



Crisis Intervention: Techniques for engaging with those who have experienced traumatic grief

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Introduction

The following information is provided to NCADP Affiliates to enhance your effectiveness when engaging with families of murder victims. To do so, it is helpful to have a general understanding of crisis intervention and the tools for engaging with people in crisis.

This information is provided as a follow up to the training last week on the impact of homicide on families of murder victims. For most NCADP Affiliates, you will not be engaging with families of murder victims in the immediate aftermath of the murder. However, as we discussed last week, the long-term effects of trauma can be triggered by internal or external cues in the survivor. Utilizing the tools of crisis intervention will help minimize the experience of the long-term effects of traumatic grief on the survivor; ensure that their safety and welfare is paramount; and demonstrate a respect for their experience. Understanding these tools will not immediately make NCADP Affiliate Leadership, staff, or volunteers who are new to this work skilled crisis responders, but it will arm Affiliates with information that will increase your confidence while engaging with those who have been traumatized by violence.

Crisis Intervention

Crisis intervention can be defined as the utilization of simple techniques to intervene in a crisis that will help victims regain a sense of control over their lives. All that we do in service to victims of violence must be framed in a manner that allows them to regain control over their lives and the tragedy they have experienced. Much of crisis intervention rests in creative listening and helping people develop ideas as to how they will cope with the next few hours or days of their life in the aftermath of a traumatic event.

Key Purposes for Providing Crisis Intervention:

- ❖ Help to educate people about the most common reactions that may occur;
- ❖ Provide both professional and peer validation of those reactions;
- ❖ Help to defuse the emotional overload caused by crisis reactions;
- ❖ Provide focus on how people can begin to cope positively with the chaos around them and methods for rebuilding a sense of safety and hope after a tragedy;
- ❖ Help assess whether people need referrals for longer psychological services or ongoing post-trauma counseling;
- ❖ Provide a method whereby people can begin to organize their thoughts about what happened by helping them develop a narrative over time to understand and integrate that experience into their current lives;
- ❖ Help individuals address what they are experiencing now and might experience in the future, as opposed to what they experienced only in those past terrible moments;

- ❖ Help victims and survivors begin to think about what provides meaning in their lives today;
- ❖ Provide affirmation that many of the confusing reactions that occur are not uncommon or abnormal in the aftermath of tragedy; and
- ❖ Reassure survivors that most people can cope well with even the most awful events and encourage them to build on their individual strengths and their adaptive capacities for coping.¹

Crisis intervention, in this context, generally takes place as soon as possible after a tragedy has occurred, or after people have been exposed to a situation that triggers memories of the tragedy or related events. The elements of crisis intervention can be applied in formal or informal settings. A formal setting may occur when a victim or survivor request an opportunity to speak to a crisis intervener about their situation either in person or by telephone. Informal intervention may occur when a crisis responder is involved in other activities, and someone who has been exposed to a traumatic event begins to talk about their experiences.²

Adopting the Tools of Crisis Intervention

The tools of crisis intervention are:

- safety and security;
- ventilation and validation;
- prediction and preparation; and
- information and education.

Addressing these issues will demonstrate to the victim a respect for their experience and compassion and concern for their well-being.

It is important to recognize that each and every time a victim tells their story, they expose themselves to vulnerability. It is different for every survivor, but each story does not go without a toll or price to be paid. Following up with survivors after they have spoken is also important.

Safety and Security

The physical safety of victims is always the first concern, followed by their emotional safety. In the aftermath of homicide, many victims experience a crack in or demise of their overall sense of safety. Many report that they were immediately concerned about the physical safety of their other loved ones upon notification of the murder. Even if they usually assumed that the other loved ones were safe in their everyday activities, the murder changed their sense of safety. Someone they loved has been murdered, so how is anyone else safe anymore?

¹ National Organization for Victim Assistance Community Crisis Response Team Training Manual, Page 4-2

² IBID Page 4-2

Safety and security in the work of NCADP Affiliates, more often than not, will be focused on issues of emotional safety as victims select opportunities to participate in the death penalty repeal efforts. To address issues of safety and security in a setting of one-on-one conversation, or in a public speaking engagement, the following are points to think about.

Hints for Helping

- ❖ Ask if this is a good time to talk.
- ❖ Ask where they would like to sit, or if you should sit for the conversation. If in doubt, ask what they think they need to feel comfortable (safe and secure) during the conversation.
- ❖ Do they need a support person present?
- ❖ Are there people they do not want present during your conversation?
- ❖ Ensure confidentiality – What is the degree of confidentiality? Are you intending to share details of your conversation with others not present? With whom would you share these details? What would you share and for what purpose?

Ventilation and Validation

Ventilation refers to the process of allowing victims to “tell their story.” Victims often need to tell their story over and over again, and each time it is told it may take on a different form. Occasionally, the differences will be due to memory problems. Sometimes the differences will reflect what is important to survivors at that particular point in time. Ventilation involves identifying appropriate words to express experiences, reactions, and responses.³

Validation refers to a process of confirming the truth of the normality of victims’ reactions based on the trauma they have experienced. Validation should be content-specific, and should be provided with the intent of assuring the victim that what they experience is a normal response to the traumatic experience.

Hints for Helping

- ❖ Let the victim establish the comfort distance between you and him/her when engaging in dialogue.
- ❖ Remember that body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice are as important as words in conversation.
- ❖ Remember to be compassionate in your presence. Try to:
 - Lean forward or incline your head to indicate attentiveness
 - Keep facial expressions neutral but reflect concern, sadness, or happiness when appropriate to the content of the victim’s story
 - Maintain eye contact if culturally appropriate
 - Speak clearly
- ❖ Ask appropriate questions – “How do you think that happened?” “What do you think were the reasons for that?”

³ IBID Page 4-6

- ❖ Never ask “why” questions. Ask questions for clarification on their responses, but not to find out more details to satisfy your own curiosity.
- ❖ Validation should be content specific.
- ❖ Utilizing words in response to a victim should include the following:
 - Words that the survivors use
 - Repetition of elements of the victims’ story back to them as a form of validation and evidence that you are listening
 - Allowing survivors to label their own reactions
 - An apology if you use words that upset the victim or words that they indicate are not accurate for their situation
- ❖ Do not validate the victims’ experience by telling of your own experiences.
- ❖ Previous experience with similar trauma may be mentioned to help build credibility and create a sense of commonality, but everyone’s experience is different.
- ❖ Here is a suggestion for how to start a conversation:

“I am sorry that you have had to experience the murder of your husband Tony. I am honored and happy that you are choosing to speak to me today about your experience.”
- ❖ Ask a murder victim family member to start the conversation about their experience at whatever point in their story they’d like.
- ❖ Ask to see a picture of the murder victim if they have one readily available.
- ❖ Keep any questions you may have to those that elicit their response to the events. Do not use questions that delve into the details that are not already on the table.
- ❖ Remember that listening quietly and without judgment is priceless.

Prediction and Preparation

Preparation and prediction is a process of ensuring that all of the information that the victim could possibly need is given to them, and that they have thought through most or all of the known possible outcomes of the actions they are about to take.

Families of murder victims who have experienced traumatic grief need to always be empowered to make decision and take action in a way that is most comfortable to them. Knowing what will logically come next, what the process is, or what the potential outcomes are – intended and unintended – will assist the victim in making the most informed choices possible.

For example, when providing support and assistance to victims in the criminal justice process, they need to know what the hearing is for, when and where it is, who will be present, what testimony they would possibly hear at the hearing, what the potential outcomes of the hearing are, etc. They also need to think about is what they think their reaction might be to the hearing, being in the courtroom with the alleged offender, what the DA or the defense attorney might say, and what the victim may feel if what they want to happen at the hearing does not transpire.



Hints for Helping

- ❖ Be clear about what your role is and what they can expect from talking with you about their experience.
- ❖ Be clear about the amount of time you have to talk with them. If you only have 15 minutes, say so. If you have an hour, be sure to say so. Just be honest.
- ❖ Give clear parameters regarding their disclosures and where you will share this information.
- ❖ Tell victims what you think will happen and what they can expect.
- ❖ Ask them what they think will happen.
- ❖ How do they think they will feel when it is over?
- ❖ What if they do not feel that way?
- ❖ Have they spoken publicly or to many people about the murder before?
- ❖ If you are meeting with a victim to engage them in speaking publicly in your repeal efforts, the following actions are important:
 - Discuss any risk of the victims' participation in your work. For example, are there other family members that would not appreciate the victim talking to you or talking publicly?
 - Discuss with the victim how they will handle these known risks. What are their plans for addressing these issues when they arise?
 - If you are preparing a victim to speak with someone else or to a group of people, it is important that they understand who will be present, if there be questions asked, what their specific role is, if there will be others there that oppose this victim or may potentially say harmful things, etc.
 - Tell the victim what it is you are looking for in terms of their testimony. What are the points you want their story to illustrate?

Information and Education

The most potent need of victims is information. Like most crime victims, families of murder victims find themselves thrown into a variety of new arenas including, but not limited to, the justice system, the medical system, the mental health system, the media, the legislative halls of their state capitol, etc. All of these areas require a form of sophistication for the seasoned professional to navigate. It is important to provide victims with as much information as possible.

Hints for Helping

- ❖ Provide as much information as possible.
- ❖ Be available to answer questions or have someone else available to do so.
- ❖ Provide information in writing. When a victim has been given written information, it provides additional opportunities to go back and review the information as often as necessary to deepen comprehension.
- ❖ If victims are testifying on a particular issue, they need to be given both sides of the issue.



- ❖ Sometimes it is helpful to piecemeal information, building up to the more substantive information over time.
- ❖ Don't underestimate the victim's ability to comprehend the issue. It is better to err on the side of giving too much information than to find out later that information they needed was not addressed.

Follow-up

Always spend some time with a survivor after they have spoken to you individually or as a public speaker.

- ❖ Arrange beforehand that you want to talk to them after their speech or assign someone else to do so.
- ❖ Demonstrate your appreciation with your time. Be gracious – walk them to their car, take time to have a cup of coffee with them, etc.
- ❖ Is there a small token of appreciation you can offer them?

Be aware of the financial costs to victims in engaging in public speaking. For example:

- ❖ What about their mileage?
- ❖ Did they have to get baby sitters?
- ❖ Meals while they are away from home?

In the immediate aftermath of the conversation or speaking engagement, check in with them on how they feel about the experience. What are their reactions to the experience? Was it what they expected? If not, what did they expect and how did the experience exceed or fail to meet their expectations?

Follow up with a phone call within 72 hours to one week of their conversation with you or their speaking engagement.

Be gracious and follow up with a note of thanks.

