

# Enhancing Victim Advocacy Through a Trauma- Informed Approach

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Victims of crime experience trauma when they are exposed to violence, physical or sexual abuse, neglect, natural disasters, accidents, or any other events that induce powerlessness, fear, recurrent hopelessness, and a constant state of alert. These victims often access system responses as a result of the crime, including law enforcement, prosecution and corrections, and community-based advocacy services, such as MADD, Parents of Murdered Children and Justice for Homicide Victims, as a result of the crime. Whether you're an advocate in a system response or one in a community-based organization, knowing about trauma will enhance your ability to work with these victim/survivors.

## Why Consider Trauma

Crime and/or violence is often traumatic. When you work with victims of crime you are working with people who have experienced trauma. Victims of crime may also have been traumatized by previous experiences such as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which can have an impact on how they

respond to more recent trauma. In addition, our responses and services can be stressful and confusing for most people. All of this can influence to what extent a victim is willing and/or able to participate in system responses and services. Trauma and your response to it, can impact your ability to carry out your role. The trauma that these victims experience can affect their participation in two key ways:

1. **Participation** in services and interventions can be difficult for victims who have experienced trauma, because the services, investigations, prosecution, and release notifications throughout the process can bring up the experience of the crime. When victims see the people or pictures of the places or scenes of the incidents of violence, it can bring up the feelings and sensations associated with those traumatic events, which can cause flashbacks, when a victim/survivor re-experiences the incident. This kind of re-experiencing may cause feelings of panic, anger, disorientation, physical pain, grief, or numbing and shutting down. These traumatic reminders are referred to as “triggers” and these triggers during the service or response you offer can disrupt your service, investigation, prosecution or notification, while also causing significant pain to the victims/survivors.

**2. Credibility determinations** of whether the victim is being truthful are often made by people with positions of authority in our system responses and services, without recognizing the impact of trauma on victims. A great deal of our system response is based on proving that something did or did not happen. Most people's lives aren't like that. When someone is forced into the criminal justice system because they have been victimized, their credibility is constantly being assessed.

This experience is unsettling for most people but to someone who is traumatized it can be triggering. It can also impact the course of a criminal investigation, whether the incident is referred to prosecution. Triggering experiences can also impact a victim's ability to access advocacy services. Even if your program is not set up to determine credibility it's a natural instinct to assess credibility with someone in your program. The problem of making accurate credibility assessments is that determining whether a person is truthful is often based on the investigator, prosecutor or victim advocate's sense of what a reasonable person can remember, or how they believe a victim should look or sound when talking about life threatening events. However, traumatic events can alter the way a person thinks, talks and even remembers an incident. To survive, victims may have dissociated, allowing them to experience the incident without actually feeling

the full effect. For example, someone who experiences a near deadly car crash caused by a driver under the influence, may dissociate so they don't feel all the pain and terror associated with the incident. The victim may talk about the car accident in a flat and scattered manner when contacting an advocate, reporting to law enforcement, or testifying. Without knowing dissociation is normal for trauma, an advocate, investigator or prosecutor can find it hard to believe a victim who is showing signs of trauma. An advocate, investigator, or prosecutor may find it hard to believe a victim is credible if they don't understand what dissociation is or how it is related to trauma.

## **What Can Advocates do to Help?**

The most effective advocates incorporate an in-depth understanding of trauma into every part of their services. The crime and subsequent investigatory and prosecutorial processes often leave participants feeling a loss of control. Recognizing this and alerting investigators and prosecutors about the impact of trauma can help them fully engage victims in their responses by minimizing and avoiding re-traumatization, to the extent possible. Advocates can provide victims with information about the impact of trauma and adapt how they work with victims to create a welcoming environment that incorporates both physical and emotional safety.

Advocates who are trauma-informed expect the presence of trauma and do what they can to prepare for it and help system responders to adapt as well. Ways to do this include:

- Review your office space and decorum:
  - Ensure it is not chaotic, over stimulating, and noisy.
  - Make sure the space you meet with victims is not too small or crowded with furniture.
  - Make sure the victim has easy access to the door and feels they can leave at any point.
  - Ensure victims are clearly and kindly directed to your office or meeting room when they arrive for appointments.
- Take time to develop a rapport with the victims you work with before you have them discuss or recount traumatic experiences.
- Normalize the victim's behavior. Help others understand the impact of trauma and adapt the way they work with victims.
- Talk to victims about what helps them when they are triggered or reminded of traumatic experiences.
- Incorporate a what-to-expect discussion into every meeting with the victim. This should be a routine preparation for investigators, prosecutors, probation and parole officers and other system responders as well. Predictability, to the extent

possible, helps alleviate a victim's fears and helps them prepare to participate in a system response or service.

- Explain and walk victims through the process of your advocacy service, investigation prosecution or release notification so they know what to expect. Talk them through the process step-by-step.
- Discuss logistical details, and have the material available in many formats: e.g. a pamphlet, a graphic, a simple step-by-step instruction page, available in different languages such as where they will go, who they will talk to, the purpose of the discussion, remind them that they can ask for breaks, and show them the location of restrooms or how they can get something to drink or eat, if needed.
- Be clear about the limitations of your role.
- Be clear about the role you can play.
- Advocates can often remember more about what the victim told them, than victims might when they are recounting events under stress. Talking with the victim ahead of time about how they might help the victim if they forget key details would be helpful.
- Create a physical and emotional safety plan for meetings with investigators, prosecutors, participating in a legal

proceeding, or anticipating the release of the person who committed the crime.

- Whenever possible offer to accompany the victim through a specific investigation, courtroom proceeding, meeting with probation or other system response.
- Prior to the scheduled event, offer to and plan how you will accompany the victim to the location where the event is scheduled.
- Strategize with them around any emotional or physical challenges to the space, investigation, prosecution or other event.
- Agree on a simple cue to let you know they are feeling overwhelmed or triggered.
- Learn grounding techniques to help victims reorient in the present when they are triggered, dissociating, overwhelmed or feeling intense anxiety.
  - Practice these techniques generally and once proficient, practice them with victims to develop a rapport and to discuss when they might be needed.
  - If possible, practice them in the location of the investigatory interview, hearing, deposition, or victim impact statement before it takes place.
- Ask for a break to give the victim a chance to get grounded after being triggered.

- If you are not able to accompany a victim, or you feel they need more support, suggest and help arrange for the victim to have a supportive person come with them.
- Explore the use of emotional support animals during any of these services or responses.
- If an interpreter is needed to participate in the interview, service or any legal proceedings, discuss the process with the victim so they know what to expect and explore any potential trauma that may be compounded by interpretation.
- Help investigators, prosecutors, probation officers and other system responders understand that the victim may need them to rephrase questions if it is clear that the interpretation process is additionally re-traumatizing or confusing.
- If immigration and customs enforcement are conducting targeted apprehensions in your courthouse, coming to court may pose an additional risk for victims that should be considered and carefully discussed.

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