

"Crime Victim Information on Trauma"

COPING WITH THE TRAUMA OF CRIME

Crime is frequent and truly democratic; it affects Americans regardless of sex, race, and age. According to the FBI's final 2004 statistics for violent and property crime, 23.8 million offenses were committed, or five offenses for every 1000 people.

WHO ARE CRIME VICTIMS?

A crime victim is anyone who is harmed or made to suffer by another's violent or brutal actions. Victims may have experienced physical or sexual assault or faced a person wielding a weapon during a robbery. Victims may have survived a car accident caused by a drunk driver. Witnesses to the death or serious injury of a friend, relative, or stranger because of a crime also are victims of crime. Victims of crime can also be those that hear, secondhand, of violence to loved ones: for example, when a family member is told by the police or emergency room doctor of the violent death of a loved one. In addition to possible physical injuries, a crime can also cause mental or emotional stress (also called trauma).

WHAT MAY HAPPEN TO YOU DURING A CRIME?

During a crime, victims experience a major life crisis that, at the time, often seems impossible to overcome; they feel that they cannot stop it from happening. Reactions to crime vary, but usually, an individual feels powerless, helpless, and experiences very strong emotions such as fear, hopelessness, and anger. Often it may seem dreamlike, time seems to slow down, and sound can seem distorted. These are normal reactions to trauma.

WHAT PROBLEMS CAN OCCUR FOLLOWING A CRIME?

The first few days following a trauma can be a time of emotional confusion. It is normal and expected that during the first few weeks following a trauma, a person's life will be disrupted in many ways. Each person's response is different but, usually, the individual can expect periods of confusion and rushes of strong feelings. Memories of the experience are likely to pop up unexpectedly and the person will feel scared and unsafe. Other problems may include problems sleeping, physical distress such as stomach tightness and muscle soreness, and loss of appetite. Most people affected by crime do not have ongoing problems that require any form of psychological treatment.

Sometimes crime victims have problems that continue beyond the first month or so following a crime. The person may become depressed months after the incident, even if they have had no other problems. Each person's response to trauma is different. The problem that sometimes occurs is called *Post-traumatic Stress Disorder* (or PTSD). PTSD occurs when a crime victim has difficulty functioning at home, work, or school because of the traumatic event. A person with PTSD feels the need to stay away from anything or anyone that may remind them of their experience. When a person with PTSD is exposed to reminders of what happened, that person usually experiences an intense emotional reaction. Perhaps the most important symptom of PTSD is the continued reliving of the trauma in painful images and thoughts while awake and nightmares while asleep. Because a person with PTSD is consumed with reliving the trauma and avoiding reminders of the trauma, they often experience a sense of detachment and withdrawal from friends, family, and coworkers.

WHAT TYPE OF HELP IS RECOMMENDED?

CRISIS INTERVENTION

You may have received initial support from hospital staff if you were treated in a hospital emergency room. Seeking continued help from a crime counselor or referral to a Crisis Center can be of great benefit. Victims of rape often receive immediate help and victims of other traumatic crimes can benefit from crises reduction intervention within the 24-to-96 hours following the trauma. Crisis intervention by an experienced mental health professional can provide support and stress management information. Additional therapy immediately after a trauma can also help prevent later problems.

VICTIM ASSISTANCE

Many communities have Victim Assistance Programs to help victims and their families deal with the aftermath of crime. These can be important in helping you feel less overwhelmed by the criminal justice system and the activities of day-to-day life. Contact your local State's Attorney Office for more information.

SELF-HELP

Victims of crime sometimes find support groups helpful. Contact your local Mental Health Association for information about self-help groups in your area. Also, some victims and their families find joining organizations such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) helpful in directing their feelings constructively.

CAN BEHAVIOR AND COGNITIVE-BEHAVIORAL THERAPY HELP?

If you are having problems recovering from a crime-related trauma, you should seek a mental health professional. Behavior Therapy and Cognitive-Behavioral treatments can assist you in managing your feelings and resolving the trauma that resulted from the crime. Usually, treatment includes stress management, such as relaxation and other anxiety-reducing methods. In addition, the cognitive-behavioral psychotherapist will assist you in confronting what happened to you in a careful and controlled manner so that the pain of the memory can be tolerated more effectively. Research has shown that, over time, individuals have the greatest chance of improving when taught various cognitive and behavioral techniques for directly dealing with all aspects of the trauma, rather than trying to block it out. Finally, cognitive-behavioral psychotherapists can be helpful in assisting the traumatized individual to reestablish their relationships at work and in the family.

Sometimes medications can be helpful to reduce the symptoms of traumatic stress that last longer than a few days and weeks. Often a cognitive-behavioral psychotherapist will work with your physician or medical psychologist to assess if medication can assist you.

What Is Cognitive Behavior Therapy?

Behavior Therapy and Cognitive Behavior Therapy are types of treatment that are based firmly on research findings. These approaches aid people in achieving specific changes or goals.

Changes or Goals might involve:

- A way of acting - like smoking less or being more outgoing;
- A way of feeling - like helping a person be less scared, less depressed, or less anxious;
- A way of thinking - like learning to problem-solve or get rid of self-defeating thoughts;
- A way of dealing with physical or medical problems - like lessening back pain or helping a person stick to a doctor's suggestions; or
- A way of adjusting - like training developmentally disabled people to care for themselves or hold a job.

Behavior Therapists and Cognitive Behavior Therapists usually focus more on the current situation and its solution, rather than the past. They concentrate on a person's views and beliefs about their life, not on personality traits. Behavior Therapists and Cognitive Behavior Therapists treat individuals, parents, children, couples, and families. Replacing ways of living that do not work well, with ways of living that work, and giving people more control over their lives are common goals of behavior and cognitive behavior therapy.

The Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies (ABCT) is an interdisciplinary organization committed to the advancement of a scientific approach to the understanding and amelioration of problems of the human condition. These aims are achieved through the investigation and application of behavioral, cognitive, and other evidence-based principles of assessment, prevention, and treatment.

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