

The For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters Journey

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Many people think of the word “grief” as being synonymous with “sadness.” The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary defines grief as “deep and poignant distress caused by or as if by bereavement” and lists “sorrow” as a synonym. Those who have lived through grief usually do not describe it quite so simply.

No question, deep sorrow is a big part of what happens when someone you love dies. But grief often includes more complicated emotions like anger, guilt, fear, blame, and regret. This is even more likely to be true when the death is sudden and unexpected, as most line-of-duty deaths are. There is little time to prepare or deal with unfinished business. The circumstances of the death may be violent and traumatic. There is often a sense of death happening out of season, way too soon.

Not only are these emotions difficult to feel, most people are hesitant to share their “darker” emotions too much with others. As a result, people often do not get

the support and help they need in dealing with these powerful, frightening feelings. People who have always relied on strong faith in times of trouble may find that faith shaken. If you are struggling with anger, guilt, and regret like you have never experienced before, rest assured you are not alone.

But what to do? Remember this: there are no “bad” or “wrong” emotions, but how you handle those emotions is important. A grief support group can be a safe, supportive place to express strong, complicated emotions that you might not feel comfortable sharing with family and friends. Writing, art, and physical activity are also outlets that work for many people. If you feel overwhelmed by your emotions, find a counselor who has experience working with people through grief and trauma. The Foundation can help you find support groups and counseling in your local area or put you in touch with a member of our Survivor Network.

Marlene Moore

Mother of Jared Moore (2004-KS)

Regret

I guess I will always regret encouraging my son to join his local volunteer fire department. When one of my coworkers asked if it didn't drive me crazy with worry, I told her, “No.” He listened to the experienced firefighters, took it all very seriously, and knew he had to follow the rules in order to stay on the department. Of course, when he was killed a few short months later, I felt like a naïve fool for thinking he was “safe.”



Jared and Marlene

But my strongest regret that haunts my dreams is the night that Jared died. He had bought a new movie, “Collateral” with Tom Cruise. After it ended, we discussed the irony of the ending, true poetic justice. I had been sick all day. When I rose to go to bed, Jared came to hug me, and I told him no, not to hug me. I was afraid I would make him sick. At nineteen, he still hugged me good-night. I turned down my chance for his last hug. In my dreams, I hug him so tight!

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Anger

I didn't know I was capable of feeling such deep anger and rage until the man who killed my son was acquitted. I remember seeing John Malkovich on the Tonight Show, being asked how he could play murderers so well. He said everyone was capable of murder under the right circumstances. I didn't believe him at the time, but I do now. As Christians, we have always been taught to forgive under any circumstance, but that has not been possible for me or my family. My husband, once a strong leader at our church, no longer teaches because of the anger in his heart. Jared's death and the difficult circumstances surrounding the way he died, have introduced us to depths of anger we did not know even existed. Anger of this kind is not healing or constructive.

In July 2007, we attended the National Conference of The Compassionate Friends. We attended a workshop in dealing with the legal aspects of a loss. Both of the speakers had sons who were murdered while attending college. They warned that the justice system does not lend comfort and can seem never-ending. Like everyone else at the conference, they assured us that there is no such thing as "closure" and that you never "get over it." But the most important thing they said to us, the most helpful of anything we heard that weekend, was this: "When you get to heaven and see your son again, what

will you say when he greets you and asks what you did with your life after he left? Do you want to tell him, 'I spent every waking minute trying to get even with the ones who caused your death!' Would that make him proud or happy knowing you spent the rest of your life angry and trying to get revenge? Wouldn't it be better to say, 'After you left, son, I did at least one good deed every day in your memory.'"

This was a turning point for me and my husband. Our efforts with the legal system have been fruitless, and the anger was eating us up inside. I can't control the court system, but I can honor my son by helping others. We will be awarding a scholarship in his name this May to a high school graduate. Jared had learning disabilities and struggled through school. I volunteer through the Youth Friends program and help tutor a fourth grader every week. Working with this sweet young lady is so much like working with Jared. She faces the same difficulties.

The anger is still there and can easily surface. The anger can still make my chest hurt, my stomach knot, and my fists clench, but I try very hard to remember my conversation with Jared the afternoon he died. He was upset with his brother and told me, "Life is too short to hold grudges." He just didn't see why his brother didn't get it. What good would life be if you went around staying angry all of the time?

Ruby Staley

Mother of Gary Lee "Deuce" Staley (2003-TX)

Fear

The one emotion that I dealt with for a long period of time was fear. I could see Gary's face as those flames roared around him. I could feel his heart pounding when he realized that he was trapped. I could feel the panic on his face and in his heart. I could hear the explosion of the car next to him. I could hear the popping of the fire. Noises haunted my head. They still do if I let them.

For years, I couldn't let go of his last moments alive, and

I wanted to be there to help him. It took a length of time before I could turn this over to the Lord. I am not sure why a crew was sent into that empty warehouse. They really should not have been. I do believe that when it is your time to go that you will go no matter when or where you are. God gave us a very special weekend with him before he took our Gary. I also know you never get over the loss of a child. I had to finally put him in God's hands, for there is no safer place to be, but a day doesn't go by that I don't think about him.

4th Annual Fire Service Survivors Conference

The National Fire Service Survivors Conference will be held April 27-30, in Novato, California. The Conference has previously been held in Washington, DC, and we decided to move the location to give our families nearer the West Coast an opportunity to attend.

This special week of activities is designed to address issues that you have indicated an interest in and to provide a chance for you to network with other survivors. It will allow you to meet fire service survivors from across the country so that you can renew acquaintances, share experiences, and make new friends. The Conference is for adults only.

This year's Conference will be held in conjunction with our Local Assistance State Team (LAST) training for fire service personnel. The intent of the LAST program is to identify a group of individuals in each state who are willing to respond to support the department and family after a line-of-duty death. The program is not intended to replace any line-of-duty death response system that already exists in a state, but instead to unify and organize each of the state teams to work on common elements relative to the line-of-duty death incident. The Foundation works within the existing state fire service structure to facilitate providing support to the departments and families who have gone through such a horrific loss. We understand there may be different state or local

protocols in various parts of the country. In the states where a system does not exist, the program will create a unit that can provide assistance. Attendance at the LAST training is optional for survivors, but, if you are interested in helping other survivors in your state when a firefighter dies in the line of duty, we encourage your attendance.

Both the LAST Training and workshops for the Survivors Conference will begin at 9 a.m. on Monday, April 27. Workshops will be offered on writing, dating, makeup, grief recovery, stress management, car maintenance, speaker's bureau, financial management, etc. On Tuesday evening our guest speaker, Darcie Sims of Grief Inc., will keynote at the dinner.

Meeting rooms and lodging have been reserved near the conference facility. The closest airports to Novato are Oakland and San Francisco, and the Foundation will arrange transportation for those arriving on Sunday from the airport to the hotel. The Foundation will provide lodging and most of the meals while you are at the conference. Depending upon funding, we hope to be able to offer a stipend to help with airfare.

If you do not receive an invitation, or if you need more information, please contact Linda at lhurley@firehero.org or call (301) 447-7693. We hope to see you there!

Michigan Friends

A group of Michigan survivors have begun meeting from time to time for friendship and support. According to Linda Wilbur, who helped get this group together, "We met in January and talked about setting up the Michigan Fallen Fire Fighters group. We are going to put together a booklet with all our information and pictures in it, so when someone needs to contact one of us they



Cari Thornton, Linda Wilbur, Kathy Lietzke, Marie Sanborn, & Doris Neilson

can look them up and put a face to the name. We plan to send this information to the LAST team members as well. We hope to be able to reach out and assist any other survivors, whether they live in Michigan or not."

If you would like to find other fire service survivors in your state or city, please contact the Foundation. We can help put you in touch with others who are looking for local connections.

The Lending Library

The Foundation maintains a Lending Library of materials related to grief and loss. The following

titles may be helpful in dealing with complicated emotions related to the death of a loved one:

Living With Grief After Sudden Loss
Kenneth J. Doka, Ed.

Sit Down, God, I'm Angry
R.F. Smith, Jr.

No Time for Goodbyes
Janice Harris Lord

When Bad Things Happen to Good People
Rabbi Harold Kushner

To borrow books for free through the Lending Library, visit www.firehero.org, or contact Linda Hurley at (301) 447-7693 or lhurley@firehero.org. If you want to purchase your own copy, please consider buying from

Amazon.com through the link on the Foundation's Web site. Purchases made through the Amazon.com affiliate program will benefit National Fallen Firefighters Foundation programs.

Public Safety Officers' Benefits Program (PSOB)

PSOB Frequently Asked Question...

How much time does a survivor have to file a PSOB death benefits claim after an officer has died from a line-of-duty injury? Per the PSOB regulations, unless a waiver is granted by the Director of the Bureau of Justice Assistance, a claim for death benefits must be filed either within three years of the public safety officer's death, or one year after any line-of-duty benefits for the officer's death have been received or denied.

Enacted in 1976, the Public Safety Officers' Benefits (PSOB) Program provides death, disability, and education benefits to those eligible for the program.



BJA Bureau of
Justice Assistance

Public Safety Officers' Benefits Program
Toll-free: 1-888-744-6513

We want to hear from you...



How have your experiences affected your faith? Have your convictions been strengthened? Shaken? Changed? If you are involved in a faith community, what part has that played in your experience? What thoughts can you offer about faith that might be helpful to others who are struggling?

Please send a Word document or e-mail to Jenny at jwoodall@firehero.org. If you don't do computers, send a typed or neatly handwritten copy to:

National Fallen Firefighters Foundation
The Journey
PO Drawer 498
Emmitsburg, MD 21727

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