

## VCSS - Caring For Victims of Crime

---

### **We Can't Fix It**

When someone is traumatised by a criminal event it is important to avoid platitudes such as “you’ll be over it soon” or any form of trying to make them feel better. For them it may feel that their life has been turned up-side-down. Just getting through another day might seem an enormous undertaking and even the simplest chore will now seem daunting while they are suffering from the trauma. Physically (even if they were not injured) and emotionally they will feel drained, operating on automatic pilot to get through only the necessary chores.

### **Listen Well**

Listening well means really hearing what they are saying and even picking up on what it not being said, but implied, such as feelings that are not mentioned but can be suggested e.g. “that sounds really scary”. Use open questions to hear and explore as much of the story as they want to tell, all the kinds of feelings (including anger), the questioning, the “if only’s”, the why’s. Don’t try to answer questions if you don’t know – help them to reach their own conclusion or come to an acceptance of not knowing.

Some clients will feel they contributed to the situation – that they must be to blame. Don’t rush to defend them. Explore from different perspectives so that they can come to their own conclusion.

### **Acknowledgement**

It is important to ACKNOWLEDGE the enormity of what has happened and the impact it is having on their life – the depth and range of feelings – how OVERWHELMING and CONSTANT it is – as though they have NO CONTROL ANYMORE. There is huge loss and grief involved in trauma and two of the biggest losses are the sense of safety and sense of having some control over their lives.

### **Normalise**

Often the victim will be afraid they are losing their sanity. They may find themselves replaying the incident over and over in their minds. Because they think their feelings, thoughts and reactions are abnormal they begin to think they are going crazy. Thought stopping can be useful for them. Concentration may be proving difficult and they may suffer short term memory loss. They may even have suicidal thoughts or simply wish they were dead.

They are likely to feel anxious and afraid all the time and to fear that another disaster is about to happen in their lives or to someone they love. Their confidence will be affected so that tasks that once were easy will now seem too hard. It will reassure them if you tell them that any or all of this is normal.

### **Don't Minimise**

Never compare or minimise a person’s trauma, loss and grief. There will always be others who may seem to have suffered greater misfortune, but we can only feel our own grief and knowing someone else is suffering does not take our pain away.

## **VCSS - Caring For Victims of Crime**

---

### **Reality of Ongoing Pain**

Be honest about the reality that the pain and insecurity will be ongoing for some time. Explain that being human means we have feelings and we hurt. Explain that their world view has been altered by the incident, their sense of safety has been stolen from them and whereas before they thought such disasters only happened to other people – now they know it can happen to them.

It will take some time for them to re-establish their trust in their environment and their personal safety but the fact is their life will never be the same again. We can not go back to what was, but we can go forward and establish a new and maybe, even better life. Down the track many clients will look back and realise something positive has come from the trauma, such as re-assessing their priorities.

### **Differences in the healing process**

One of the most important messages to give a family in trauma, grief and loss is that they will all cope with it differently. Mum will cry all the time, Dad won't cry at all (when anyone is around, perhaps in the shower!). Someone else will withdraw and barely say a word, another will be angry and snap at everyone, some will try to dull the pain with alcohol or drugs, and another will want to talk non-stop.

Make sure they know this and ask them to be gentle with one another. Explain that they each had a different experience of the event and they are different people with different characters and coping abilities. There could be complications and the healing process could be more difficult if they have unresolved issues from the past that are likely to resurface at this time.

### **No Timetable**

As with the differences in coping behaviours – they will all go through the healing process in their own time. Ask them not to think that because one of them seems to cope, that everyone else should be at the same stage. Assure them there is no need to hurry and in fact the process can not be hurried, other than to say that the more they express their feelings, the more progress they will make.

### **Encourage them to comfort themselves in healthy ways**

Emphasise the need to nurture and comfort themselves as they would a good friend in similar circumstances. If they need to make a special safe place, help them work out where and how.

Alcohol and drugs generally bring more problems. Numbing feelings with medication only delays the grieving process which is a normal, natural reaction in the circumstances and is better to experience now, rather than mask and become ill by holding the feelings in. "Hibernation" is appropriate during the healing process. Exercise, yoga, meditation, listening to favourite music, painting or craft work, working on the car etc are all useful ways of either processing the feelings or taking a break from them by concentrating on something else. Massage is especially good and it's OK to warn the masseuse that there could be some tears.