

Domestic Homicide Case Study

RJ Practitioner: Becky Childs

Introduction:

This case study refers to an offence you might initially assume would be out of scope: domestic-related homicide. Naturally, there is great caution around the use of RJ in Domestic Abuse. We share the concerns, recognising the need for caution and a robust risk assessment process. Nevertheless, nationally, there is a shift in the approach of offering RJ in domestic cases, a growing focus on what victims of domestic abuse are telling professionals they want and how we as RJ providers, and the wider CJS, can help. In Cleveland, we have completed specialist training in the use of RJ in DV cases, in anticipation of this; delivered by Restorative Solutions and developed in collaboration with Hampshire Police. We are fortunate to work in close partnership with the specialist DV support service, My Sister's Place, MATAAC and Cleveland Police to develop an evidence-based and responsive process for victims of domestic abuse, wishing to engage with RJ. Crucially, all referrals are dealt with on a 'case by case' basis, with a victim-led focus and in accordance with a dynamic risk assessment.

Referral Background:

This was a victim-initiated referral, from the direct victim's sister, who was clear of her need to communicate with the man who had murdered her younger sister. From the point of being woken in the early hours of the morning by a call from her mother, informing her of her sister's death, she felt she had no voice as a secondary victim of this offence. Her mother, who typically spoke on behalf of the family, had continued to do so throughout their journey through the CJS; including in completion of the Victim Personal Statement. She had safely been estranged from her sister in months prior to her murder, as a result of the lifestyle choices her sister had been making at the time. As such, she hadn't known of her relationship with the offender, learning of this only at the point of being informed he had just murdered her sister.

A great deal of her wish to communicate with the offender, centred upon her frustration as to why he hadn't walked away from the argument they'd reportedly been having prior to the murder and his apparent refusal to give her any eye contact in Court. Four years passed since the murder and she felt she was unable to grieve. This resulted in a significant impact upon her physical and mental well-being, as well as impacting on that of her family. She hoped the communication would help her begin to heal.

RJ Intervention Preparation:

The offender was identified as being in custody in Wales. Given the distance, assistance was accessed from the responsible Offender Supervisor, maintaining regular contact. From the risk assessment, it became quickly evident the offender knew nothing of the sister's existence. As such, further checks were undertaken to ensure the victim was happy for this information to be shared and that offender was still happy to proceed, once learning of the sister's existence. The concern being that with this new information coming to light, this may impact upon his willingness to still engage with the process of communicating with another family member.

Repeated home visits to provide case update and support for the victim was organised in preparation for the conference, with essential aftercare planning through a local mental health service. Appropriate support was also identified for the offender; to ensure he was fully supported throughout the process.

The Impact of the Direct Meeting:

The meeting itself was highly emotive and challenging but held within the constraints of a safe and controlled directly about his lack of eye contact in court and during the conference. Asked him directly “why won’t you look at me?” and he replied, “because I see your sister, every time I look at you.” Quite simply, it must have been like looking at a ghost. This challenges evidences just how impactful the RJ process can be for both parties; to ask a question that had been building for so long, to gain the clarity of unknown facts and to hold the offender fully accountable for the harm they have caused. This powerful impact was further extended to the other professionals within the meeting and to the Supporting Wing Officer who stated, “I knew it was serious but when they started talking, I realised just how serious it was. He was a model prisoner on the Wings, even though I knew he’d done this.”

Following the direct meeting, the victim felt unable to fully describe how she felt and how she had found the experience of communicating with the offender. This can be a common reaction and the victim was subsequently, given time to re-adjust and reflect. When contacted in a follow-up support call a few days later, she advised how “it felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders and I got the closure I had desperately been wanting. I managed to let go of a lot of the pain and anger, that was affecting me and my family. I got to have my voice heard. That was massive for me; for four years I hadn’t been able to.”