

UNDERSTANDING VICTIMS OF CRIME AND THEIR NEED TO DEAL WITH THE VICTIM/ OFFENDER TRAUMA BOND

The 15 Elements of the Crime Victim Detour

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In the late 1980s, when I was directing the program development of a group called Family Survivors of Homicide, we discovered that there was a dearth of information regarding crime victimization and especially homicide. The information that we did find was often misleading and minimizing. So we did our own journeying. In hindsight, I find the journey itself to be informative.



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At first the group gravitated toward grief literature. Because we were mainly parents of murdered children, we companioned with a cousin group called “Compassionate Friends” and found their rituals and understanding of grief truly outstanding. We emulated their program and invited various grief counselors to come and speak to the group. We were taught the stages of grief from almost every discipline and perspective, all of which was helpful.

But it wasn't enough. After spending the first part of our biweekly evenings on our inner journeys we would always end up discussing the offender. At one point, one of our members went to see the young man who had killed her son. We were intrigued. She led us through the journey of what would now be called “restorative justice encounters,”

where we began to spend time trying to understand the offender and the trauma bond that binds us.

One thing became clear; for us to find our way back to health after encountering serious crime we needed to become our own experts in every field.

The exploration of the Crime Victim Detour will explain why a violent crime has such catastrophic impact on victims and why restorative justice will look different through the eyes of a crime victim.

These are the issues that they need to face:

1. Story Fragmentation

The reaction to something as horrific as a violent crime is shock, numbness and disconnection. This fragmented state shows itself first in a victim's inability to find the words to describe in a cohesive way what happened. The inability to find words at this time is critical.

Because victims have difficulty describing what happened, they will deal with this frustration in various ways. They might suppress their story and refuse to talk about it to the point where they will avoid people or places that demand an explanation. Others might obsess about telling their story to everyone they meet. Those who tell their stories might have obvious inconsistencies in their stories. The stories might lack chronological cohesion or reflect defensiveness. It is not uncommon for victims to lapse into lengthy descriptions of simple concepts, be overcome with emotion during certain parts of their story or fumble for words. Some victims will stick only to facts in their story and express no feelings; others might dramatize emotions with few facts; others might find more creative ways to express their story.

2. Terror Trauma

Fear that can be empowering in normal circumstances can be so overwhelming after a violent crime that, instead of being a positive reaction, it will incapacitate and disorient victims of severe crime. When victims are assaulted with enormous fears of every kind — fear of death, fear of violence, fear of the perpetrator, fear of abandonment, fear of their own emotions, fear of shame, fear of memories, fear of pain, fear of fear itself — the intensity of the fear will show itself in severe physical, mental and emotional traumatization.

Because of the severe panic and terror reaction to violence, victims will probably have an obvious physical response to the violence. The resulting state of physical hyperarousal might show itself in an adrenaline rush, accelerated heart rate, hot flashes or chills, frequent urination, nausea and other exaggerated startle responses. The terror trauma could also affect victims' behavior and lifestyle. They might complain about having trouble eating, sleeping, remembering small details or concentrating. They might insist on Band-Aid symbols of safety. They might want to keep their lights on, build a fence around their yard, insist on not being left alone, become overprotective of other members of the family and be reluctant to leave any place deemed as safe.

3. Grief Displacement

The losses of a violent crime need to be processed and grieved. However, since the grieving process is one of vulnerability, pain and sadness, it is common for the victim who is already feeling unsafe to want to avoid this process. The persistent police investigation, media attention, offender presence and public interest can also threaten to overshadow the necessary grieving process. Unprocessed grief will then find its expression in other less healthy forms.

Because issues surrounding a violent crime often overshadow the initial sense of loss resulting from the crime, victims might avoid acknowledging the losses and resist the mourning process. Unresolved grief will find its expression in other ways. It might show itself in related forms of emotions such as exaggerated fear and anger responses, in unnatural forms of connections and associations or extreme forms of suppression, avoidance and forgetfulness. It might show itself in confused emotional responses; for example, there might be no tears or an excessive amount of tears shed in unusual times or places.

4. Time/Memory Warp

Violence robs crime victims of control of their lives. The resulting inner chaos can disturb the inner controls of victims' minds and sense of time to the point where they might feel as if they are going crazy. This can rob them of the ability to process events as they are happening, manage their lives, dream creatively, plan in advance or make decisions.

Because of the loss of control, victims might experience a sense of overwhelming chaos created by a violent crime. The loss of the ability to organize their thoughts or process their lives systematically will leave them feeling as if they have lost their minds. Often they will complain about having difficulty remembering details such as names, times and places. Losing control of a sense of time might show itself as being obsessed about the past, being unconcerned about the present and having no thought of the future. If they feel that the present time is meaningless, they will have difficulty with very practical life-management issues, like meeting time commitments, paying their bills on time or accomplishing tasks with deadlines.

5. Spiritual Crisis

Encountering violence will often leave a victim feeling insecure about his or her spiritual beliefs and understanding of a Higher Power. The criminal violation of society's moral code and social contract calls into question the order and control of the entire universe and the creator of that universe.

Because violent crime often forces crime victims to reevaluate their entire spiritual value system, they are forced to ask the questions like "Why me?" in terms of their place in this universe. "What was the purpose of this? What do I need to learn? What did I do wrong?" These questions often result in guilt feelings or feelings of disloyalty.

During this time, victims might talk about their inner spirituality and describe feeling disconnected, empty, purposeless, dried up, exhausted internally, old and thirsty. They might use desert language.

6. Identity Devastation

The experience of violence reorders the "self" of the victim. The values, interests, lifestyle, attitudes and habits are so drastically altered that a victim can become unrecognizable after a violent crime. Stigmatization resulting from the tendency of society to want to "blame the victim" can also cause the victim to question his or her identity, status and worth.

Because crime causes a radical change in the status, values and habits of the crime victim, victims might feel alienated and different. They might complain that everyone has changed, that their friends

are no longer sympathetic. They might appear hypersensitive to the criticism or disapproval of others. They may talk about insecurities, loss of confidence and lack of self-esteem. Some victims will show a reckless behavior that reflects lack of regard for themselves or others. They might be reluctant to become involved in social situations. Family relationships will be shifting and changing too.

7. Disabling Harm

The breaking of the law, which is designed to protect the rights and freedoms of every individual, causes immeasurable harm to the victim of the crime. Even in comparatively less severe crimes, victims can still be seriously violated mentally, physically, emotionally or spiritually. Continuing losses resulting from the crime, such as marriage failure, job loss and social dysfunction, can also continue to disable the victim from continuing his or her life as before. Thus the question of who is going to cover the cost of the losses and help the victim recover from the harm is an important expectation of the justice-making process.

Because of the accumulated physical, emotional and spiritual harm caused by violent crime, victims feel that there needs to be some recognition of these losses, preferably through compensation, perhaps indirectly through healing or rehabilitation programs, or at the very least through a sincere apology. This need for recognition of the loss might force them to demand restitution even if the process of gaining compensation is more emotionally draining or more expensive than the actual loss. They will often say, "Someone has to pay." Because of the initial loss, they will vehemently resent losing even one day at work to be present in court. They will resent having to pay for counseling or any kind of rehabilitation when these expenses are a result of crime.

8. Blame/Guilt Confusion

The first instinct of a victim is to identify the primary cause of the harm. However, the cause of the violence is not always apparent or easily identified; this can lead to blame confusion. It is the nature of this blaming process to choose a cause that is nonthreatening, accessible and convenient, which can lead to misappropriated blame. This can result in illegitimate self-blame or unwarranted blame projected on to another person, system, place or thing.

Because of the confusion around blame and guilt, and because of the strong need to deal with the primary cause of the violence immediately and effectively to recreate a sense of safety, there can be a sense of panic to deal with the cause. When this confused force of emotion, which is not always rational, is directed at the police, the media, the entire justice system, the prison system, or their close friend or partner or themselves, it can be extremely destructive. Victims will often set out on a “war path” against the person or system they feel is the cause of the violation. This unwarranted blaming can effectively destroy communication channels that the victim still needs.

9. Truth Dilemma

To make sense of the violence, to restructure their lives and to build in preventative safeguards, victims need to know what happened and why. Unfortunately, for many reasons in the aftermath of violent crime, this information is not always accessible. Victims’ “need to know” can conflict with their natural desire to avoid anything that is frightening, horrifying or painful.

Because of the victims’ “need to know,” they will often begin a fact-finding journey and truth-telling quest to find the answers to the violence they have just experienced. They might want to see the medical examiner’s report, talk to everyone who was part of the crime, meet other survivors or read books on violence and crime.

The information they seek could be about the crime, the criminal or any information pertaining to their own personal well-being. In the case of murder, victims might want to know every detail of the time leading up to the act and the discovery of the body of their loved one. If victims are worried about some of the information, they might expend a great deal of energy hiding information or avoiding it.

10. Uncontrollable Rage

The natural feelings of anger in response to an injustice can take on unusual proportions after experiencing violence or murder. A disempowering justice system and the public’s general lack of understanding of the victim’s needs can exasperate the victim until his or her anger escalates into an uncontrollable revenge emotion.

Because the emotions around the feelings of rage are often out of control, victims can, without warning, explode into fits of rage and act in ways that are not characteristic. Since the anger emotion is not conducive to calm rational thinking, the resulting behavior can seem irrational, out of control and possibly dangerous.

11. Victim/Offender Trauma Bond

All crime is about broken societal relationships. The more violent the crime, the more difficult it is to reestablish a trust relationship. Until there is some resolution, victims and offenders are often bonded together in an unfinished justice agenda. Some of the unresolved issues can include terror, rage, guilt, protection and blame.

Because victims are connected to the offender in an unfinished justice-making process, they might become obsessed with the whereabouts of the offender, need to know the attitude of this person or demand restitution from this person even if they know restitution is impossible. They might react strongly to anything that happens to the offender — for example, news of the offender being transferred to another institution, the offender being released on probation, etc. If this trauma bond is not dealt with, it can control either party for the rest of his or her life. In the case of victims, the offender's attitude and whereabouts can determine where the victim will choose to live, what he or she will do, and with whom to associate.

12. Justice Revictimization

The victim's expectations for a balanced, understanding justice-making process are often disappointed by the existing criminal justice system, which focuses more on determining guilt than on the victim's needs for recovery and vindication. Professionals and other alternative justice processes can also fail the victim. Since the expectations for justice are so high, this disappointment can feel like revictimization.

Because victims find the criminal justice system disappointing, it is not uncommon for victims to rage against the system and the professionals working in the system. They might use excessive "victims' rights" language or participate in protest vigils, letter-writing campaigns or angry telephone calls. They might begin to lobby the government and become angry political lobbyists for change.

13. Unsatisfactory Closure

Victims yearn to find closure and a way of “moving on,” but the aftermath of violence remains a continuing part of their lives. The constant reminders of the crime, the unresolved issues and the continuing losses can also hold victims hostage to the injustice even after they have decided to move on. Not being able to find a way to gain control of their lives, they remain victimized.

Because of the inner pressure to move on and “get over” the event, victims who feel imprisoned or stuck because of the event might use artificial ways to find closure. They might suppress the experience by refusing to talk about it or acknowledge it in any way. They might become obsessed with finding closure and reconstruct different ways and means of closure. Failed attempts are met with extreme anger and feelings of failure. Eventually they might begin to find ways to escape the inner pressure and be vulnerable to addictions.

14. Recovery Controversy

Recovering wholeness and healing from the wounds of serious violent crime is often sabotaged and infiltrated with pressure and expectations from many different sources. Society as a whole, media and friends all have expectations that put undue pressure on victims to conform to their idea of what recovery looks like. This outside pressure can range from an expectation of the victim forgiving to that of avenging the injustice.

Because so little is still known on how to really deal with trauma and the aftermath of violence, knowledgeable victims might be skeptical about entering any proposed recovery plan. Those who try to conform to outside pressures to recover might choose a recovery plan that is more destructive than healing or, at the very least, entirely ineffective. Being unable to find a recovery plan that will help them deal with the issues will leave victims feeling stuck and powerless.

15. Paralyzing Despair

The cumulative effects of the fragmentation, traumatization, disorientation, disempowerment and unsatisfactory closure can cause a paralyzation often referred to as “becoming stuck.” Victims can become stuck in any one of the elements — stuck in fear, stuck in

anger, stuck in grief. This state is characterized by lack of hope. Being stuck arouses feelings of hopelessness that can put the victim at risk of choosing a destructive means, such as suicide or escapism, to deal with the resulting despair.

Because of the feelings of being powerless and stuck, many victims find that over time their hope has faded — or has disappeared completely. Then they are susceptible to paralyzing despair, which can be compared to a depression. Repeated failure can lead to intense discouragement and fatigue.

Victims do not simply get over their experiences. They are permanently encoded with the experience. Research suggests that victims have a more negative view of the world than those who have never been severely traumatized. Crime victims know that “bad things can happen to good people,” and nothing can take away this knowledge. But those who have come to terms with what life is all about, the good and the bad, will emerge as butterflies with a deeper appreciation of what is good, feel somewhat sadder about the bad, and be considerably wiser because of the knowledge of both.

