

COPING WITH VICTIMIZATION



OFFICE OF JUSTICE PROGRAMS
MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY

People who have not personally experienced victimization may never fully understand the painful reality and consequences of being a victim. No one ever expects or seeks to become a victim. Victims often experience many difficult emotions. In some cases, they may be so traumatized that it can be challenging to care for themselves and resume their daily activities.

COMMON VICTIM REACTIONS

Victims experience a broad range of emotions in the aftermath of a crime. These emotions are a normal and natural reaction to a stressful situation or traumatic event. There is no right or wrong way to feel—each victim experiences unique emotions at different points during their recovery process.

Victims may feel **shock** and **numbness** immediately after the crime. They may find it difficult to react, think clearly, make decisions, interact with others, or go about their daily lives.

Victims may be filled with **denial** and **disbelief** about the incident. The shock and loss of control over life and personal safety may leave victims troubled, confused, and unable or unwilling to face the reality of the crime or deal with its complications.

Anger is a common reaction. Victims often feel angry with the offender, the criminal justice system, and sometimes with those closest to them. They may have thoughts of wanting to “get even” with the offender accompanied by feelings of shame.

Grief and **depression** frequently follow injury or loss. Victims who are depressed often lose interest in their lives and struggle with feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. It is important to seek professional help if these feelings last for an extended period of time.

Guilt is a normal reaction as victims tend to second-guess themselves, saying, “I should have ...,” or “If only I had ...” Criminal justice system personnel and others who focus on how

the victim could have avoided or prevented the crime may add to this sense of guilt.

Fear and **distrust** can be hard to overcome. Crime is sudden and often life-threatening. Once victims have experienced it, feeling safe again can be difficult. Victims may fear staying at home or leaving home and may find it impossible to trust anyone.

Anxiety may cause victims to avoid certain places, people, and situations that remind them of the crime and their vulnerability. Anxiety can lead to physical problems, such as headaches, changes in appetite, and sleep difficulties.

Frustration, loneliness, and **despair** may set in when victims are unable to recover even after a significant period of time. Victims may no longer wish to “burden” those closest to them with their troubles, or those individuals may no longer have the time or patience to continue to provide emotional support to the victim.

Dealing with all of these emotions can be overwhelming for victims. Family and friends closest to the victim may also be experiencing these emotions as well. Talking about the impact of the crime and developing coping strategies can assist in the recovery process.

For most victims, these feelings will diminish over time with the support of family and friends. Crisis intervention and professional therapy also play a key role in recovery, especially for victims who are struggling to recover on their own. Such professionals can help victims learn how to manage their emotions and regain a sense of control over their lives.

Even victims who feel they have recovered may experience difficult emotions again at certain times. Events that may trigger an emotional response include seeing someone who looks like the criminal, hearing sounds that are like those surrounding the crime, or marking a date that has special significance, such as the anniversary of the crime.

In some instances, especially after the murder of a loved one or other crime of violence, victims' lives may never be the same. Instead, victims must work to find a "new normal" where they have accepted and incorporated the loss into their lives.

SUGGESTIONS FOR SUPPORTING PEOPLE

- Encourage victims to express their feelings and provide a safe, nonjudgmental, and comforting environment for doing so.
- Validate victims' feelings and confirm that their confusing or troubling emotions are normal.
- Tell them you are sorry about the incident.
- Ask how you can help.
- Emphasize that they are not to blame for what happened.
- Allow victims to respond in their own way and in their own time.
- Check in with the victim on a regular basis and pay attention to any issues that require intervention, such as substance abuse or mental health concerns.
- Provide mutual support to the victim's family and friends, who may also be experiencing a wide range of distressing feelings.
- Offer to attend criminal justice proceedings with the victim or help with any needed paperwork.
- Gather information about other resources the victim can contact for additional support and assistance.

Time and support from caring individuals are critical for victims trying to recover from the impact of a crime.

SUGGESTIONS FOR VICTIMS

- Talk about the crime with a patient and sympathetic listener. Family members, friends, and spiritual leaders can often provide the needed time, support, and assurance to assist you in recovering at your own pace.
- Contact a victim advocate who can offer support, as well as information about the criminal justice system, and referrals to other resources. The Office of Justice Programs Website at dps.mn.gov/divisions/ojp has a searchable victim service provider directory for Minnesota.
- Take steps to bolster your sense of safety and security. Work with a victim advocate to develop a safety plan and/or obtain a restraining order against the offender. Install new locks, a security system, or additional lighting. Learn personal safety techniques. Register for release notification if the offender is in jail or prison through the VINE system.
- Try to maintain a routine and make daily decisions to regain a sense of control. Avoid isolating yourself from family and friends. Interacting with others can help to speed your recovery. Practice proper self-care by getting enough sleep, eating healthy and regular meals, and getting adequate exercise.
- Mental health professionals are available to help you in the recovery process. Call a crisis hotline and/or arrange for one-on-one counseling or group counseling. Some victims may be eligible for financial assistance from the Minnesota Crime Victim Reparations Program to assist with therapy costs.
- Join a support group to talk with others who have experienced similar crimes and learn what has helped them heal. A victim advocate will assist you in finding a support group, if one is available.
- Recall how you may have overcome difficulties or challenges in the past and try to use some of the same coping strategies in your current situation.
- Try writing or keeping a journal about your feelings. Focus on the positive things in your life and make a list of reasons to recover.

REACH OUT FOR HELP

United Way 211

The 24-hour, toll-free referral hotline can be reached by calling 211 or 800-543-7709 from anywhere in Minnesota.

Victim Service Provider Directory

For a listing of Minnesota victim service providers see the OJP Website at dps.mn.gov/divisions/ojp or call 888-622-8799.

Minnesota Crime Victims Reparations

Financial assistance is available for victims of violent crime. For information and claim forms, see the OJP Website: dps.mn.gov/divisions/ojp or call 888-622-8799.

Offender release notification

For inmate information and release notification, call VINE at 877-644-8763 or go to www.vinelink.com. Victims of offenders in prison should also contact the Victim Assistance Program at Department of Corrections for additional notification forms at www.doc.state.mn.us or call 800-657-3830.

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