



Center for Restorative Justice & Peacemaking

An International Resource Center in Support of Restorative Justice Dialogue, Research and Training

Understanding and Responding to Victims of Crime

Responses to Crime Victimization Communication with Crime Victims (Do's and Don'ts) Major Needs of the Crime Victim

Responses to Crime Victimization

I. Crisis Response

1. Characteristic/nature of crisis producing events:
 - Suddenness
 - Arbitrariness
 - Unpredictability
2. The crisis reaction
 - Shock, disbelief and denial
 - Emotional turmoil: anger, fear, frustration, confusion, self-blame, guilt, grief
 - Reconstruction: the “rollercoaster” of the future

II. Long Term Stress Response to Trauma

1. Re-experiencing the traumatic event
 - Recurrent and unwanted recollections of the event
 - Recurrent dreams of the event
 - Suddenly acting or feeling as if the traumatic event were happening —associated with an environment or trigger similar to the crisis event
2. Feeling more numb to the external world beginning sometime after the event
 - Marked decrease in interest in one or more important activities
 - Feeling isolated, detached, or less connected to others
 - More limited in affected (emotional) response.
3. Additional possible responses:
 - “Hyper-alertness,” jumpiness, or exaggerated startle.
 - Sleep disturbances

- “Survivor’s guilt”
 - “Why did I survive when others did not?”
 - Guilt about what I needed to do to survive
- Trouble with memory or concentration
- Will avoid activities that make one remember the traumatic event
- Stress reactions intensify when one is exposed to events that are symbols or reminders of the traumatic event

Communication with Crime Victims (Do’s and Don’ts)

Don’t Say Things Like:

“I understand.”

“It sounds like...”

“I’m glad you can share those feelings.”

“Your lucky that...”

“It will take some time but you’ll get over it.”

“I can imagine how you feel.”

“Don’t worry, it’s going to be all right.”

“Try to be strong for your children.”

“Calm down and relax.”

Do Say Things Like:

“You’re safe now.) (If true)

“I’m glad you’re talking with me now.”

“I’m sorry it happened.”

“It wasn’t your fault.” (If there was no attributable blame to the victim.)

“Your reaction is not an uncommon response to such a terrible thing.”

“It must have been really upsetting to see (hear, feel, smell, touch) that.”

“I can’t imagine how terrible you are feeling.”

“ You are not going crazy.”

“Things may never be the same but they can get better.”

To Improve Communication with the Victim

Avoid Words Like:

- “Feelings”
 - Use “reactions” instead
- “Share” or “Sharing”

- Ask to “tell about the experiences”
- “Client,” “victim,” or “survivor”
 - Use victims preferred name
- “Incident,” “event,” or “accident”
 - Use “crime,” “attack.” Or “crash”
- “Alleged” when referring to a victim

Major Needs Of Crime Victims

- I. Safety and Security
- II. Ventilation and Validation
- III. Prediction and Preparation
- IV. Education and Information

I. Safety and Security

1. Learn all about types of crime and range of victim reactions.
2. Individualize each:
 - Crime
 - Victim(s)
 - Situation
3. Explain:
 - Who you are
 - Your role in the case
 - Your agency’s role and functions
 - Your and your agency’s relationship to the offender
4. Give victims as much control and decision making as possible.
 - Validate their ability to have control and to make decisions related to their case.
5. Before meeting with victims:
Explain where you are located. (“A safe environment”)
 - Who can they bring?
 - What should they bring related to their case?
 - How long will the meeting take?
 - Clearly define the purpose of the meeting:
 - PSI Information
 - Victim Impact Statement
 - Parole hearing
6. Never assume victims know the offender will not be present!
7. Recognize you may be a “trigger” for victims:
 - You may represent the crime
 - You may represent the criminal
 - You may represent the victim’s unfair treatment by the criminal justice system
8. Clarify your role in providing safety and security to:

- Victims
 - General public
9. Always provide your name and telephone number for follow-up.
10. Explain any victim's rights related to safety and security, such as:
- Protective orders
 - Protections from intimidation, harassment or harm
 - "Stalking" laws
 - Preventing handgun purchases

II. Ventilation and Validation

1. Always allow victim to talk...ventilate...and express their feelings.
- 2.Reinforce that victim input is:
- Important to you professionally
 - Important to case deposition
- 3.Acknowledge:
- Past difficulties victim(s) may have had with criminal justice system
 - Possible victim trauma
 - That "the system isn't perfect."
 - Express your role in working g to improve the system.
4. Ask up-front: "how did the crime affect you and your family?"
5. Validate victim's anger directed at the
- Offender
 - Criminal Justice System
 - Society
 - Validate that you also understand their anger may be directed at you.
6. Be honest about any feeling you may have speaking to the victim:
- Nervous
 - Anxiety
 - Fear
- 7.Never say' I understand."
- 8.Always ask" Who else have you talked to?"
- 9.Practice active listening skills:
- Looking
 - Nodding
 - Summarizing
 - Clarification
 - Eye contact
 - Allowing silence

10. Use basic validation skills:

- Give your name
- Use victim's name (after finding out how the victim wishes to be addressed).

- Say:
 - I'm sorry.
 - It's not your fault.
 - Your input is valued and important.

III. Prediction and Preparation

1. Explain lack of "truth in sentencing."
2. Ask victims: What do you want to happen?
3. Ask victims" "What do you think will happen?"
4. Explain parameters of:
 - Offender supervision
 - Commitment
 - When supervision ends
 - Any victim's rights related to above
5. Encourage victim input and validate that input
6. Parole and probation
 - Explain the difference
 - Identify who is the probation or parole officer
 - Provide victim with officer's
 - Name
 - Address
 - Telephone number
 - Where or who to call in cases of emergency
 - Explain conditions of probation and parole
 - Location of offender
 - Applicable treatment programs
 - Restitution (be realistic)
 - Issues related to victim protections
 - What happened with violations
 - Any victim's rights or recourse of probation and parole
7. Restitution (at sentencing - - through the department of corrections – at /after probation or parole).
 - Who collects
 - Who disburses?
 - Payment schedule
 - Non-payment cases
 - Remedies: Criminal, Administrative, Civil
8. Encourage and validate victims' short and long-term concerns!

9. Perhaps most important...

Being realistic is crucial to helping victims predict and prepare for the future!

IV. Information and Education

1. Recognize most victims do not understand the Criminal Justice systems and corrections.
2. Provide information about the system:
 - Different agencies
 - Roles and responsibilities of each agency
 - How they interact (or *do* the interact?)
 - Key players
3. Always put information in writing
 - Keep it simple'
 - Keep it in layperson's terms
4. Know exactly what victims need to know!
5. Know victim's rights in your state:
 - Statutory rights
 - Constitutional rights
 - Rights under agency policies
6. Be aware of and educate victims about efforts to strengthen crime victims' rights:
 - Locally
 - Statewide
 - Nationally
7. Always explain what you can and or will do. Never assume the victims knows this.
8. When possible, provide written educational resources.
9. Inform and involve victims in National Victims Rights Week activities. (April)
10. Free resources and assistance:

National Criminal Justice Reference Service 800-851-3420

Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse 800-638-8736

Bureau of Justice Assistance Clearinghouse 800-688-4252

National Victim of Crime Resource Center 800-394-2255

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