

First Response



To Victims of Crime

Course Information

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Course Format: Lynne Presley, Training & Staff Development Unit

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Course Objectives

After completing this course, employees will:

- understand that the actions of a first responder to a crime victim can influence that victim's attitude and behavior during the remainder of that victim's incarceration.
- be able to name the three main needs of most crime victims.
- understand how to approach and interact with special needs crime victims, such as the elderly, disabled, and mentally ill.
- understand that the tone, pitch and clarity of their speech can influence their interaction with crime victims.

Introduction

Whenever a crime is committed, law enforcement officers are usually the first on the scene. The initial response to the victim will have a long-lasting impact on the individual's view of the justice system and participation in the investigation and prosecution of the crime.

In the last few decades, great strides have been made in recognizing and assisting the victims of crime. However, this has not always been true of crime victims who are incarcerated or under supervision.

Introduction

Crimes against people who are incarcerated must be reported as detailed in OP-050108, "Use of Force and Reportable Incidents", and, if applicable, OP-030601, "Oklahoma Prison Rape Elimination Act."

However, the manner in which the first responder conducts the first contact with the crime victim can influence that victim's attitude and behavior during the remainder of that victim's incarceration.

Introduction

It is in society's best interest to better understand and meet the needs of crime victims, both incarcerated and those who are not. As John Gillis, Director of the Office for Victims of Crime in the U.S. Dept. of Justice stated:

"... all crime victims deserve to be treated with compassion, sensitivity, and respect. A response encompassing all those qualities undoubtedly will serve to increase the effectiveness of the entire criminal justice system."

Introduction

If crime victims are treated in an insensitive manner, even if the treatment is not intentional, the result can be a second victimization. By approaching victims in a supportive manner, victims may be more willing to provide detailed information about the crime.



Victims' Three Major Needs

1. The Need to Feel Safe

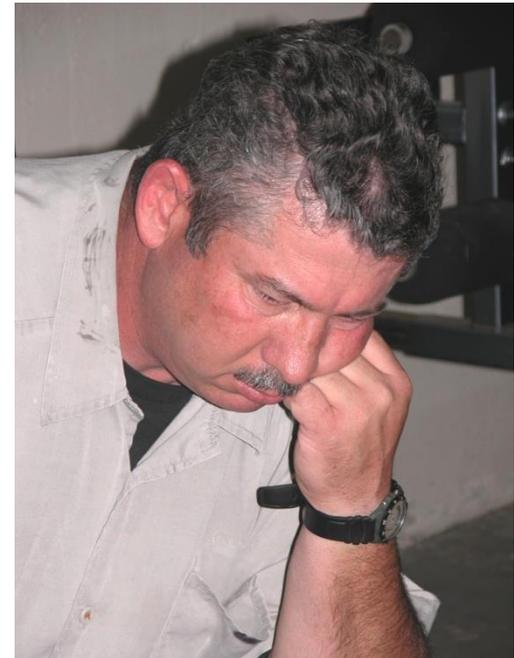
People often feel helpless, vulnerable and frightened by the trauma of their victimization. This is true of incarcerated people, too, although they may try not to show their emotional vulnerability.



Victims' Three Major Needs

2. The Need to Express Their Emotions

Victims need to air their emotions after the trauma of a crime. They need to have their feelings accepted and their story heard by a non-judgmental listener. Victims may have feelings of self-blame, anger, shame, sadness, or denial. Emotional distress may surface in seemingly peculiar ways, such as laughter or an expressionless face.



Victims' Three Major Needs

2. The Need to Express Their Emotions

Victims may even feel rage, which they sometimes direct at the people who are trying to help them.



Victims' Three Major Needs

3. The Need to Know "What Comes Next"

Victims often have concerns about their role in the investigation, particularly in an institutional setting. They may worry about repercussions from other offenders if they are perceived as an informer. Some of their anxiety may be alleviated if they know what to expect in the aftermath of the crime. This will help to prepare them for upcoming stressful events and disruptions in their life related to the prosecution of the crime.

First Response to Individual Types of Crime Victims: Older Victims

When older people are victimized by crime, they may suffer worse physical and psychological injuries than other age groups. For instance, when victims 65 or older are injured in a violent crime, they are about twice as likely to suffer serious physical injury and to require hospitalization than any other age group.



Responding to Older Victims

- Give victims time to collect their thoughts before interviewing them
- Allow victims adequate time to hear and comprehend your words during the interview
- Ask questions one at a time, and wait for a response before proceeding to the next question.
- Understand that the recollections of some older people may surface slowly. Do not pressure them to recall events or details; rather, ask them to contact you if they recall something later.



First Response to Individual Types of Crime Victims : Victims Who Have a Disability

Anyone can be a crime victim, but disabled people are often more vulnerable than others, both in society and those who are incarcerated. People with a mental disability can be less able to recognize and avoid danger, and people with a physical disability can be less able to protect themselves or escape harm. Many times, perpetrators specifically target disabled people under the assumption that victims will be unable to escape or report the crime.

Responding to Disabled Victims

- Do not act on your curiosity about victims' disabilities. Restrict your questions to those necessary to accommodate their needs. Focus on the issues at hand, not the disability.
- Listen to your tone of voice and monitor your behavior to make sure you're not "talking down" to victims, coming across in a condescending manner, or treating the victim as a child.
- Never assume that people with disabilities suffer less emotional trauma and psychological injury than other crime victims.

First Response to Individual Types of Crime Victims: Victims Who Have a Mental Illness

Mental illness encompasses a number of distinct brain disorders that disrupt a person's mood balance, thought processes, memory, sensory input, and ability to relate to others. Mental illness should not be confused with mental retardation. People with a mental illness are usually of normal intelligence but may have difficulty functioning at normal levels due to their illness.



First Response to Individual Types of Crime Victims: Victims Who Have a Mental Illness

Although first responders cannot be expected to recognize specific types of mental illness, the following symptoms are indicative that a crime victim may have a mental illness:

- Accelerated speaking or hyperactivity; delusions, hallucinations or paranoia.
- Inappropriate emotional responses (for instance, laughter during a serious moment).
- Catatonia, which is characterized by a marked lack of movement, activity or expression.
- Unfounded confusion, anxiety, panic or fright.

First Response to Individual Types of Crime Victims: Responding to Victims Who Have a Mental Illness

- Approach victims in a calm and nonthreatening manner.
- Conduct your interview in a setting that is free of people or distractions upsetting to victims.

Avoid the following conduct in your actions and behavior:

- Circling, surrounding, closing in on, or standing too close to victim.
- Concealing your hands; sudden movements or rapid instructions or questions.
- Signs of impatience; inappropriate language such as “nuts”, “psycho” or “crazy”.

First Response to Individual Types of Crime Victims: Victims with Mental Retardation

Mental retardation is a disability affecting the brain and its ability to process information. People with mental retardation have problems with judgment and in their abilities to focus, understand and reason.

Ultimately, there is often no way for the first responder to know whether a crime victim has mental retardation. If you suspect this disability, proceed as though the victim does have mental retardation. In so doing, you can best ensure effective communication and an optimum response to the victim's needs.

First Response to Individual Types of Crime Victims: Responding to Victims with Mental Retardation

- Show the same level of respect to crime victims with mental retardation as you show to all victims.
- Do not assume that victims are incapable of understanding or communicating with you.
- Create a safe atmosphere, limit distractions, and establish a trusting rapport with victims before interviewing them.
- Speak directly and slowly, keeping your sentences short and words simple. Listen to how victims talk, and match your speech to their vocabulary, tempo and sentence structure.

First Response to Individual Types of Crime Victims: Responding to Victims with Blindness or Visual Impairment

The ability to see exists along a wide continuum from sighted to partially-sighted to blind. Blindness and vision impairment become more common with advancing age. Tips that will help you to interview crime victims with visual impairment or blindness include:

- Describe the chair and seating arrangements when assisting victims in sitting down, and place their hand (after asking permission) on the back or arm of the chair.
- Do not speak loudly. Most people with blindness or visual impairment are not hard of hearing.

First Response to Individual Types of Crime Victims: Responding to Victims with Blindness or Visual Impairment, continued

- Let victims know when you or other persons step away (and return) during a conversation.
- Avoid lapses of conversation in your interview without first informing victims of why you need to be silent; for example, tell victims you are writing.
- Try to project attentiveness, concern and compassion through your voice and choice of words. Remember that victims cannot see your facial expressions or body language to ascertain whether you are listening to them and interested in what they have to say.

First Response to Individual Types of Crime Victims: Responding to Victims Who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

About 10% of the U.S. population has some degree of hearing loss. Among older persons, one in three persons over age 60 and half of those over 85 have a hearing loss.

Whether deaf or hard of hearing, victims of crime with this disability are fully capable of cooperating with first responders. To effectively meet victims' needs, the responder must quickly determine the method by which victims want to communicate, and then immediately begin using it.

First Response to Individual Types of Crime Victims: Responding to Victims Who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing, continued

- Signal your presence to victims by waving your hand or gently (so as not to startle) touching victims on the arm or shoulder.
- Determine how victims want to communicate by initially communicating through writing in situations where victims do not speech or lip read, and a sign language interpreter is not immediately available.
- Avoid shouting or speaking very slowly to make yourself understood as this distorts your speech, lip movements, and facial expressions, and may make you appear to be upset.

First Response to Specific Types of Criminal Victimization: Responding to Victims of Sexual Assault

Sexual assault is one of the most traumatic types of criminal victimization. In addition to the physical injuries suffered, victims can also be intensely traumatized by feelings of humiliation at their violation, and by the frightening realization that they could have been even more severely injured or killed. Victims may be reluctant to report the crime, fearing that they will not be believed. They may also fear retaliation from the assailant.

Sexual assault procedures in OP-030601, "Oklahoma Prison Rape Elimination Act", should always be followed.

Remember that your initial contact with the assault victim can significantly affect when and if they start down the road to recovery.

First Response to Specific Types of Criminal Victimization, Sexual Assault, continued

Tips on responding to sexual assault victims:

- Do not be confused or surprised by the victim's emotional reaction to the assault. Permit victims to express their emotions, which may include crying, angry outbursts, withdrawal and difficulty discussing the assault, screaming, and laughing (which may be in response to stress and relief at having survived the assault).
- Avoid interpreting a victim's calmness or lack of emotional reaction as indicating that a sexual assault may not have occurred or that the victim has not been hurt or traumatized. Remember that the victim may be in shock.

First Response to Specific Types of Criminal Victimization, Sexual Assault, continued

- Interact with victims in a calm, professional manner. Exhibiting your outrage or disgust at the crime may cause victims even more trauma. Remember during your interview that it is natural for victims to want to forget, or actually to forget, details of the crime that are difficult for them to accept.
- Be mindful of the victim's personal concerns. They may be worried that they were impregnated, or have contracted a sexually-transmitted disease such as the virus that causes AIDS. They may also fear the reactions or criticisms of other prisoners if they learn of the sexual assault.

General Communication Guidelines

No matter what type of crime the victim experiences, there are some "Do's and Don'ts" guidelines that can lead to appropriate and productive communication between the victim and first responder.



General Communication Guidelines

Do attempt foremost to communicate trust, support and confidence

Do calm and comfort victims. Ask, "How are you doing?"

Do allow victims to tell what happened in their own words.

Do be alert for hidden meanings and messages not directly expressed by the victim, without making unwarranted assumptions.

Do understand that many victims will have extreme difficulty reconstructing their lives after a violent crime, and that some may never recover from the tragedy.

General Communication Guidelines

Don't be judgmental or blame the victim for the crime that was committed.

Don't "second guess" how the victim reacted to the crime, either at the time it was occurring or in the aftermath of a violent act.

Don't be afraid of silence. Use it constructively. Don't talk more than the victim.

Don't become defensive or arrogant, or get into an argument with a victim.

Don't expect to be a psychotherapist, nor to know all the "right" answers. Your job is to listen and assist the victim - to the degree possible - in handling his or her immediate issues.

General Communication Guidelines

Good things to say to victims:

- How can I help you?
- What happened is not your fault.
- Do you have any concerns about your safety?
- Who else have you spoken to?
- Let's see if we can figure out your most important needs right now.
- I may not understand what you're going through, but I will try and help you.

General Communication Guidelines

Bad things to say to victims:

- I know how you feel.
- Get over it.
- I can promise you that we'll find out who did this to you.
- At least you weren't badly hurt.
- You're not the only victim this has happened to.
- You must have brought this on yourself.

General Communication Guidelines

Interpreting Verbal Messages

It's important that you practice how to communicate. Ignorance or carelessness in your speech can result in misunderstandings and even hostility from victims.

Pitch: How high or low your voice is can reveal your emotions. Keep your pitch in the medium range.

Tone: Listeners can "read" the tone of your voice, and can determine frustration, anger, boredom, and other emotions.

Clarity: A clear and steady speaking voice is best for gathering and conveying information. Slow down, speak deliberately, and you will be understood.

General Communication Guidelines



Effective Listening

No matter how effective your questions are, if you aren't listening, you won't get the information. Listening is a mental process. There is a very real difference between hearing and listening. We can hear things going on all around us that do not register with the brain in the sense of provoking thought. This type of listening usually "goes in one ear and out the other."

Listening – active listening – assumes an understanding or comprehension that hearing does not. This type of listening weighs and considers what is being said.

General Communication Guidelines

Selective Listening

Selective listening is the skill of focusing on the words that reveal another person's need and problems. Give the victim your complete attention. Let others answer the telephone, and don't try to complete peripheral work while talking with the victim.



General Communication Guidelines

Responsive Listening

Responsive listening is sometimes called “reactive” listening. That is because you react to points the victim makes. Responsive listening includes some or all of the following actions:

- Provide feedback as the victim speaks, which demonstrates that you are listening to the victim’s story. This can build rapport , demonstrate your interest and attention, and encourage the victim to keep speaking.

General Communication Guidelines

Responsive Listening, continued

- Take notes. You can't expect to remember everything a victim tells you. Taking notes demonstrates your professionalism and concern, as well as preserves important information.
- Confirm what you hear. One technique is summarizing what the witness says to you: "If I understand you correctly, you would like to complete a written report and testify at the misconduct hearing." Confirmation can avoid misunderstandings down the line, which can lead to further emotional and/or physical damage to the victim.

General Communication Guidelines

Responding to Difficult Questions

Victims may sometimes ask questions that you don't know how to answer. Here are some questions frequently asked by crime victims, and suggested responses.

Question: "Can you help me?"

Response: "I'd like to try. Tell me more about what happened, and we'll see what we can do."

Question: "Everyone here so far has treated me like a dog."

Response: "I'm sorry you feel you've been treated badly. I'm going to do my best to help you in a respectful way."

General Communication Guidelines

Responding to Difficult Questions, continued

Question: "Can you guarantee that . . . will happen?"

Response: "I'm sorry, but I can't guarantee anything. However, I can work with you to see if we can help to make it happen."

Question: "Do I have to tell you who did this to me?"

Response: "Only if you decide to do so, which will help us to identify who hurt you."

Self-Test

Click the button to see if you knew the correct response.

1. By interacting with crime victims in a supportive manner, victims may:

- A. Refuse to discuss the crime
- B. Start to cry, then refuse to cooperate
- C. Be more willing to provide detailed information about the crime.

[Click here](#)

The correct response is “C”

Self-Test

Click the button to see if you knew the correct response.

2. One of the major needs of most crime victims is the need to express their emotions about the crime they experienced.

A. True

B. False

[Click here](#)

The correct response is "A"

Self-Test

Click the button to see if you knew the correct response.

3. Most elderly crime victims have a limited ability to remember crime details, so the first responder must argue forcefully with them to aid their memory process.
- A. True
 - B. False

Click here

The correct response is "B"

Self-Test

Click the button to see if you knew the correct response.

4. When responding to crime victims who have a physical disability, it's important that you question them about the extent of their disability, in order to better meet their emotional needs.
- A. True
 - B. False

[Click here](#)

The correct response is "B"

Self-Test

Click the button to see if you knew the correct response.

5. As a rule, victims with mental retardation are incapable of understanding you.
- A. True
 - B. False

[Click here](#)

The correct response is “B”

Self-Test

Click the button to see if you knew the correct response.

6. Victims with a mental illness are usually of normal intelligence.
- A. True
 - B. False

[Click here](#)

The correct response is “A”

Self-Test

Click the button to see if you knew the correct response.

7. It's important to let blind/visually-impaired victims know when you or other persons step away (and return) during a conversation.
- A. True
 - B. False

[Click here](#)

The correct response is "A"

Self-Test

Click the button to see if you knew the correct response.

8. It is best to speak very slowly to deaf victims, so they can read your lips.
- A. True
 - B. False

[Click here](#)

The correct response is “B”

Self-Test

Click the button to see if you knew the correct response.

9. Sexual assault victims may:
- A. Show a lack of emotion
 - B. Laugh
 - C. Cry
 - D. All of the above

[Click here](#)

The correct response is “D”

Self-Test

Click the button to see if you knew the correct response.

10. “At least you weren’t badly hurt” is a caring thing to say to a crime victim.
- A. True
 - B. False

[Click here](#)

The correct response is “B”

Conclusion

Dealing fairly with offenders requires thought, care and impartiality. Correctional philosophy has shifted from the attitude that “Well, if they commit a crime, lock them up, throw away the key, and take away all their hope. If they get hurt by another prisoner, they probably had it coming.”

A more modern philosophy is that crime victims, even those who are incarcerated, deserve to be treated compassionately, fairly and respectfully. Law enforcement’s sensitive and quality response to all victims strengthens the criminal justice system.

Would you like to know more?



The U.S. Dept. of Justice – Office for Victims of Crime maintains an extensive web site with information for first responders to crime victims. Click below link to go to their home page:

<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/ovc/welcovc/welcome.html>

