SECTION 6

TRAUMA
THE CENTER FOR TRAUMA & RESILIENCE

Who are victims of crime?

Federal Law PL 97-291 defines victims as individuals who suffer physical, financial, or emotional harm as a result of the commission of a crime. This definition includes the families of children who are victims of crime or the survivors of a homicide victim.

The statistics are alarming.

One violent crime occurs every 26 seconds; one property crime occurs every 3.8 seconds and one murder occurs every 36 minutes. (Federal Bureau of Investigation, Uniform Crime Report 2014).

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics:

- The young, black, and males were most vulnerable to crime
- Except for rape/sexual assault, every violent crime victimization rate for males were higher than for females
- Blacks experienced higher overall rates of violent crime than whites and persons of other races
- Nationally, black residents in urban areas experienced a higher rate of violent crime than urban whites.
- Teenagers and young adults were more likely to become victims of violent crime than older persons. Persons ages 12-24 sustained violent victimization at a higher rate than individuals of all other ages.
- Persons from households with lower incomes were more vulnerable to violent crime than those from higher income households.
- Minorities, urban dwellers and those who rent their homes experienced the highest rates of property crime.
- When compared with other age groups, persons age 65 or older were disproportionately affected by property crimes.

According to the National Sheriff’s Association:

- Victims of crime are more often men than women, more often young, more likely to be black, more likely to be divorced or single.
- People with low incomes have the highest violent crime victimization rate.
- The risk of being the victim of violent crime is higher than the risk of being affected by divorce, or death from cancer, or hurt in a traffic accident.

The risk depends on a combination of factors. Anyone can be a crime victim.
Criminal Victimization as a Crisis

Crisis: A threatening life experience which seriously disrupts personal and social functioning.

-- "The key word in this definition is 'threat'...a severe threat to the self may result in eating or sleeping disturbances, inability to engage in usual social interactions, inability to think clearly or to concentrate, or inability to work. In a very real sense, a threatening event can directly or adversely affect the functional integrity of the person..."

"The Psychological Impact of Personal Crime" Morton Bard, Ph.D.

-- Crisis research indicates that the ability of an individual to adapt to and handle a crisis depends on the meaning assigned to the stressful experience and the nature of the victim's experiences immediately after the threat.

-- Not all stressful life experiences have a crisis impact: e.g., death after a prolonged illness which enables a spouse or relative to be prepared for the death.

-- Threatening life experiences that are sudden and unanticipated, unpredictable and random or arbitrary frequently produce a shattering impact on the individual's sense of self and ability to function with others.

-- Most crimes, by definition and action, are sudden, unpredictable, and arbitrary... Many crimes produce a crisis in the victim's life.
Victimization Factors

A) **Victimization** is a stress situation that can result in a crisis for the victim:

1) It is **sudden**. Crime often occurs without warning. It is generally impossible to prepare psychologically.

2) It is **arbitrary**. The crime seems to have neither reason nor explanation. The client asks, "Why me?"

3) It is **unpredictable**. One never knows when crime will occur. It cannot be anticipated.

B) **Reactions**:

1) **Denial** - "This did not happen to me; it's a dream." Or “It’s not that big of a deal.”

2) **Confusion** - "Life seems completely out of control. I can't think straight."

3) **Helplessness** - "I can't help myself; I'll never get over this."

4) **Mistrust** - "I don't feel safe and don't know who I can count on anymore."

5) **Regression** - "I can't handle adult responsibilities right now."

6) **Dependency** - "Tell me what to do."

7) **Anger** - (Most often directed at the police/crisis interventionist) - "I'm going to get the person who did this to me!"

8) **Self-blame** - "I deserved this."

9) **Repression** - "I can't remember anything."

10) **Rationalization** - "This happened because...."

11) **Depression** - "Everything takes too much effort. I'm tired all the time. Why bother to try to accomplish anything?"
C) **Type of crime - Intensity of Response**

Crimes are acts against the inner self (self-concept) of an individual. The closer a criminal act penetrates the victim's sense of being, the more traumatic the reaction:

1) **Burglary** hurts the person’s outermost layer; property is an extension of the self.

2) **Robbery** harms or threatens to harm the person's second layer (outer layer) because of actual contact with the offender.

3) **Battery** hurts the person's inner self (physical well-being) through physical pain.

4) **Sexual Assault** touches the person's basic values and emotion; the injury is to the inner self and beyond mere bodily harm.

The above are obviously generalizations. Every individual's victimization needs to be evaluated according to the individual's makeup.
Trauma Recovery is a three-stage process that varies for each individual. The duration of each stage can vary from hours or days to months or years.

Denial of trauma can “freeze” an individual’s progress through the trauma recovery process. Refusing to address the painful feelings surrounding a trauma only suppresses them, and they can be reawakened in the future by events reminiscent of the trauma.

Supportive people can assist in the recovery process.
Emotional Responses to Trauma

There are numerous emotional reactions that a person who suffers a traumatic event may experience. The emotional reactions can last from hours to weeks and certain emotions can be repeated and appear very confusing.

Shock Stage: This stage usually happens first and can last a few hours or longer. During this time, you may feel immobile, and things may not seem real or may feel as if they are happening to someone else. You may have difficulty remembering how to do things or concentrating on a minor job. You may deny that the trauma occurred and "force" yourself to act normal.

Impact Stage: This follows the shock stage and can last for a few days or even weeks. The first sign is usually a sense of anxiety or nervousness which you cannot identify, but may cause you to feel uptight, jittery or scared. Anger can also occur. Anger towards the person who caused the trauma, the people who were there and didn't help, the police, or friends who don't understand. Intense anger or rage and thoughts of revenge can arise. Frequently, victims of trauma begin to second-guess their behavior during the event. They may think, "What if I had done this or that." "What ifs" tend to confuse us about what really happened and can lead to feelings of guilt, helplessness, anger and sadness. Self-doubts can lead to depression, which involves feelings of worthlessness or guilt. In addition, sudden crying spells, feeling helpless and sleeping problems may frequently occur. Some people feel like they are on a roller coaster and go from being very angry to very sad in a matter of minutes.

Resolution Stage: This stage may last from weeks to months. An important step is recognizing that you probably did the right thing during the trauma and the responsibility for the trauma is not yours. You can learn that it is normal human behavior to be frightened, angry and sad when experiencing trauma, and that it's okay to feel that way. Talking about your feelings and stopping self-blaming thoughts are also very helpful in accepting and growing from the unfortunate event.

You will always remember the trauma. Sometimes people or things which remind you of the trauma can trigger a flood of the feelings described above. Talk about these feelings with friends, family or people who were there during the trauma. Sharing your thoughts will ease your feelings of helplessness and confusion.

Stress after a trauma is common. If you have a medical condition and it appears to be getting worse, contact your family physician or local health clinic for assistance.
Shattered Assumptions

1. We believe that we are protected from harm by some personal invulnerability. (It won't happen to me.)

2. We believe that the world operates in a way that is meaningful and comprehensible. (Things happen for a reason.)

3. We view ourselves in a positive light and believe that bad things don't happen to good people.

If we hold these beliefs, and then experience a crime, our assumptions and our beliefs become shattered and with them, our personal world may become shattered.

Looking at the assumptions one at a time:

1. The truth is, we are not invulnerable. We are all in a position to become a statistic. While we hope that this does not happen, we cannot just pretend that we are safe from harm. If nothing bad has happened, that tends to reinforce that we are safe. When something bad does happen, we are, perhaps for the first time, open to feeling vulnerable. Feeling vulnerable is not pleasant; however, it can keep us safer. Those who have experienced crime are more aware of the fact that they may be vulnerable. They are more aware of their surroundings and don't take safety for granted.

2. Unfortunately, the world does not always operate in an organized fashion. Many times we become subjected to the randomness of the world. Sometimes there is no reason why something happens to us. We cannot explain why we were victimized. We search for answers, and find none. When we realize the randomness of things, again, we don't take things for granted. We have our guard up most of the time. We have to learn who we can trust, and who is potentially dangerous to us.

3. We have somehow come to believe that if we are good people, then nothing bad will happen to us. Unfortunately, bad things do happen to many good people. Just leading a "good life" won't protect us from harm. We must understand that even if we don't deserve to be victimized, sometimes it still happens. Our awareness of this will also help keep us safer. Just because something bad happens to us, does not mean that we are bad people. We must learn to grow in a positive way in spite of what has happened to us. We can learn to grow by learning as much as we can about ourselves, sharing ourselves with others who have also been victimized, and integrating our experiences to make ourselves stronger.

Source: Ronnie Janoff-Bulman and Pat Brummett
Trauma Reactions

SLEEP PROBLEMS
Insomnia, sleeping too little
sleeping too much
nightmares

THOUGHT CHANGE
flashbacks
frequent and/or intrusive thoughts about the event
loss of memory of some or all of the event
confusion
poor concentration
intrusive imagery

CHANGE IN DAILY ACTIVITIES
changes in work patterns
changes in free time patterns
isolation
loss of interest in pleasurable activities
changes in use of alcohol, drugs or prescribed medications

CHANGE IN FEELINGS
anxiety                             hopelessness
fear                                crying
guilt                               sadness
depression                          thoughts of hurting self or others
tenseness                           sense of loss
anger/irritability

PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS
shortness of breath                headaches
sweating                           stomachaches
nausea                              racing heart
weight gain or loss                pain
changes in eating habits           heightened startle response

RELATIONSHIPS
not wanting to be alone            avoiding family or friends
changes in sexual behavior         fighting or tension

SENSE OF LOSS
Actual or perceived loss of:
safety and trust                    physical or emotional health
personal boundaries                 composure and control

Section 6 – Page 8