

The Good Samaritans First Aid Kit

Victim service providers often find that victims have many expectations—some reasonable, some not.

It is reasonable for crime victims to expect Good Samaritans volunteers to care about their situation, to try to help, and to offer information about options, services, and the justice system.

It is *not* reasonable, but very common for victims to want volunteers to solve their problems for them.

It is difficult for people to think straight or attempt to solve problems when their emotions are running high. You can best help crime victims solve their own problems by administering psychological first aid.

Here's what you need to keep in your "first aid kit":

EMPATHY FIRST—Be empathetic to the crime victim's point of view, not your own. Understand that the victim feels violated and has intense feelings about the event—whether the crime seems "serious" to you or not.

GIVE THEM TOOLS—Understand that the victim needs both factual information and constructive resources. Be prepared with a list of local agencies and organizations to which you may refer victims with specific needs (e.g., document replacement, prescription drug replacement, and emergency food, clothing, or shelter).

STAGES—Realize that you are dealing with victims who are at varying stages of the recovery process and you must relate accordingly.

EMPOWERMENT—Like the antivenom kept in some first aid kits for snake bites, the antidote to a crime victim's sense of powerlessness is to recover control. Even making the smallest decisions can be empowering. For instance, ask the victim if it is okay if you sit down, or ask if he or she needs a blanket. Such questions allow the victim to decide and to feel competent.

I HEAR YOU—Just listening and showing that you understand is an important step toward helping the victim to help him- or herself.

NO PRESSURE—Be careful that your suggestions or demeanor do not appear to pressure or patronize the victim.

THANKS, ANYWAY—Sometimes no action is needed. Not all encounters with a victim will result in a referral or a solution.

YOU'RE NOT ALONE—Let the victim know that he or she is not alone and that his or her feelings are normal in this situation.

CAN I GET BACK TO YOU?—You do not have to provide an immediate answer—take time to think. You can always ask if you can call back or ask for time to gather information.

HEAL THYSELF—Good Samaritans have feelings too and can suffer from “vicarious trauma.” Be open about your emotions and talk with your colleagues or with professional counselors (while taking care to preserve victim confidentiality). Sharing will help you understand your own reactions and emotions, find new ways of dealing with crisis situations, and realize that sometimes there are no solutions, no matter how hard you try.