

THE WAY I FEEL

A Series of Six Creative Books for Healing Post-Traumatic Stress

Foreword by Charles T. Clegg, M.D., Medical Director
College Hospital, Cerritos, California

Trauma and violence have touched and wounded young lives for generations, but only in recent years have we begun to understand the dimensions of the problem – both in young children and in adults who have carried the emotional scars of childhood experiences into their adult lives.

In the Eighties, mental health professionals began taking a new look at the effects of Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome as a result of childhood trauma. We have begun to understand the impact of trauma on young lives - and we have begun to listen to the subtle and direct messages that young people in these situations give us. We are, at long last, beginning to heed their cries for help.

As we face the realities of trauma, we are listening to young people in new ways. THE WAY I FEEL series represents a compassionate, innovative and interactive way for adolescents to express their feelings and begin to heal. Teens using this series will not only find reassurance from the excellent text, but from the opportunities for creative expression of their own. They will be able to communicate their own frightening thoughts, ways to feel safe and sources of love through the creative exercises in the books. These creative expressions can give the therapist vital clues to the young person's feelings and progress.

Healing, a renewed sense of safety, growing self-esteem and the reassurance of love are the major themes of the THE WAY I FEEL series. These books are a gentle, compassionate and active effort to assist young people who are, after all, our future.

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THE WAY I FEEL

Creative Books For Healing Post-Traumatic Stress

by Debra Whiting Alexander, Ph.D.

A NOTE TO PARENTS, TEACHERS AND COUNSELORS

The most difficult time to deal with trauma appears to be during the pre-adolescent and teen years. Along with the physical changes of puberty, teens hold extreme feelings and idealized emotions. Lifestyles are explored which may express individuality and movement towards adulthood. Trauma accentuates the turmoil and complicates the changes that teens naturally face.

This series is designed to facilitate the expression of feelings in the adolescent who has been directly or indirectly exposed to crime, violence, and trauma. It is intended to normalize reactions in a supportive and nonthreatening way.

These books are not intended to be used as a substitute for treatment. When a trauma occurs that is outside the range of usual human experience, it is beneficial for those affected to receive specialized help from a professional counselor trained in the treatment of post-traumatic stress.

Untreated, a traumatic experience may disrupt the formation of a teen's identity and continued development. It may prevent the adolescent from developing meaningful beliefs and values which encourage a positive sense of independence. Loss of trust, feelings of detachment, shame and guilt all contribute to life attitudes which may alter identity formation.

POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER IN TEENS

In the aftermath of trauma, teens' post-traumatic stress reactions are likely to resemble those of adults. High startle response, hypervigilance, avoidance of triggers, increased withdrawal, isolation, and somatic complaints are common.

Adolescents are often guarded and suppress thoughts and feelings as a way to avoid confronting the trauma. Because regression is common at all ages following a trauma, the adolescent may temporarily exhibit childlike attitudes.

Survival may manifest a sense of euphoria as well as contribute to a sense of immortality in the teen. The events occurring prior to a trauma may be seen as omens and there may be symbolic reasons teens feel they survived. Sometimes, this creates the belief within adolescents that they have the ability to predict future events.

Teens may exhibit anger, self-critical and blaming behaviors. Physical symptoms of depression may lead to substance abuse, thoughts of suicide and dangerous risk-taking behaviors. Eating and sleeping disorders may be evident as well as poor impulse control. Feelings of frustration may be acted out through rebellious acts in school.

Fear that the trauma will repeat itself adds to the sense of a foreshortened future, for example, not expecting to have a career, marriage, or long life. Meanings to life are questioned and exploration of spiritual values and beliefs are not uncommon. It is important to engage in open conversation about these concerns and to support the adolescent for communicating them.

It may be difficult for adolescents to recognize and report their diminished interest in significant activities. A professional evaluation to assess levels of depression can be especially important for teens. Medication may be a temporary aid in relieving the painful symptoms of post-trauma stress while the trauma is being worked through in treatment.

CONTENT OF BOOKS

All six books in this series were written from a teen's perspective. They are open ended so that individual experiences may be easily integrated. Each book carries a general theme and healing message.

#2357 THE WAY I FEEL normalizes a teen's inner experiences whether directly or indirectly impacted by crime or trauma. It provides acceptance and understanding for a teen's full range of emotional reactions. It encourages identification and self-expression of painful feelings common to trauma victims.

#2358 ALL MY DREAMS recognizes the impact a traumatic experience has on a teenager's hopes, dreams and meanings to life following the experience. It provides ideas for rebuilding experiences of safety and comfort in the world.

#2359 IT'S MY LIFE was written for teens who have been the direct victim of a crime or trauma, including sexual assault and incest. Symptoms of depression and suicide are explored and dealt with.

#2360 IT HAPPENED IN AUTUMN focuses on the healing process for survivors of homicide. It explores a family's response to trauma and grief from a teen's perspective following the murder of a loved one.

#2361 WHEN I REMEMBER may be used for teens who have witnessed crime, trauma or violence. This story normalizes the secondary victim's experience which is often as intense as the primary victim's. Often, the secondary victims fall through the cracks in treatment because they are not as easily recognized.

#2362 IN THIS HOUSE CALLED HOME validates the experiences felt by teens growing up in a violent home. The idea of expressing anger in a nonviolent way and the need for family healing are addressed.

HOW TO USE THE BOOKS

Like adults, teens need to be allowed to ventilate their feelings and then have those feelings validated. By utilizing the stories in this series, you can begin to help adolescent trauma victims define their fears, and then deal with them in a safe and helpful way.

Each story/journal is designed to facilitate expression of thoughts and feelings, and may be personalized through the creative writing opportunities found in each book.

These stories may be shared with a teen during counseling or as reading material between sessions. Some may choose to share their own journal writing while others will need their privacy respected. Many may choose to leave their writing for you to read between sessions. **LET EACH INDIVIDUAL DECIDE** how their writing will or will not be shared.

It is helpful to ask questions relating to what the teen identified with or didn't identify with in the story. If personal writings are not shared, it may be helpful to explore what feelings or reactions they noticed in themselves while reading or writing in the books. For example, you might ask what idea in the story brought up the strongest reaction for them, or how their experience might be different from what was portrayed in the book. Explore what was difficult about reading or writing in the book, and what felt easy.

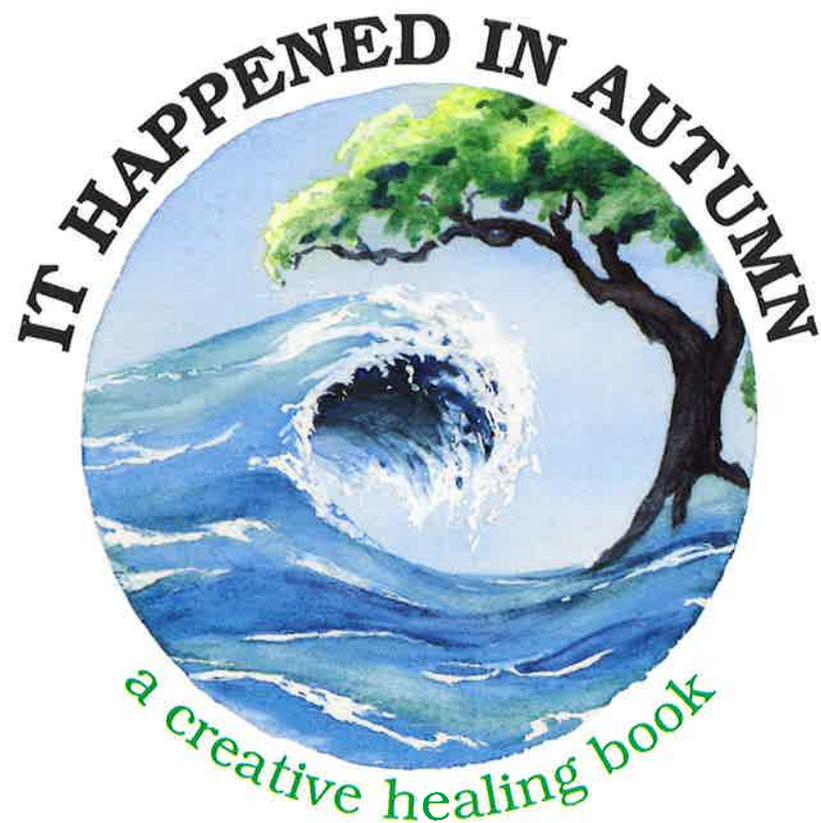
The exercises within the books provide useful experiences for groups to utilize together as well.

IMPORTANT GUIDELINES

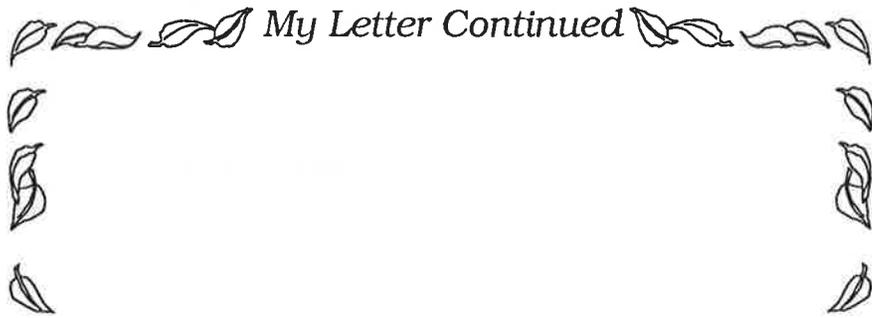
- ▶ **PROVIDE CHOICES** regarding when and what a teen will read, write or discuss with you. This is an important step to reestablishing a sense of mastery over an experience that was out of their control.
- ▶ **JOINING AND ALIGNING** with a teen's experience will reduce the sense of isolation they are most likely feeling. Building a safe and trusting rapport through active listening is imperative to a trauma victim's ability to explore and express frightening material.
- ▶ **BLANK PAGES** appear throughout the text of each story. They are titled so that a teen may be encouraged to share personal experiences of their own. Writing may be effective in helping teens relax inhibitions, focus on creative abilities and face difficult feelings in an empowering way.

- ▶ **DON'T TRY** to make a teen open up before he or she is ready. Be available, accepting, nonjudgmental and listen. Building confidence is important to reestablishing self-esteem and the teen's ability to recover.
- ▶ **DON'T TELL** a teen what his or her feelings should be. Maintain a nonjudgmental attitude towards comments, expression of feelings, and ideas about each story. Respectful listening will acknowledge the importance and seriousness of their own unique experience.
- ▶ **REMINDE** teens that they may be able to forget about what happened for a while, but prepare them for feeling upset when something serves as a reminder of the trauma.
- ▶ **THE MORE A TEEN UNDERSTANDS**, the less fearful he or she will be. Encourage discussion of the event and its aftermath. Feelings about what happened and realistic expectations about what could have prevented the event are important to discuss. Clarify ideas that are based on inaccurate information. These might be distorting beliefs about what happened and why.
- ▶ **ANSWER ALL QUESTIONS** truthfully. Lying or offering inaccurate information to protect teens can impede the recovery process as well as affect their trust in you.
- ▶ **HELP** the teen identify what changes in attitude might be linked to the impact of the trauma.
- ▶ **HELP** teens understand how acting-out behaviors communicate their anger or numb their responses to what happened.
- ▶ **ACKNOWLEDGE** the wide range of feelings that are normal responses to victimization. Explore the physical sensations that may be linked to the event. Remind them that being a witness to a trauma can be just as devastating. They are NOT going "crazy."
- ▶ **PREPARE** them to expect increased stress within their family and among peers.
- ▶ **IT WILL TAKE TIME** to feel like themselves again. Help teens learn to be patient with themselves by being patient with them.
- ▶ **BE WILLING** to hear everything as many times as it needs to be said.
- ▶ **DIRECTLY ADDRESS** any and all suggestions of suicide (overt and covert), feelings of hopelessness, or the lack of will to live. Elicit actual plans and respond in a way that will protect the teen. Assist them in taking care of themselves. Listen to all comments seriously and take action to obtain help immediately if a teen is in danger of harming him/herself or others. Encourage alternative behaviors which lessen the traumatic sense of helplessness.
- ▶ **REASSURE** teens that the crime or trauma was NOT their fault.
- ▶ **EDUCATE** teens and their families about the effects of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Normalize their experiences whenever possible with information about the common reactions to trauma.
- ▶ **ENCOURAGE** teens to trust and honor their feelings. Give them hope and confidence in their ability to heal. Identify positive memories that provide strength during times when intrusive, traumatic memories are worked through.
- ▶ **MOST TEENS** will continue to need information at new stages of development. Parents are encouraged to remain open to questions in the event that the trauma needs to be discussed again.
- ▶ **REMEMBER:**
 - ▶ Changes in behaviors are normal reactions to being frightened and upset.
 - ▶ It is important to talk to teens about what it is they are going through when THEY are ready.
 - ▶ Give as much reassurance and support as possible, both emotionally and physically.
 - ▶ Support teens' need to reevaluate their beliefs and values about life.
 - ▶ What happened is over. They survived the trauma and, with time, they will survive the memory of it too.

It is my belief that adolescents can grow strong in spite of a tragedy with support and acceptance from the adults around them. It is my hope that this series will provide an additional resource for those adults enabling teens to experience the pain and sorrow of a trauma in an honest and meaningful way.



by Debra Whiting Alexander, Ph.D
illustrated by Patricia Lynn Sobel



My Letter Continued

IT HAPPENED IN AUTUMN

*A Story for Teens Coping with a Loved One's
Homicide*

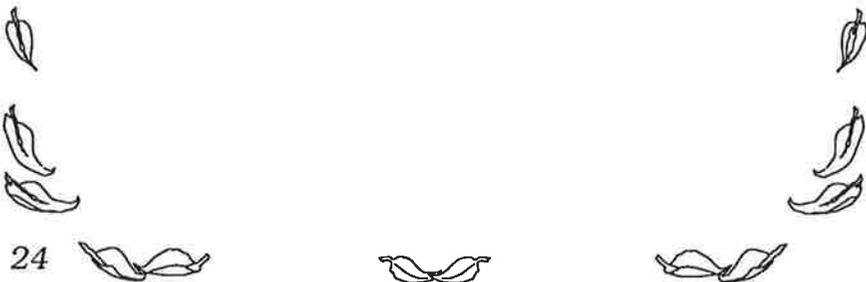
Written by Debra Whiting Alexander, Ph.D.
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  *My Letter To Someone I Lost*   

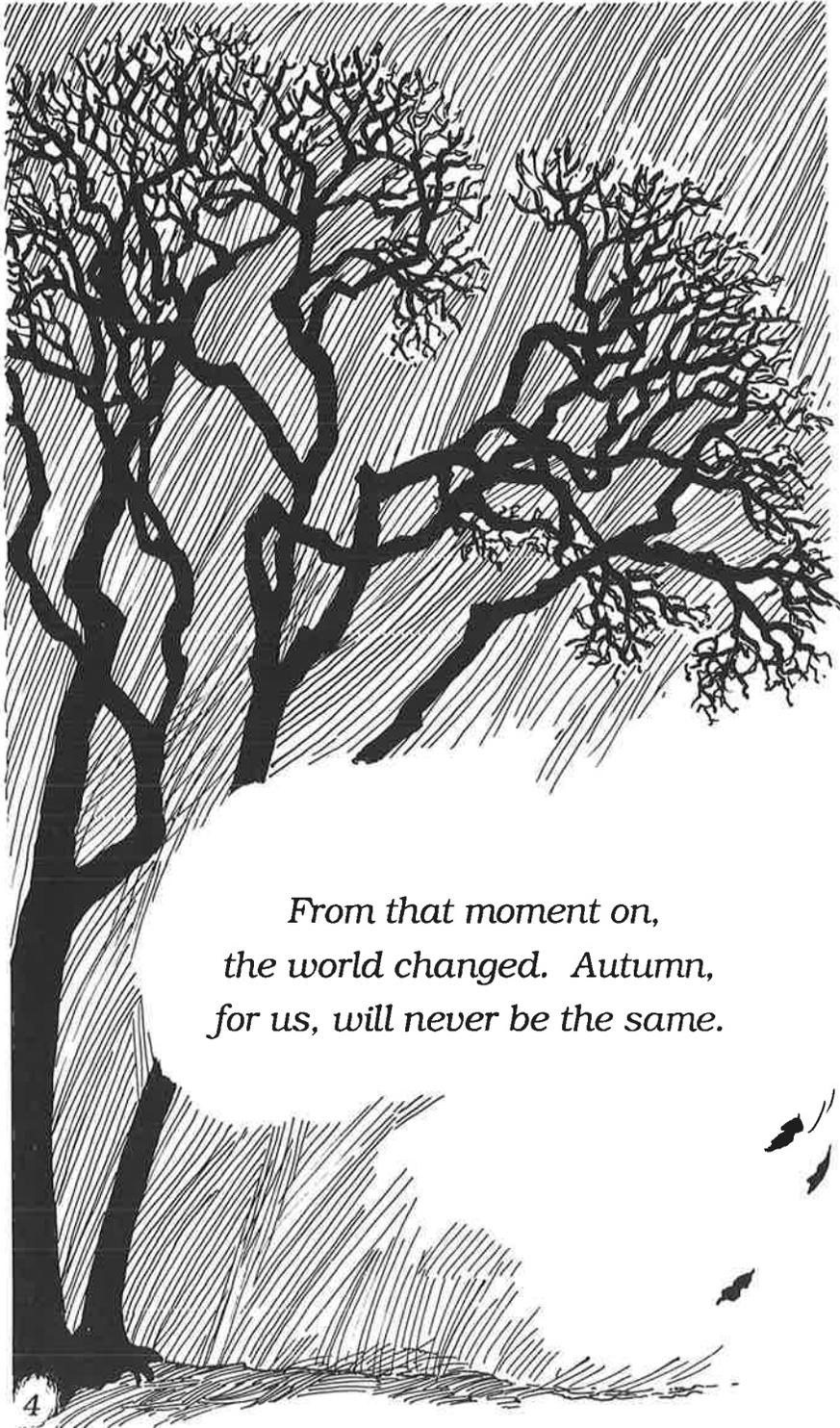


... Today, I planted a maple tree just for you ... right along the river where we used to walk. It's safe and protected there. My special spot to come and remember you while I watch the seasons come and go. Have I let go of you? Never. For me this tree holds the roots you'll always have to my heart. And only growing stronger with time. Have I accepted the trauma that took you from the world? No. It will never be acceptable and that's okay.

I heard someone say once that with every loss we grow stronger. It's hard to believe, but I think I'm beginning to understand. I discovered there are parts of you that I have learned to carry in me. I realized you gave me these lifelong gifts. I realized it sitting at the river next to the maple trees. It happened in autumn when the leaves were changing ...



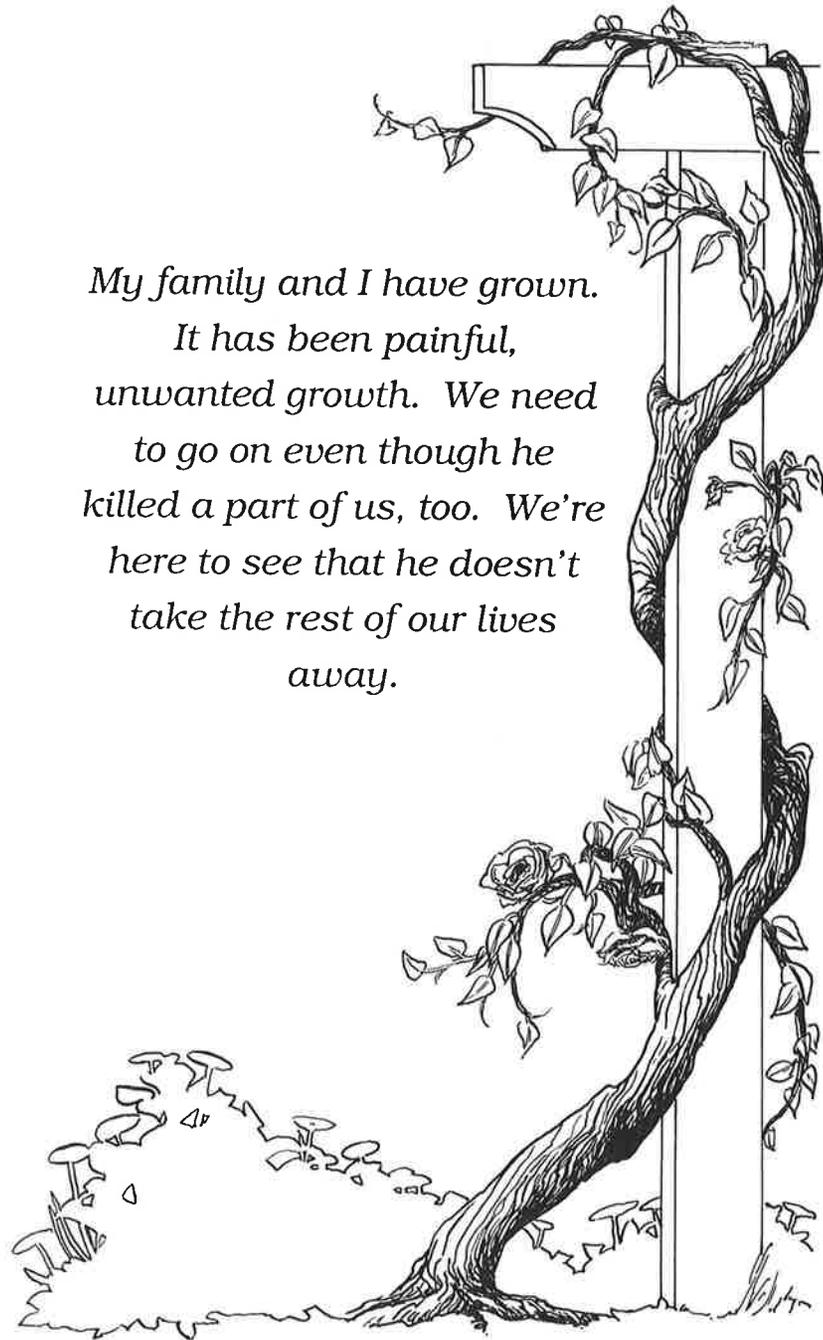
One week ago today,
someone in my family died.
Not of old age like we all
expected. Not of heart failure
or disease which we had
feared. She died a violent
death for no reason at all.



*From that moment on,
the world changed. Autumn,
for us, will never be the same.*

*There's so much I still want
her to know. So much I keep
wanting to say. It finally
dawned on me what she
would have wanted ... so I'm
moving on and facing my life.
I wrote a letter to tell her ...*

*My family and I have grown.
It has been painful,
unwanted growth. We need
to go on even though he
killed a part of us, too. We're
here to see that he doesn't
take the rest of our lives
away.*



*I remember thinking this
can't be real. It wasn't
supposed to happen to our
family. It shouldn't have to
happen to anyone. I can't
sleep. I can't eat. I never stop
thinking. A part of me is
gone. Maybe it's with her
somewhere.*

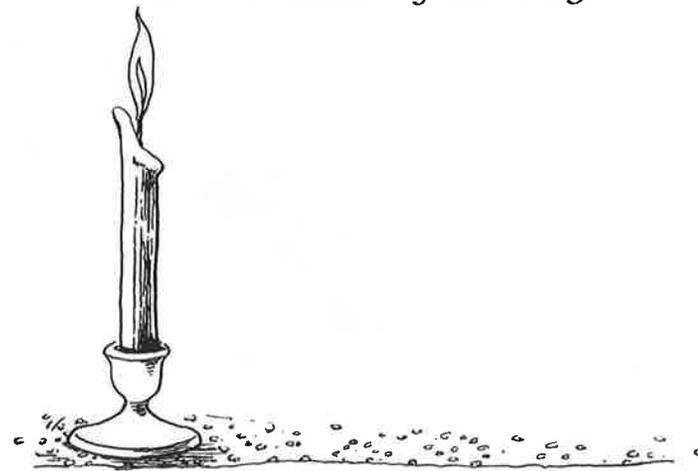
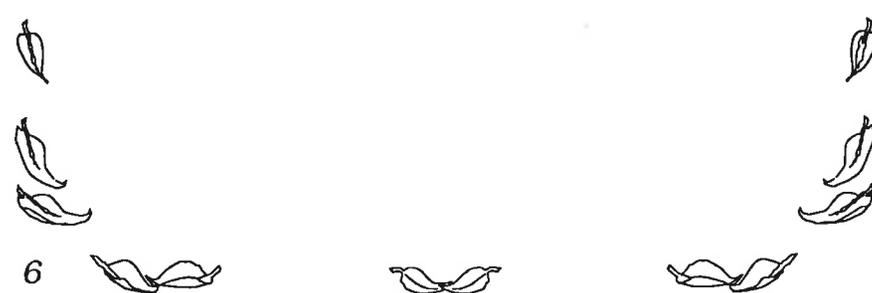


 *I Remember Thinking ...* 

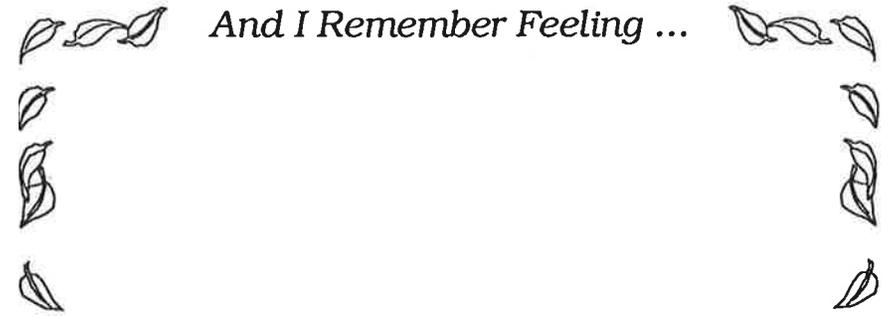


We learned we had to cope with the trauma before we could grieve. We each had our own reactions, separate from one another and together as a family. It helped to share our thoughts and feelings and to be open about the ways the crime affected us.

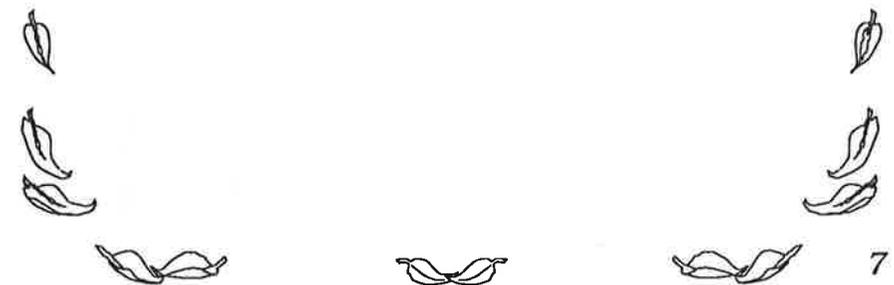
We not only found new support from each other, but also from other families like ours. They tell us it'll take years longer to grieve because of the way she died.



*Somebody suggested we see
a specialist in post-traumatic
stress. Someone who
worked with “survivors of
homicide.” The words
attacked me, made me cringe
inside. How could that be?
But that’s who we are now.*



And I Remember Feeling ...



Life isn't safe. I was living in a dream world. I'll never finish school. I'll never have children. I'll never live "happily ever after." I never want to waste another minute of my life again, but every minute I have I feel afraid.

I saw the person who did it and I've been haunted by his face ever since. It's not fair that it was his face that last saw hers. Watching him walk around makes me sick.

I look at him and see someone rotten from the inside out. How dare he go on breathing the air we share! What place is there that could possibly hold all my rage?



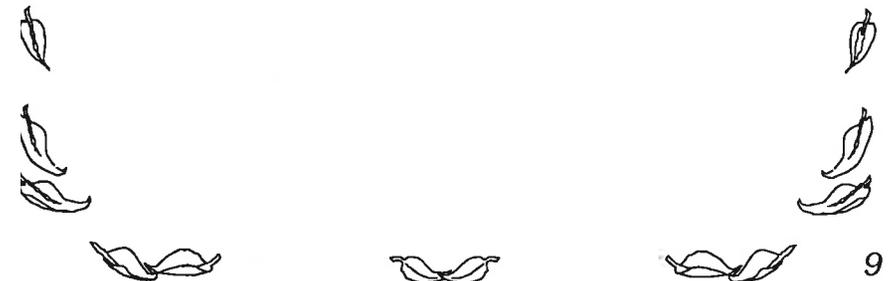
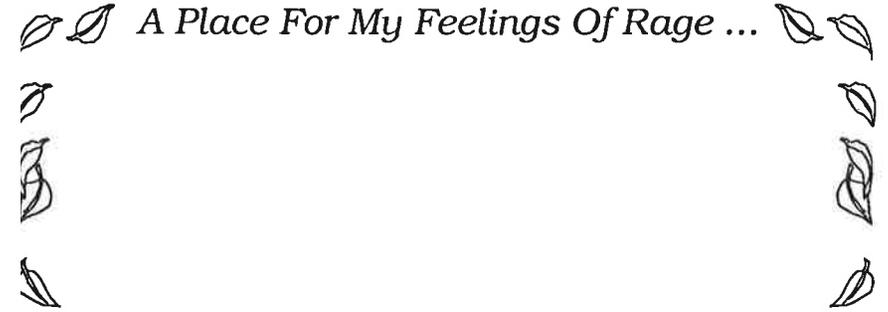
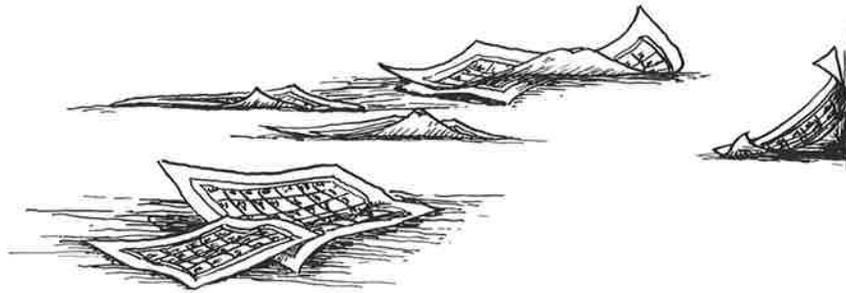
How My Family Reacted



It's been a year now. The anniversary date has passed and we're still here. In a time warp between that day and never.

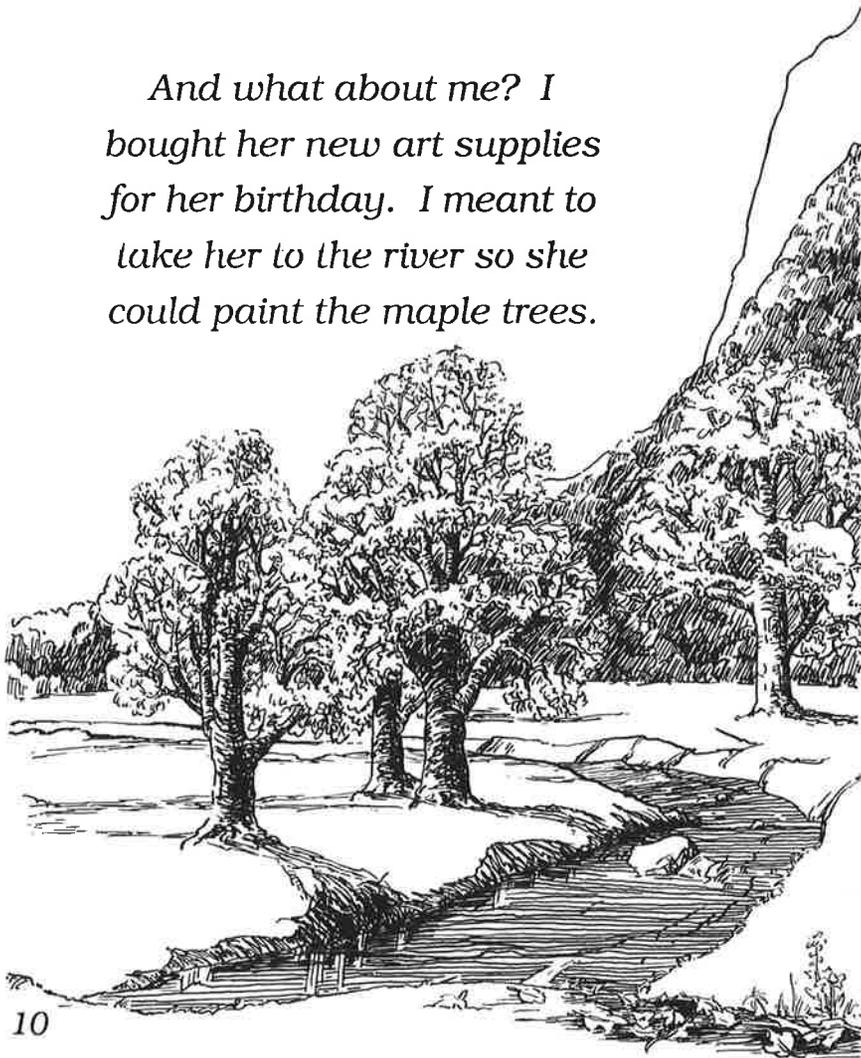


It was time for our family to get help. Someone always ended up yelling, or crying, or walking away. Pretty soon no one was talking. We spent a lot of time together, being alone.

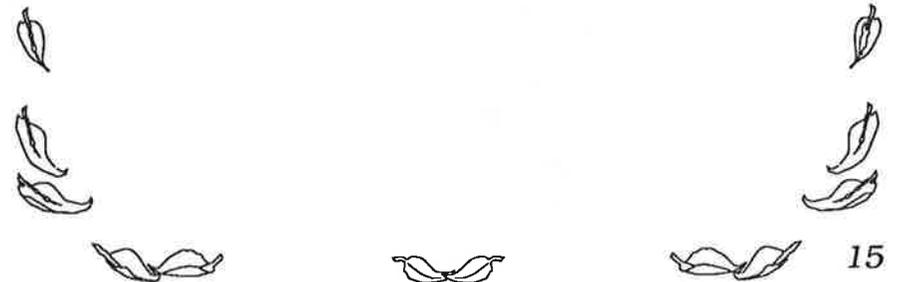


My parents blame themselves. They keep asking: "If only...", "What if...", "Why..."

And what about me? I bought her new art supplies for her birthday. I meant to take her to the river so she could paint the maple trees.

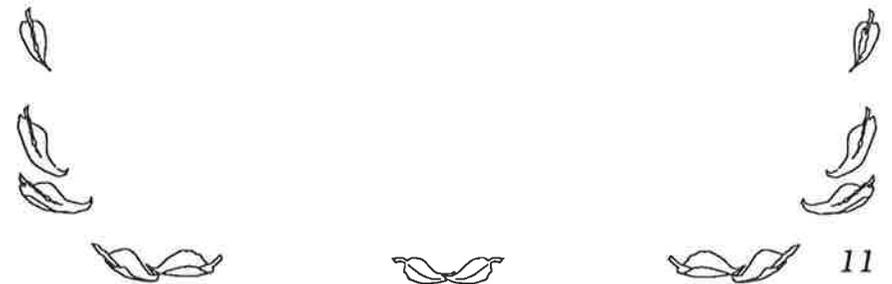
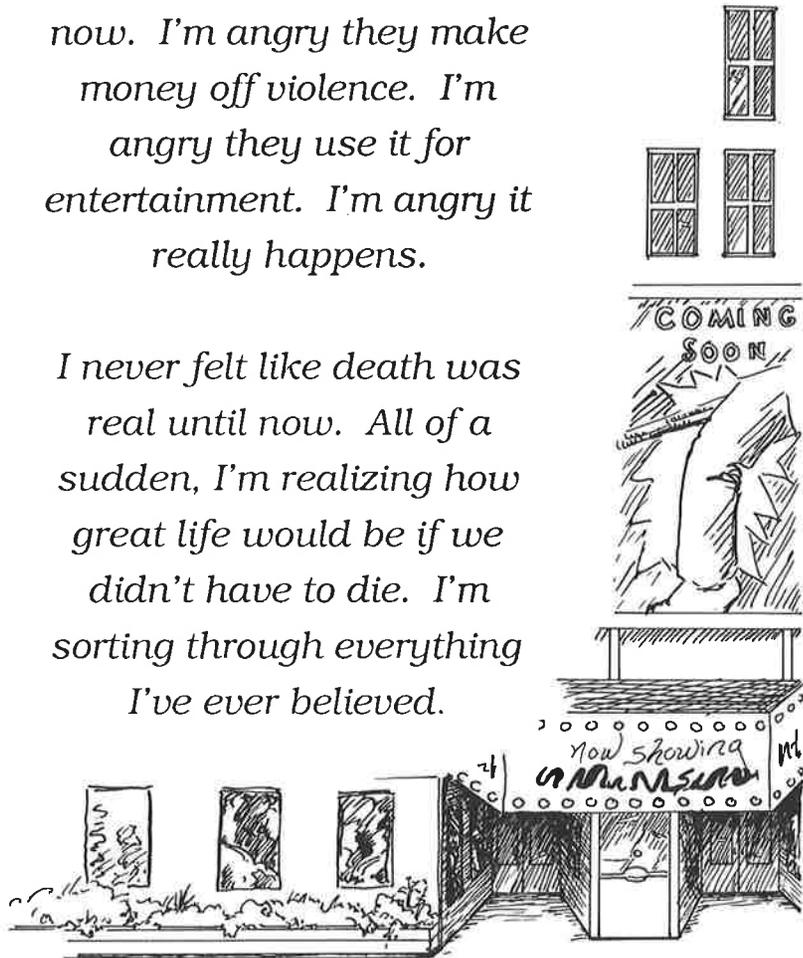


What I Believe And What I Question



I keep hoping this will get better. But how can that ever happen when she's gone forever? Will I have nightmares for the rest of my life? I can't even watch t.v.. All those scenes are too real now. I'm angry they make money off violence. I'm angry they use it for entertainment. I'm angry it really happens.

I never felt like death was real until now. All of a sudden, I'm realizing how great life would be if we didn't have to die. I'm sorting through everything I've ever believed.



I close my eyes and all I see is her suffering. Constant images of what happened. Did she scream, was she crying? What were her last thoughts? What did she have to feel? How do I stop seeing the face I loved so much looking so afraid?

I can't talk about it to anyone. I want to be with my parents, but I don't know how without talking about the murder. I'm worried I'll say the wrong thing and upset them more. My thoughts are too weird to tell anyone. Is this normal? I wish someone could tell me how to stop feeling the way I do. I'm scared and I'm sad. I'm afraid of what I think about.

