

How to help a Victim

[Presentation made to correctional personnel at a course sponsored by the Alberta Department of Justice.]

1. A Disclaimer

First, a disclaimer. My particular status as a victim comes from the murder of my daughter in August 1988, now several years ago. Besides being a victim of crime, however, I am both a lawyer and a clergyman, and since that time I have become a regular prison visitor, and member of a support group for victims of homicide, as well as a facilitator for the "Alternatives to Violence" project. So I am not necessarily your typical victim - if such exist. However, I have certainly experienced the painful and devastating emotional and also financial consequences that crime of this nature brings with it.

2. Who are Victims

Perhaps the first thing to realize - and even victims don't always do this - is that there is no pre-existing condition that makes some people into victims and leaves others free. The question "What have I done to deserve this?" is natural, but most times the answer is "Nothing". Victims form a cross section of society who have happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. They come from an enormous variety of backgrounds. There is no such thing as a "typical" victim.

3. The Element of Surprise

Your victim didn't expect this disaster to happen. It has come out of a clear blue sky, and has likely disrupted all sorts of plans and lifestyle arrangements that had been taken for granted. The victim's position is made all the worse because the rest of the world hasn't been affected by what has happened, is merrily going its own way, and would like nothing better than for the victim to "get over it" so that its life can go on undisturbed.

4. The Element of Overload

Certainly, one thing I never realized ahead of time in the context of my own situation, was the sheer weight of things to do at the time of the loss. Dealing with the police, the media, radio, press and TV, who have a way of intruding uninvited and asking the same questions over and over again, as well as playing detective on their own bat. Notifying the relatives of the loss. Arranging - and financing - the funeral. Dealing with the Medical Examiner. All this on top of the regular needs of life, including getting something to eat, which often enough is neglected, and one's own psychological reactions to a very unpleasant and unexpected event, which can very much interfere with one's ability, for instance, to hold down a job and earn a living. The typical victim is a very pressured person.

5. The Psychological Effects

The human brain is of limited capacity, and the most noticeable thing about the victim's situation is that it is one hundred per cent occupied in trying to process the events that have occurred, and the change of situation that he or she has to face. Dreams, memories, voices in the head, flashbacks, grief, anger, feelings of regret or guilt, thinking "if only I hadn't...", searching for explanations and clues - all of these occupy the mind so much that your victim can for a very long time behave like an absent minded daydreamer. Don't be surprised if he or she cannot grasp your questions, takes no interest in things you

think important, falls down in performing his or her work, and generally seems "spaced out". The typical response to loss comes in different ways at different times - numbness, anger, bargaining, depression, before a stage of acceptance is reached. Don't be surprised, though, if this last stage of acceptance is not reached for a number of years: in fact, I wonder if it is ever totally reached at all.

6. Suggestibility

A consequence of this preoccupation is that the person affected by loss or grief becomes extremely suggestible. Any small act of kindness and sympathy is immensely encouraging. Any criticism or failure to sympathize can be taken as outright hostility. This can be quite a serious matter when the victim meets and is possibly moulded or else intimidated by the lawyer for the "other side". The "Stockholm Syndrome" is a reality.

7. A naive belief in the power of the justice system

One sad and common expectation on the part of victims, which ends almost universally in disappointment, is the idea that somehow the processes of justice will be able to give peace and closure to the victim, as the wrongdoer is put away. Unfortunately, no amount of punishment of the wrongdoer can achieve this, and if the accused gets off with a light sentence, or somehow beats the charge on a technicality, the victim feels doubly abused. Add to this, the generally cavalier treatment given to witnesses (including the victim) in the court process, and the end result is often abuse three times over (more if a new trial is ordered on appeal!), and a heavy degree of resentment. Victims do not generally understand that criminal proceedings are between the Crown and the accused, for "disturbing the Queen's peace", and are not designed to give solace to the victim of the crime at all.

8. Anger, and the "Urge to do something"

Anger is the very natural consequence of abuse, either of ourselves, or someone we care for. It is a form of energy, which ideally should be used to put the situation right. In the victim of a major crime, it is a very powerful emotion. If badly directed, it may turn into self abuse with depression, drugs, alcohol, marital breakup, and perhaps even suicide. In the best of cases, it can be used in constructive ways: memorials to the departed, useful work in the community, campaigning for improved public safety, and so on. The victim needs to be helped to use this energy constructively - very often his or her ignorance means that it is spent in ways that are not particularly helpful or even socially disruptive.

8. What do we do?

I hope these thoughts are of help. If I could summarize with some advice:

- Do be patient with victims. You don't expect someone with a broken leg to immediately run a sprint. Respect the time it takes to heal a broken heart!
- Be ready to lend a sympathetic ear. Talking about their loss is part of the therapy victims need to release their immense emotional burden. It may bore you to tears, but you are doing a good work.
- Be ready to explain the process, particularly the steps that are taken by the justice system, and that the justice system is essentially for the protection of society (including possibly innocent accused), not the compensation of the victim. Victim/offender mediation is actually a much preferable way of settling the emotional damage, but is not suitable in all cases, and should not be forced on either party.
- See that the victim gets help with practical matters. Food, finances, medical and psychological

help, access to compensation and welfare services - the average victim needs these and often has not the time, energy or experience to know where to look.

- If this is a high profile case where the media are interested, protect the family of the victim by organizing some person as the family spokesperson and sole media contact.
- If possible, link the victim up with some form of support group. Those who have been there before are living proof that it's possible to survive, and know something of what is needed to do so. Besides, it takes pressure off the professionals who also have other things to do!
- If the victim wants to do something active to change the world in the light of what has happened, be ready with suggestions as to how this can usefully be done.
- In particular, the word "victim" itself is not the best way for a person affected by crime to view him or herself. You'll be happier when the person you know thinks in terms that "He may be a victim. You are a casualty, but I am going to be a Survivor." Make that suggestion stick!

Be kind to the victims you meet. There's no guarantee that some day, something nasty may not happen also to **you**.

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