

What you can do:

Supporting yourself and others after a trans death or violent crime

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It is normal to feel grief, anger, fear, sadness, and confusion when we lose someone we care about, particularly if the death was unexpected and/or violent. People who identify as part of one or more subpopulations can also feel these feelings when they learn that someone they did not know but who also belonged to their group has died or been seriously harmed. This is obviously true of the trans¹ community, in which news of suicides, murders, and other violence reverberates quickly via social media and word-of-mouth.

When we feel strong emotions like grief and anger, our brains release certain chemicals that diminish our abilities to think more creatively. Instead, our brains tend to focus on the actions we know best, the ones that have historically helped us to survive: fighting, isolating (fleeing), or freezing. The combination of the chemicals our brains create when we learn upsetting news or feel strong emotions can also heighten memories and bring back strong emotions about our own past pain and struggles. For many of us in this state our thoughts and actions tend to return to what is most familiar, what we have seen and experienced a thousand times over: locating who is to blame for the loss, “holding them accountable,” and “making them pay.” Others feel paralyzed, unable to do anything other than feel the depth and intensity of pain. Some will isolate and withdraw from social contact and other news altogether.

Pursuing “justice” seldom cures our distress. Indeed, sometimes trying to hold someone accountable for doing harm actually makes us feel worse. Because we are seldom in a position to actually prosecute or confront the wrongdoer, pursuing justice may increase our feelings of helplessness and powerlessness. When we can directly address someone we deem “responsible” for the harm – for example through a harsh/blaming social media post or picketing outside their home – we run the risk of later (when our brain chemistry has gone back to normal) feeling guilty for adding to the world’s already overwhelming stock of pain and violating our own values about how we want to treat other human beings.

FORGE, as the leading national trans organization devoted to issues of violence, would like to suggest some alternative actions grieving community members can take to help ourselves regain a more solid emotional ground and strengthen our community.

¹ Throughout this document, we use the word “trans” to represent a wide range of people within an expansive community, inclusive of those who identify as gender non-conforming, gender non-binary, and loved ones. We honor and recognize the complexity and multiplicity of gender identities. We use these words in their broadest meanings, inclusive of those whose identities lie outside of these often limiting terms.



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FIRST STEP: TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

It's hard for any of us to be there for others, to push for social change, and to create a world that is healthier and safer for everyone, if we don't attend to our own core needs. Here is a short reminder list about common things that help us function better and enable us to more effectively help others:



› Sleep

(Have I had the right amount of sleep in the past 24 hours?)

› Eat

(Have I eaten in the past 8 hours?)

› Move

(Have I moved my body at some level in the past 12 hours?)

› Medication

(Have I taken my prescription, over the counter or other medications today?)

› Contact with others

(Have I had human or animal contact with anyone in the past 24 hours?)

› Hygiene

(Have I showered/bathed in the last 24 hours?)

› Relaxation

(Have I had any time off, time to do something fun or relaxing, in the past 24 hours?)

WHAT YOU CAN DO NOW!

Once you have taken care of your own core needs, the following are just a few actions you can take now that may help others who are experiencing difficult times (and they might help you too).

■ Call someone.

You can call anyone, but it may be better to call someone who is likely also feeling your current loss. Listen. Seriously, that's all: just listen to each other. Sharing the pain can be remarkably healing.

■ Announce an impromptu and informal gathering.

One person posted on social media, "It's time for a family dinner. I'll be at X restaurant at X time tonight; come join me."

■ Invite someone out for coffee or a movie.

Think about someone you've met in the community who at some point may have struck you as lonely or hurting. Ask them to keep you company for awhile.

■ Announce a candlelight vigil or community speak-out,

or some other event where people can simply be with each other while you all acknowledge the loss and your feelings.

■ Hug someone.

New research shows that a 20-second hug can release oxytocin, the brain's "feel-good" chemical. (Get permission first, of course!)

■ Hold someone's hand.

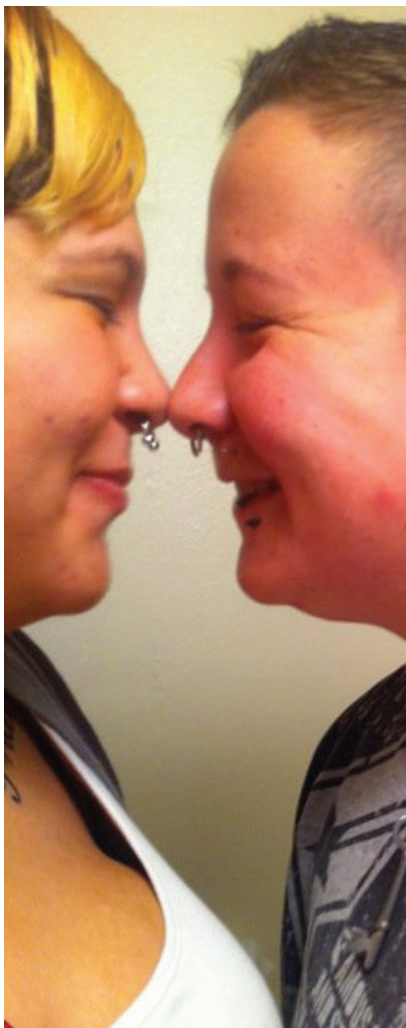
That simple physical touch can help both of you feel safer and less alone. (Ask to make sure it's OK first.)

■ Use your social media outlets

to advertise the existence of relevant local and national resources such as suicide hotlines or anti-violence projects.



MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN THE LONG RUN



■ Recruit a friend and host a community meeting

designed specifically to discuss unmet needs and what people are willing to work on as a group. FORGE organized such a multi-faceted community effort in 2010 after the murder of transwoman Chanel Larkin. You can learn more about our “Community Cares” project by viewing the webinar hosted at <http://forge-forward.org/event/hate-violence-community-cares/>

■ Think about what you can contribute to prevention efforts.

Is there a local National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) chapter you could speak to about trans issues? A nearby church that might be willing to post on a bulletin board a list of local trans organizations? A Gay-Straight Alliance at your neighborhood high school that might love to hear from a local trans adult or committed community member?

■ Think about how you can contribute to public education efforts.

Does a local trans or LGBT organization sponsor a speaker’s bureau you can join? Do any of your friends or neighbors belong to a civic group that regularly seeks out speakers? Is there a nearby professor who teaches a class that could benefit from a trans speaker?

■ Organize a visible trans contingent in a mainstream event

like a walkathon, Christmas in April, or community clean-up. These types of events reach a wide audience and let people know that trans people (or your organization, if you have one) exist and are valuable parts of the larger community.

■ Consider what you think helped lead to the person’s loss.

It could be racism, transphobia, lack of resources, family rejection, or many other things. Research what groups help address that issue and make a donation in the name of the lost or harmed person.

■ Make a longer-term commitment to that organization

by volunteering or serving on their board of directors.

■ Consider joining a buddy or mentorship program.

It doesn’t matter if you are the more experienced or less experienced person in the pairing; the point is connecting people who learn to care about each other.

■ Help draft and lobby for legislation that may help prevent further tragedies,

such as outlawing reparative therapy or improving transpeople’s access to legal, living-wage employment.

■ Make a huge difference in a single life:

become a foster or adoptive parent.

■ Need more ideas?

Check out “101 Things You Can Do” at <http://forge-forward.org/wp-content/docs/we-are-all-responsible1.pdf>

