

# Communicating With Victims: "The Do's and Don'ts"

## **DO:**

- Attempt foremost to communicate trust, support and confidence.
- Calm and comfort victims. Ask “how are you doing?”
- Allow victims time to tell what happened and describe how they are feeling in their own words.
- Give victims back the control the offender took away by letting them decide when and where to talk.
- Reassure them that their feelings are quite normal and natural, even though they may seem a bit unusual at the moment.
- Let the victim know that any feelings of anger, distress, frustration, fear, etc. are not uncommon and are perfectly justifiable.
- Be willing to listen to the victim share his or her experience if he or she wants to talk about the crime and its effects, and validate that experience with empathy and support.
- Be alert for hidden meanings and messages not directly expressed by the victim, without making unwarranted assumptions.
- Be encouraging, but not unrealistic.
- Be alert for opportunities to stress the victim’s qualities and strengths (without being patronizing).
- Accept the fact that you may never know whether a victim follows through with your recommendations.
- Have a information and referral system – with names, addresses, telephone numbers, e-mails, and web sites/pages – to determine appropriate referrals.
- Offer to make referral calls/contacts for further information and victim support (to ensure that a connection is actually made for the victim).
- Ask for assistance from a supervisor if a call appears to be too difficult to handle yourself.
- Recognize the mistakes will be made, and that increased communication skills come from learning from your mistake.
- Understand that many victims will have extreme difficulty reconstructing their lives after a violent crime, and that some may never recover from the tragedy.

## **DON'T:**

- Be judgmental or blame the victim for the crime that was committed against him or her.
- "Second guess" how the victim reacted to the crime, either at the time it was occurring or in the aftermath of a violent act.
- Avoid the victim, or avoid listening about his or her reaction to the crime. Listening about and validating those experiences and emotions are critical to a victim's reconstruction after a crime.
- Try to frame the victim's experience to any possibly similar experiences, including your own. It is essential to individualize each victim, each crime, and each victim's reaction to that crime.
- Be "over-helpful" by making decisions and choices for victims. Since no victim chooses to be victimized or has control over a violent act committed against him or her, the ability for victims to regain control over their lives, and make decisions affecting their lives, becomes very important.
- Be discouraged if you feel a call has been unsuccessful. You are not expected to "solve" most problems with a single phone call.
- Be afraid of silence. Use it constructively. Don't talk more than the victim caller.
- Become flustered by the victim's anxiety or urgency. One of the most important things is that you must remain calm, even in a crisis. Remember too that your anxiety can easily be transmitted over the telephone.
- "Take sides" with a victim who has had difficult experiences with the criminal or juvenile justice system. Work to solve problems, and assure the victim that you will do your best to address their identified needs. Avoid "trash talk" about allied professionals at all costs!
- Become defensive or arrogant, or get into an argument with a victim.
- Expect to be a psychotherapist, nor to know all the "right" answers. Your job is to listen and assist the victim – to the degree possible – in handling his or her immediate issues.

## **SOURCES:**

Kaufman-Yavitz, Louise. (N.D.). "Some Common Do's and Don't's." St. Louis, MO

Seymour, Anne. (1998). "Do's and Don't's in Supporting Victims of Crime. Unpublished.

Stout, Ed. (N.D.). "Victim First Aid." St. Louis, MO: Aid for Victims of Crime.

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