

Reactions to Victimization and Trauma

What Can I Expect?

Being the victim of a crime is an experience that has an impact - surviving the experience often creates new perspectives on life and people, changes trust levels, and increases awareness for the victim. The initial impact in the first few days or weeks is often the most intense part of that impact for many people. Crime affects the primary person to which it happened and it can also affect secondary victims such as family members, friends, and coworkers who are within the victim's support system. Witnesses to crime as well as those people supporting someone who witnessed a crime may also be impacted. Witnesses and secondary victims may experience similar reactions to that of primary crime victims. What each victim, witness, family member, friend, or colleague experiences after a crime will be unique to that person. The basic reactions to expect include physical, mental, and emotional reactions to the victimization that occurred. The list below is not an exhaustive list of reactions that someone might experience, but it does provide some examples of the natural reactions people may have after being exposed to victimization and trauma. These include:

- ❖ Emotional rollercoaster and/or “cycling” of emotions – moving quickly from one emotion to the next
- ❖ Changes in eating patterns (Example: Eating too much or not eating enough.)
- ❖ Changes in sleeping patterns (Example: Sleeping too much or not sleeping enough.)
- ❖ Nightmares
- ❖ Flashbacks
- ❖ Body fatigue/weakness/soreness
- ❖ Exhaustion
- ❖ Crying
- ❖ “Triggers” that send the body into emotional or physical reactions from the crisis event (Examples: Seeing the story on the news and becoming angry or tearful; seeing someone who looks like the perpetrator and becoming anxious or scared.)
- ❖ Nausea/Vomiting
- ❖ Inability to concentrate
- ❖ Physical shock
- ❖ Emotional shock (Example: Not being able to cry.)
- ❖ Spiritual Conflicts
- ❖ Changes in thinking (Example: feeling uncomfortable around someone who resembles the attacker.)
- ❖ Body fatigue resulting from the healing of physical injury
- ❖ Body fatigue resulting from the emotional “rollercoaster”
- ❖ Numbness
- ❖ Mood instability or cycling of emotions
- ❖ Changes in interpersonal relationships

What can I do?

- ❖ Give yourself permission to experience the reactions you are having. Remind yourself that it is okay to cry, become anxious, feel unsafe, be angry, etc. Find a way through the reaction rather than attempting to deny or avoid the reaction.
- ❖ Focus on what you did right during the crime or just after the crime (rather than what you think you did “wrong”) - you may want to write this out and keep it close and read it as a reminder. Remember that one of the things you did right, is that you survived.
- ❖ Work on finding a balance between taking time to process the traumatic experience and taking “breaks” from the trauma. While this experience is now a part of your definition, it does not define you as a whole.
- ❖ Maintain or re-establish your daily routine. It is important to continue our daily activities to try and re-establish some form of “normalcy.” Though our lives change after experiencing crime, the world continues to move around us and it is important we try to find the “new normal” of our lives while incorporating the experience of the crime.
- ❖ Write a narrative – tell your story. Form your story into a narrative from start to finish. It is healing to be able to write/draw/tell the story of victimization in order to incorporate it into our lives.
- ❖ Examine and determine if your perceptions of safety, the world, people, etc., have changed and be cognizant of those changes. It is natural for our perceptions or beliefs to change after experiencing crime. Talk about this with someone you trust.
- ❖ Find coping mechanisms that work for you. You may need a different coping mechanism for each type of reaction you are having or you may need to change them over time. Examples of coping mechanisms include:
 - ◆ Journal/Write.
 - ◆ Meditation.
 - ◆ Call someone you trust for support when you need it.
 - ◆ Read.
 - ◆ Log your triggers and reactions to see if there are patterns and work to prepare for those times and how to handle it.
 - ◆ Take a bath.
 - ◆ Watch a movie (not one with violence, crime, suspense, or “heavy” plots).
 - ◆ Listen to music that affects you positively, allows emotions to be expressed, or soothes you.
 - ◆ Spend time on a favorite hobby...or start a hobby!
 - ◆ Go out for ice cream or coffee and sit and chat with a friend about anything.
 - ◆ Draw/Paint.
 - ◆ Go for a walk with a friend (keeping safety in mind).
 - ◆ Take a self-defense course.
 - ◆ Start a worry jar; write your worries as they come up and place them in a jar – talk about them with an advocate, a friend, or someone you trust.

How long will this impact last?

Each person's reactions to victimization and trauma are unique to their personality, life experiences and to the crime which they experienced. Often, the most intense reactions will occur in the Acute Crisis Period, which is the first 6-8 weeks after the crisis event (*Crisis Intervention 2*, Parad and Parad, 2002). These reactions can begin to reoccur at other critical stages such as the arrest or release of the offender, court dates, anniversaries of the crime (one week, one month, one year, etc.), major life events, etc. Each person's journey through healing will vary. Being willing to acknowledge the impact and work through it will help you along the way.

Where can I find support?

Support can come from a variety of places. You are the best person to determine who would be of good support from these groups as you know them personally. Good support entails someone who is a good listener, who truly cares about your well being, and who is willing to help you find ways to work through your experience. It is encouraged that you find a base of support with people you are familiar with as well as people who are experienced with the situation you encountered, such as a victim advocate, crisis counselor, or other form of helping professional. Think about family members, friends, coworker, counselors, or church affiliations who have been of help in the past and with whom you would feel comfortable sharing your experience.

If you feel you would benefit from giving yourself the space and time to process your experience with someone outside of your support system, contact a local victim advocate or community hotline to find out information and resources for emotional support, such as crisis intervention, counseling, or support groups. Reaching out for support is a sign of strength, not a sign of weakness, and will ultimately give you more strength from which to draw. Remember, it is important that you give yourself permission to acknowledge your reactions and work through them.

In some instances, you should seek professional help from an advocate or counselor regardless of your support system; such instances might include if your reactions impair your ability to function when they occur (such as a disabling panic attack), if you are having suicidal or homicidal thoughts, if you no longer feel comfortable with your support system, if you do not have a support system, or if your reactions are impairing your ability to complete the basic functions of daily living.

The Victim Advocates at the Sarasota County Sheriff's Office can provide you with face-to-face or telephone based crisis intervention sessions; these sessions can provide you with a safe space and the time to process the impact and begin building coping skills to assist you through healing. Please do not hesitate to contact us to schedule an appointment. Services are available to primary victims, secondary victims, and witnesses to crime; services are also available to those experiencing crisis or trauma.

*The SSO Victim Assistance Unit can be reached Monday through Friday,
8:00am-4:30pm by calling (941) 861-4942.*

Services are free and do not require a police report.

Persons wishing to access services of this program do not need to have been the victim of a crime to receive services. Advocate are mandated reporters and must report instances of child abuse, abuse of vulnerable adults, and abuse of the elderly.