

CRIME

Crime is frequent, increasing, and truly democratic; it affects Americans regardless of sex, race, and age. According to the FBI's final 1995 statistics for violent and property crime, 13.9 million offenses were committed, or 5 offenses for every 100 people. The chance that you will be the victim of a violent crime (with or without injury) is greater than your risk of being hurt in a car accident.

Who Are Crime Victims?

A crime victim is anyone who is harmed or made to suffer by another's violent or brutal actions. Victims may have experienced physical or sexual assault or faced a person wielding a weapon during a robbery. Victims may have survived a car accident caused by a drunk driver. They may have witnessed the death or serious injury of a friend, relative, or stranger as a result of a crime. Victims of crime can also be those who hear, secondhand, of violence to loved ones: for example, when a family member is told by the police or emergency-room physician of the violent death of a loved one. In addition to possible physical injuries, a crime can also cause mental or emotional stress (also called trauma).

What May Happen to You During a Crime?

During a crime, victims experience a major life crisis that, at the time, often seems impossible to overcome; they feel that they can't stop it from happening. Reactions to a crime vary, but usually an individual feels powerless, helpless, and experiences very strong emotions such as fear, hopelessness, and anger. Often it may seem dreamlike, time seems to slow down, and sound can seem distorted. These are normal reactions to a trauma.

What Problems Can Occur Following a Crime?

The first few days following a trauma can be a time of emotional confusion. It is normal and expected that during the first few weeks following a trauma a person's life will be disrupted in many ways. Each person's response is different, but usually they can expect periods of confusion and rushes of strong feelings. Memories of the experience are likely to pop up unexpectedly, and the victim will feel scared and unsafe. Other problems that victims have include difficulties sleeping, physical distress, such as stomach tightness and muscle soreness, and loss of appetite.

Sometimes victims have problems that continue beyond the first month or so following a crime. Other times, the victim may become depressed months after the incident, even if they have had no other problems. Each person's response to trauma is different. The most typical problem that arises is called Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (or PTSD). PTSD occurs when the crime victim has difficulty functioning at home, in family, work, or school because of the trauma. A person with PTSD feels the need to stay away from anything or anyone that may, even in the smallest way, remind them of their experi-

What Is Cognitive Behavior Therapy?

Behavior Therapy and Cognitive Behavior Therapy are types of treatment that are based firmly on research findings. These approaches aid people in achieving specific changes or goals.

Changes or goals might involve:

- A way of acting, like using breathing exercises
- A way of feeling, like becoming less anxious
- A way of thinking, like learning to view anxiety-provoking stimuli as something other than a heart attack
- A way of dealing with physical or medical problems, like practicing exposure with difficult situations to reduce their effect.

Behavior Therapists and Cognitive Behavior Therapists usually focus more on the current situation and its solution, rather than the past. They concentrate on a person's views and beliefs about their life, not on personality traits. Behavior Therapists and Cognitive Behavior Therapists treat individuals, parents, children, couples, and families. Replacing ways of living that do not work well with ways of living that work, and giving people more control over their lives, are common goals of behavior and cognitive behavior therapy.

HOW TO GET HELP: If you are looking for help, either for yourself or someone else, you may be tempted to call someone who advertises in a local publication or who comes up from a search of the Internet. You may, or may not, find a competent therapist in this manner. It is wise to check on the credentials of a psychotherapist. It is expected that competent therapists hold advanced academic degrees and training. They should be listed as members of professional organizations, such as the Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies or the American Psychological Association. Of course, they should be licensed to practice in your state. You can find competent specialists who are affiliated with local universities or mental health facilities or who are listed on the websites of professional organizations. You may, of course, visit our website (www.abct.org) and click on "Find a CBT Therapist."

The Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies (ABCT) is an interdisciplinary organization committed to the advancement of a scientific approach to the understanding and amelioration of problems of the human condition. These aims are achieved through the investigation and application of behavioral, cognitive, and other evidence-based principles to assessment, prevention, and treatment.

ence. When a person with PTSD is exposed to reminders of what happened, that person usually experiences an intense emotional reaction. Perhaps the most significant symptom of PTSD is the continued reliving of the trauma incident in painful images and thoughts while awake and nightmares while asleep. Because the victim with PTSD is consumed with reliving the trauma, they often experience a sense of detachment and withdrawal from friends, family, and coworkers.

What Type of Help Is Recommended?

Crisis Intervention

You may have received initial support from hospital staff if you were treated in a hospital emergency room. Seeking continued help from a counselor, or referral to a Crisis Center, can be of great benefit. Victims of rape often receive immediate help; and victims of other traumatic crimes can benefit from counseling within the 24 to 96 hours following the trauma. Crisis intervention by an experienced health professional can provide support and stress management information. Additional therapy immediately after a traumatic event can also help prevent later problems.

Victim Assistance

Many communities have Victim Assistance programs to help victims and their families deal with the aftermath of crime. These can be important in helping you feel less overwhelmed by the criminal justice system and the activities of day-to-day life. Contact your local State's Attorney Office for more information.

Self-Help

Victims of crime sometimes find support groups helpful. Contact your local Mental Health Association for information about self-help groups in your area. Also, some victims and their families find joining organizations such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) helpful in directing their feelings constructively.

Can Behavior Therapy Help?

If you are having problems recovering from a crime-related trauma, you should seek an evaluation with a mental health professional.

Behavior Therapy and Cognitive-Behavioral treatments can assist you in managing your feelings and resolving the trauma that resulted from the crime. Usually, treatment includes stress management strategies, such as relaxation, and other anxiety-reducing methods.

In addition, the cognitive-behavioral psychotherapist will assist you in confronting what happened to you in a careful and controlled manner so that the pain of the memory can be tolerated more effectively. Research has shown that, over time, individuals have the greatest chance of improving when taught various cognitive and behavioral techniques for directly dealing with all aspects of the trauma rather than trying to block it out.

Finally, cognitive-behavioral psychotherapists can be helpful in assisting the traumatized individual to reestablish their relationships at work and in the family.

For more information or to find a therapist:

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