

Crime, Teens, and Trauma

What Is It?

We say something is traumatic when it is shocking, upsetting, disturbing, painful, or harmful. Being a victim of crime is often a traumatic event and can have an effect on people for a long time.

If You Have Been a Victim of Crime, You Might:

- Feel angry, sad, lonely, or depressed.
- Have trouble sleeping.
- Feel like no one understands.
- Think it's your fault.
- Feel sick to your stomach or not want to eat.
- Feel like you have no friends.
- Find that you are always getting into fights.
- Want to hurt someone else or yourself.
- Feel like taking steps to defend yourself.
- Feel hopeless about whether anything can be done.
- Feel bad about yourself.
- Be afraid to go out.
- Feel anxious all the time.

Being a victim of crime when you're a teenager can really affect how you develop and mature as an adult. What follows are some of the normal phases teens go through, and how they can be affected by victimization. If you are dealing with some of the issues described below, you should know that you don't have to feel this way forever. It is important to remember that, with help, you can begin to feel better. Call the National Crime Victim Helpline at 1-800-FYI-CALL (1-800-394-2255) for help.

Body Focus

You have probably been taught about the changes your body goes through during the period called puberty, or adolescence. Although awkward and uncomfortable, these changes

are healthy and normal. Teens who are victimized (especially sexually) during puberty may feel unclean or devalued. You might think there is something strange about your body. You may think that the changes in your shape or size caused or encouraged the abuse and that you have no control over what happens to you. You might think that the only way to get attention is by using your body to attract it. You may feel that your body is worthless or “only good for one thing.”

Peer Involvement

Younger children are closely connected to their families and caretakers. Adults fulfill their needs for guidance, help, comfort, companionship, food, shelter, and safety. As you get older, however, your need for your parents decreases, and your emotional dependence on your friends increases. Most teens test limits set by their parents, look for social and emotional support from friends, and become more concerned about the acceptance of friends than family.

Teens who have been victimized, though, often feel different from their friends. You may feel that no one else understands what you are going through. You might feel separated and isolated from your friends. You might feel like your friends are judging you or blowing you off, or harassing you. You may want to withdraw from your friends, or find a new group of friends where you feel more accepted.

Critical Thinking Skills

One of the most important life skills you begin to learn as a teen is critical thinking. Critical thinking is the ability to think about what is happening in a situation and to anticipate several different ways it could turn out. If during your teen years you become a victim of crime, you may start to think that bad things will continue to happen. You may start believing that you will always feel lonely, hurt, or confused and that you can’t do anything to change it. You might feel hopeless and helpless, or even think about hurting yourself or dying. But if you can begin to think critically, you can start to figure out several different possible outcomes to your situation and ways to get beyond the bad times.

Abstract Thinking

During normal development, adolescents begin learning to think abstractly. They also analyze the relationships between cause and effect, learn to predict outcomes, and identify and explore values. If you are victimized during the development of these skills, you might begin to mistrust your own values and judgment and wonder if something you did “caused” the victimization. You may believe that you are responsible for what happened or that you are bad or should expect nothing better than this kind of treatment. You may feel that your personal

choices and desires are meaningless and may begin to expect to be hurt and used by other people.

Risk-Taking

Part of growing up is learning to evaluate risks. It's looking at choices you make, figuring out what might happen, and deciding if it's worth doing. A risk might be making a friend of a different ethnic background, trying out for a sport, exploring career and educational opportunities, or deciding who to date. Victimized teens sometimes have a hard time thinking about these choices and don't see when things are dangerous or have a long-term impact. You might have used drugs or alcohol, had unprotected sex, driven after drinking, gotten into fights, or started stealing. You might not recognize, appreciate, or care about the long-term consequences of your choices.

You're Not Alone

More than 1.5 million teens become victims of violent crime each year. Teens are:

- 14 percent of the general population;¹
- 28 percent of victims of violent crime; and²
- twice as likely as adults to become victims of crime.³

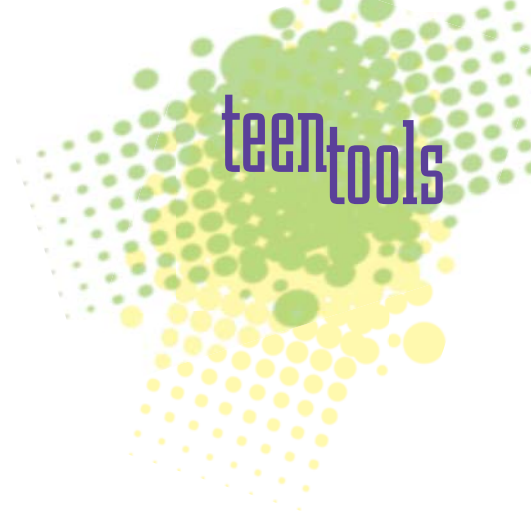
Get Help

Having bad things happen to you is not your fault. Nothing about what you say, the way you look, or what you believe gives anyone the right to hurt you.

- Tell your parents, and talk with them about ways that they can help you be safe.
- Tell a teacher, counselor, or trusted adult to see how they can help you. Talk with friends. You might find you're not the only one who has had these kinds of experiences.
- If you are having difficulty finding help, call the National Crime Victim Helpline at 1-800-FYI-CALL (1-800-394-2255) for free, confidential assistance, information, and referrals to local resources. You can also e-mail us at gethelp@ncvc.org.

Where can teen victims find help?

- Parents
- Teachers
- School counselors
- School resource officers
- Coaches
- Clergy
- Youth program staff



- Victim service providers
- Rape crisis centers
- Community mental health agencies
- Social workers
- Police
- Friends
- Neighbors
- Relatives

About Confidentiality

If you choose to tell someone, you should know that some adults are mandated reporters. This means they are legally required to report neglect or abuse to someone else, such as the police or child protective services. You can ask people if they are mandated reporters and then decide what you want to do. Some examples of mandated reporters are teachers, counselors, doctors, social workers, and in some cases, even coaches or activity leaders.

Help Yourself

The most important thing is your safety. Seek out persons or resources in your community that can help you reduce your risk of being victimized again. Find healthy things that help you express how you feel: write in a journal, talk to friends, paint or draw, or exercise. It doesn't matter very much what it is, as long as it doesn't hurt you or anyone else, and it makes you feel better.

Help Someone Else

Sometimes it's hard to know what to do or say if a friend has been the victim of a crime. He or she might not know how to talk about it either. Let your friend know that you care. Stay calm, and don't judge their choices or behavior. Believe your friend, and just listen. Sometimes letting them vent and not needing to have answers for everything can help a lot.

Sometimes the family and friends of victims also feel the impact of the crime and experience emotional and physical reactions. This is called secondary victimization. If this is happening to you, help is available for you, too.

If You Want to Read More...

...about specific crimes, see our GET HELP series at www.ncvc.org/gethelp.

1 Bureau of Justice Statistics, "Criminal Victimization in the United States, 2005: Statistical Tables," (Washington, DC: GPO, 2006), Table 3.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.