

# Victim Support

## Advice for Family and Friends

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Often family and friends are called in suddenly to support someone who is a victim of crime or has witnessed a crime. Under these circumstances, it is often difficult to know what to do and, what not to do.

There are also people who may have to be given extra consideration because of their special needs. The list given here is brief but will give you some ideas about how you go about giving support. Many of the agencies listed in the [Useful Contacts](#) Section will support you too and can give referral advice. You don't have to carry the whole burden.

- Try to be calm and competent. You are there to support and help. This is most important where there has been violence and the victim is very distraught. But do not assume that external calm means the victim is not upset. Reassure him/her that they are not to blame for what happened. Don't judge.
- Be patient, listen carefully and allow emotional responses to happen. The most important thing you need to do is just be there. Listen and sit with the victim while the emotional outpouring is happening. There may be a lot of grief, anger or other emotions expressed. Don't take this personally.
- Help the victim to feel safe. Reassure him/her, if possible, that there is no further danger. Where there is still a need for protection ensure that police are aware of this and that the victim is in a safe place.
- Be willing to spend as much time as needed with the victim. Your support may be needed over quite long periods of time. Be clear about what you can offer but make sure you ask him/her what they need, and that they do not feel they are imposing on anyone. But ensure they have private time too.
- However distraught the person is, it is still their life and they are in charge and therefore need to be consulted on any decisions which are being made. Try not to "take over". However, you may have to act as the "go-between" with police, medical staff and others. Keep the victim involved.
- Ask if you can help with the children in any way. They'll need comfort too.
- Help with practical tasks eg, cleaning, cooking, etc. - but be careful as these things can actually keep the person sane and anchored to daily life.
- Don't tell them they are "lucky it wasn't worse" or "you'll get over it". Traumatized people are

not consoled by such statements and, for some crimes, there is an ever present memory. Instead let them know you are sorry the event occurred and you want to understand and assist them. Remember that anniversaries of birthdays, weddings, or of the crime itself can be very difficult for the victim.

- Ask the victim if he/she would like you to act as a "go between" with the media. They should respect the victim's privacy if he/she does not wish to talk, and go away when asked.

Every individual is unique and, although there are many *common reactions* to crime, everyone's experience will differ. It is always important to ask people what they need and not make assumptions based upon generalisations. Everyone has the same rights to proper treatment. However, there are some special issues that need consideration.

- Elderly victims of crime may see the event as an affirmation of their fear of crime and their vulnerability to physical harm and loss of control. They may also be disoriented and need some medical assistance. Be especially patient, caring and treat him/her with dignity and respect - all the opposites of the treatment they have just received.
- People with physical or mental disabilities need to be spoken to directly, not just to the parents or care-givers. Be sensitive to any special needs which they may have, for example, transportation or medication. Focus on what they can do, and speak simply and clearly.
- Children and young people are victimised by crime more often than is realised. Sometimes, we think we are "protecting" them but children need to talk things out too, and need the truth. Always make sure your communication with the child is simple and non-threatening. It is very important that the staff in charge at the child's kindergarten, child care centre or school be informed about what has happened so they can be a real, every day, on-going support for the child. They have the skills and knowledge to identify behavioural and emotional trauma.
- If a child tells you that they have been physically or sexually abused it is very important to take what they say seriously and to prioritise their safety as s/he may fear further abuse or retribution. Try to focus on his/her immediate emotional and practical needs. The child will probably feel damaged, hurt and betrayed. Many also feel guilty and responsible in some way, if not for what happened then for the disruption to the lives of those involved and their families, especially where the abuse involved is incestuous. Abused children are often also depressed and sad that a trusted person hurt them and that other trusted people were unable to protect them from harm. See the contacts section for agencies that can help you talk through how you can best support the child and what options there are.
- People from indigenous communities or from different cultural or racial backgrounds may need to contact someone they know and trust for support. However, they may also be afraid of contacting anyone in their own community because of a fear of causing embarrassment or gossip. Or they may just be isolated from their community and need to find out how to make the first contact. If the crime was racially motivated, this will be deeply distressing to the person's sense of identity

and self esteem. Many migrants and refugees may not understand or trust the Australian legal system or the police. They may need a familiar person to talk this through. Be sensitive to the possible need for an interpreter.

- Lesbians and gay men may be anxious about contacting help agencies for fear of negative comment. Some will want to be open about their sexuality and others will not. It may indeed be irrelevant to the crime. Respect their decision. There is support, advice and information available.