

How Crime Victims React to Trauma

What Is It?

Many crimes involve the use of force or violence against victims. Crime victims of all types of crime may experience **trauma**—physical damage to their bodies or emotional wounds or shock caused by the violence against them. Reactions to trauma vary from person to person and can last for hours, days, weeks, months, or years.

Physical trauma: Crime victims may experience physical trauma—serious injury or shock to the body, as from a major accident. Victims may have cuts, bruises, fractured arms or legs, or internal injuries. They may have intense stress reactions: their breathing, blood pressure, and heart rate may increase, and their muscles may tighten. They may feel exhausted but unable to sleep, and they may have headaches, increased or decreased appetites, or digestive problems

Emotional trauma: Victims may experience emotional trauma—emotional wounds or shocks that may have long-lasting effects. Emotional trauma may take many different forms:

- **Shock or numbness:** Victims may feel “frozen” and cut off from their own emotions. Some victims say they feel as if they are “watching a movie” rather than having their own experiences. Victims may not be able to make decisions or conduct their lives as they did before the crime.
- **Denial, Disbelief, and Anger:** Victims may experience “denial,” an unconscious defense against painful or unbearable memories and feelings about the crime. Or they may experience disbelief, telling themselves, “this just could not have happened to me!” They may feel intense anger and a desire to get even with the offender.
- **Acute Stress Disorder:** Some crime victims may experience trouble sleeping, flashbacks,¹ extreme tension or anxiety, outbursts of anger, memory problems, trouble concentrating, and other symptoms of distress for days or weeks following a trauma. A person may be diagnosed as having acute stress disorder (ASD) if these or other mental disorders continue for a minimum of two days to up to four weeks within a month of the trauma. If these symptoms persist after a month, the diagnosis becomes **posttraumatic stress disorder** (PTSD).

Secondary Injuries: When victims do not receive the support and help they need after the crime, they may suffer “secondary” injuries. They may be hurt by a lack of understanding from friends, family, and the professionals they come into contact with—particularly if others seem to blame the victim for the crime (suggesting they should have been able to prevent or avoid it). Police, prosecutors, judges, social service providers, the media, coroners, and even clergy and mental health professionals may contribute to such secondary injuries.

¹ Repeated, intense, vivid mental images of past traumatic experiences.

If You Are a Victim

How You May Feel: Every victim is different. You may experience shock, numbness, denial, disbelief, and anger—any of the feelings victims typically have (see above).

Common Injuries: You may have bruises, cuts, scrapes, broken bones, sexually transmitted diseases, and a wide range of internal injuries. You may also have physical reactions (such as rapid heart rate and breathing, increased blood pressure, nausea or sleeplessness) to the emotional wounds caused by the crime.

Decisions to Consider:

- **Medical Care:** Will you seek medical care to treat your injuries and be tested and treated for sexually transmitted diseases? You may want to seek such help, even if you decide not to report the crime.
- **Counseling:** Will you cope with your feelings privately, reach out to a friend or family member, or seek the help of a clergy member or professional counselor? Counseling can help you manage the emotional and physical impact of the crime and regain a sense of control over your life. You can choose from many different types of counseling:
 - Hotline—one-on-one advice (by phone) from counselors specifically trained to help victims who have experienced trauma.
 - Group counseling—counseling under the care of a mental health professional in a group of people who experienced similar traumas.
 - Individual counseling—one-on-one, in-person counseling by a counselor, therapist, psychologist, psychiatrist, or other professional trained to help victims recover from trauma.
- **Reporting the Crime:** Will you report the crime? You may want to talk to a victim advocate (see below) to help you make this decision, guide you through the criminal justice system, and help you solve problems that may arise as you cope with your reactions to the crime.

Resources

The best way to find out about these options is to talk to a crime victim advocate. The National Crime Victim Helpline (**1-800-FYI-CALL**) advocates can help you think through these decisions and refer you to resources in your area. Helpline services are free and confidential.

National Crime Victim Helpline

1-800-FYI-CALL (1-800-394-2255)

1-800-211-7996 TTY

8:30 a.m. – 8:30 p.m. ET weekdays

Or visit: **Help for Crime Victims:** www.ncvc.org/victimassistance

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