vehicles, and be courteous and discrete to their client.

Alternatives to Professional Companies

If a professional company is not used for the cleanup, you must contact the Polk County Solid Waste Division before bringing any crime scene material to the landfill.

GRIEF SUPPORT GROUPS

The Bethany Center, Good Shepherd Hospice, Support for Children & Adults

(Call for appointment or assessment)

450 Arneson Avenue

Auburndale, Fl 33823

863-968-1707

Toll Free

1-800-753-1880

Or

3470 Lakeland Hills Blvd. (Administrative Office)

Lakeland, Florida

863-682-0027

Toll Free

1-800-464-3994

The Compassionate Friends

(Call for appointment or assessment)

Meets 2nd Monday of each Month at 7:00 p.m.

First United Methodist Church

72 Lake Morton Dr.

Lakeland, Florida

863-646-8917

“Grief Share” of Victory Assembly of God

(Meets every Tuesday at 7:00 p.m. in the Main Sanctuary)

1401 Griffin Rd.

Lakeland, Florida

863-859-6000 ext. 273

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP YOURSELF

Be kind to yourself – Think about steps to speed your recovery and to reduce the negative impact of the event. See yourself as having normal responses to an abnormal event and make up your mind to take steps to help yourself.

Talk to people – Talking to a trusted person about your reactions may help. You will feel less alone and more encouraged that you are okay. Reach out to others!

Get plenty of rest – Even if you do not sleep, your body will benefit from just relaxing.

Do an activity that provides comfort – Keep a journal; write down your thoughts. Take a day off and read a book, see a movie, work in the garden or clean a closet if that is what you feel like doing. Take a warm bath and listen to relaxing music and cook only if you feel like it. Any activity you normally enjoy will be of benefit.

Get some exercise – Walking, running, swimming, cycling, rope jumping, calisthenics and/or weight lifting will all help you feel better. Do any of these in moderation. The immediate benefits will improve sleep, decrease tension and anxiety, and increase your self-esteem.

Do not make big life changes – Give yourself plenty of time before making life-changing decisions. Think all decisions through. But make your own daily decisions, because this will give you a feeling of control over your life.

Get help – Be sure to seek help if your reactions to this event are stressing you beyond what you can do for yourself. See your own physician or get counseling. See page 29 of this booklet for resources or contact the victim/witness advocate to assist with referral information.

DEALING WITH THE DEATH OF A LOVED ONE

Someone you love has just died. It is an understatement to say that your life is changed and it will take a tremendous amount of time and hard work to recover. You may have feelings such as guilt, anger, sadness and even depression. Understanding these emotions may ease your sense of grief. It will take determination and the support of family and friends, and there are grief support groups in your area to help. Refer to page 20 for some of these grief support groups. If your loss is the result of a homicide, refer to the Crime Victim Compensation Program on page 22 (the victim/witness advocate will help you with this). We hope that you will find the following information helpful.

COPING WITH THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM (Homicide)

Most survivors of homicide victims are new to the Criminal Justice System. As you progress through various stages you may become angry and frustrated because your impressions of the justice system are not what you thought.

Record your thoughts in a journal – If you are inclined at all toward writing, it helps to release your feelings and record your progress.

Turn your grief into creative energy – Find a way to help others. Helping to carry someone else's load is guaranteed to lighten your own. If you have writing ability, use it. Great literature has been written as a tribute to someone loved and lost.

Take advantage of your religious affiliation – If you have been inactive in matters of faith, this might be the time to become involved again.

Get professional help when needed – Do not allow crippling grief to continue. There comes a time to stop crying and to live again. Sometimes just a few sessions with a trained counselor will help you to resolve the anger, guilt, and despair that keeps you from functioning.

Remember – No matter how deep your sorrow, you are not alone. Others have been there and will help share your load if you will let them. Grief varies considerably from one individual to another. It is usually characterized by an immediate and overwhelming sense of discomfort. Many people seek out the help and support of family, friends or a support group to help express, understand, and accept their feelings.

Get rid of imagined guilt – You did the best you could at the time. If you made mistakes, learn to accept that we are all imperfect. If you are convinced that you have real guilt, consider professional or spiritual counseling.

Accept your understanding of the death for the time being – You have probably asked “why?” over and over and have finally realized that you will get no acceptable answer. But you probably have some small degree of understanding. Use that as a viewpoint until you are able to work up to another level of understanding.

Join a grief support group – Your old circle of friends may change. Even if it does not, you will need new friends who have been through your experience. Bereaved people sometimes form groups of friendship and sharing. (See page 20 and 29 for a list of grief support groups.)

Continue to see your old friends – This may be difficult because some will not know what to say and may avoid contact with you for fear of saying the wrong thing. However, do continue to make the effort.

Postpone major decisions – It has been recommended to wait at least one year before selling your home, for example.

People naturally want to see justice done swiftly so that they can heal from that part of the trauma. Unfortunately, the Criminal Justice System often seems to prolong people’s grief. For example, you may find that justice does not always prevail. Sometimes the guilty are released on procedural grounds. Many homicide cases are never solved or do not result in convictions even if the identity of the offender is known.

Sometimes it will seem like the only ones serving a life sentence are the survivors – cases may drag on and on. Some cases never go to trial, others may take years before they go to trial. If there is a conviction, it likely will be appealed and a small fraction of cases find their way back to court for another trial.

Those who administer our laws (law enforcement officers, prosecutors, judges and others) must deal every day with the most brutal crimes. Sometimes they build self-protective barriers which may come across to victims as insensitivity, even though that is not so.

To help you through this ordeal, seek out supportive friends, counselors, or your victim/witness advocate.

Remember, Florida law gives survivors of homicide victims certain rights to information about pending cases, and other assistance. Keep in contact with the detective who is working your case, as well as the State Attorney’s Office.

**To register as a victim or for information,
Contact the State Attorney's Office
863-534-4800**

Suicide

Someone close to you has died. Your grief is intensified because the death was a suicide. The healing process will be painful and often seems unnaturally slow. Understanding your emotions, as well as learning something about the suicide in general, may ease your grief.

Why Suicide?

People of all ages commit suicide – men, women, young children, the rich and the poor. No one is immune to this tragedy.

Why should anyone willingly hasten or cause his or her own death? Mental health professionals generally agree that people who take their own lives feel trapped by what they see as a hopeless situation.

Whatever the reality, whatever the emotional support provided, they felt isolated and cut off from life, friendships, etc. Even if no physical illness was present, suicide victims feel an intense pain, anguish and hopelessness. John Hewett, author of "After Suicide" says, "He or she probably wasn't choosing death as much as choosing to end the unbearable pain."

Grieving Guidelines

Accept the grief – "Roll with the tides" of it. Don't try to be brave; take time to cry. This applies to men as well as women...strong men can and do cry.

Talk about it - Share your grief within the family. Do not attempt to protect them by silence. Find a friend to talk to, someone who will listen without passing judgment. If possible, find someone who has experienced a similar sorrow. Talk often, and if your friend shows impatience, find another friend.

Keep busy – Do purposeful work that occupies the mind, but avoid frantic activity.

Take care of yourself – Bereavement can be a threat to your health. At the moment, you may feel that you do not care. That will change. You are important and your life is valuable; care for it.

Eat well – At this time of emotional and physical depletion your body needs good nourishment more than ever. If you can only pick at your food, a vitamin supplement might be helpful, but it will not fully make up for a poor diet. Be good to yourself.

Exercise regularly – Return to your old program or start a new one as soon as possible. Depression can be lightened a little by the biochemical changes brought by exercise. And you will sleep better. An hour-long walk every day is ideal for many people.