

## Emotional Trauma of Robbery Victimization

Typical victim responses to a robbery can include such reactions as: Shock; Anxiety; Numbness; Anger; Disbelief; Despair; Fear; Depression; Confusion; Humiliation; Helplessness; Shame; Denial; and Guilt. Victims' old assumptions about the world have been shattered producing intense feelings of anxiety and helplessness, and a preoccupation with fear of a recurrence of the crime. In addition, there is rage at the offender, sadness over the losses involved, discomfort because of a new sense of vulnerability, fear of loss of control, discomfort over aggressive impulses (especially thoughts of revenge), guilt about not having been able to prevent the crime, humiliation, rejection by others, the belief of others that the crime was somehow partially the victim's fault, and an increased suspicion of strangers.

Robbery victims may experience recurrent and intrusive thoughts and dreams of the incident and may also be hyper-alert, startling at little noises or abrupt actions. Changes in eating and sleeping habits are also common. A robbery can be a violent, life-threatening situation and for the victim can incorporate issues of one's own death and fears of leaving loved ones behind.

How victims react to violent crimes such as robbery varies from person to person and is affected by individual factors such as how they usually handle stress and what kind of support systems they have in their lives. Intervention and support after a victim endures a robbery are beneficial for recovery from this crime and its violation of both property and personal safety (Manton & Talbot, 1990). In 1991, an estimated 86,000 robbery victims (4% of all reported robbery victims) were treated by mental health care providers (Miller, Cohen & Wiersema, 1996).

Although robbery victims may feel as if they are the only ones who are experiencing these feelings and that no one else can understand what they are going through, these reactions are a normal response to an abnormal event. Some reactions may continue for some time or resurface after being triggered by another event. Resolution of crisis reactions after a violent crime is a healing process. It is important for the victim to give him/herself permission to heal at their own pace. Just as everyone reacts to a crisis differently, not everyone recovers from a crisis in the same manner or within the same time frame. Realizing and accepting that these reactions are normal are the first steps to recovery. Another critical step in recovery for the victim is being able to talk about the experience and any crisis reactions in order to validate feelings and fears. As victims talk about the robbery and their reactions, over time the incident will begin to be put into perspective and be integrated into their life.

Robbery victims are not alone. In most communities, there are victim assistance programs, caring professionals, and support groups comprised of other victims of violent crimes all of whom are there to help by providing assistance, services and referrals. To contact crime victim services in your area, check in the front of your local phone book under "Community Services Numbers" or "Emergency Assistance Numbers," or call your local county/city prosecutor's office.

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## What Victims of, or Witnesses to, Burglary, Robbery and Assault Should Do

- Get a good description of the offender.
  - Carefully observe and remember as much as possible about appearance and behavior.
  - Try to memorize details of the person's physical identity (age, height, weight, color of eyes and hair). A good way to determine height and weight is to compare the person to yourself or someone you know, or to note the person's size and build relative to an object or a doorway located where the crime is occurring.
  - Look for distinguishing personal characteristics, such as scars, tattoos, hair style, or other prominent features.
  - Observe the person's clothing (style and colors), jewelry, gait and manner of speech.
  - If a car is involved in the incident, note the make, model, color and license number.
- *Call the police emergency number immediately to make a crime report.* The sooner you report the crime, the more likely it is that the police will be able to collect important evidence and apprehend the offender.
- *If the crime occurred in your home or neighborhood, it is a good idea to notify your neighbors and/or the landlord so that they may take extra precautions.*
- *Make use of the services that are offered to assist crime victims and their families and witnesses to crime.* Crime victims often suffer psychological stress, financial losses, and other problems related to being victimized. Victims and witnesses to crime need information about the legal process and assistance dealing with police and court procedures. There are many agencies that offer help. Contact the police department, Victim-Witness Programs in the District Attorney's Office or the City Attorney's Office, or the office of your legislative representative for information about the services available.

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## How to Help the Victim of Burglary, Robbery or Assault

It is important, when addressing the needs of the victim of a robbery, assault or burglary, for you to not minimize the extent of trauma to the victim, the victim's family or his/her friends and neighbors. In light of the intensity of some other crimes, one might be tempted to minimize these crimes, particularly if the offense is not aggravated (involving the use of a weapon).

However, this time of victimization involves many of the same dynamics as are found in other crimes which might be considered more major. The sense of violation and loss always accompanies these crimes. A woman victim of a burglary, who came home and found that her personal clothing items had been rifled through, said that she was now unable to wear any of these items. It is the invasion of private space that is so offensive.

Also there is usually a material loss. Since these types of crimes, unless aggravated, are lower on the priority of law enforcement, there is often just a report made for insurance purposes and nothing more. The victim is re-offended by the casualness of some law enforcement personnel regarding the

apprehension of the offender. The attitude that "the insurance will take care of it" often disturbs the victim. It is important that you as the victim's supporter assist with any insurance problems that may occur; however, do not reinforce an "insurance will take care of it" attitude. Insurance does not make it right. Often there is the loss of items which are not of much material value, but are priceless from the standpoint of treasured mementos and photographs. These are irreplaceable.

Then there is the safety factor. Anyone who has suffered a robbery or a burglary is concerned about its repetition. If the theft has been from a car the victim will probably from then on, without fail, always lock the car. If it is from the home, increased security measures are taken. This type of crime always leaves the victim less free and more cautious, often in a way that may seem overly cautious. If the counseling agent becomes concerned about the victim becoming paranoid, it is important that he/she not minimize the reason for this caution, and deal with it gently with understanding.

Of course, aggravated robbery involves the threat of major injury or even death, and all of the symptoms akin to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder may be exhibited...shock, fear, anger, nausea, sleeplessness, "unreasonable" fear of others, inability to go to or be in certain places, reliving of the event, etc. It is well for you as a support to the victim to suggest psychological counseling, or the victim's participation in a trauma support group.

Most jurisdictions now have victim and witness assistance programs either in connection with prosecutor's offices or law enforcement. Make yourself aware of these programs and assist the victim in making contact. These offices provide information on compensation for loss, as well as on psychological and support programs.

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