

People often experience a range of reactions after becoming a victim of crime. Some of these reactions are physiological and may create temporary changes to the way your body functions. These changes in your body systems following a traumatic event can be disturbing, particularly if they are getting in the way of everyday activities.

At the time of a traumatic event, the body unconsciously prepares itself to protect you from danger. This is often referred to as the flight/fight/freeze response.

Flight/Fight/Freeze Response

The body releases a stimulating hormone called adrenalin that increases your strengths and abilities. It enables your body to cope with a dangerous situation so that you are more able to protect yourself.

The flight/fight/freeze response can create the following immediate physiological changes (you might recognise some of these reactions from a traumatic situation that you have been in):

- Hair stands up
- Pupils dilate
- Sweat appears
- Nostrils flare
- Mouth goes dry
- Muscles tense
- Breathing quickens
- Heart beat quickens
- Blood pressure rises
- Digestion slows down



The flight/fight/freeze response does not necessarily stop just because the danger has disappeared. It can be “left on” for some time afterwards. The excess adrenalin can be left in the system; often a threatening situation does not allow the adrenalin to be ‘used up’. For example, in an armed hold-up situation, a victim may not be able to fight or flee. The victim may react by freezing and be left to feel powerless with excess adrenalin flowing through their system, causing tension and muscle contraction.

The fight/flight/freeze response directs the body’s resources to attend to the immediate crisis and as a consequence, the other main systems can alter in their functioning. This is explained below.

Body Systems Response

Digestive System

The digestive system is responsible for supplying the body with necessary nutrition and the disposal of waste. This system is often disrupted after a crime and slows as a result. As a consequence, waste and toxins can be left in the system and the body can be deprived of essential vitamins, minerals and nutrients. The deprivation of nutrients can cause fatigue, dizziness, headaches and a decrease in energy levels. You may also notice an upset stomach and change in bowel habits. The build-up of toxins in the body can cause panic, nervousness, shakiness, irritability and/or sleep disturbance.

This fact sheet has been developed to provide general information to victims of crime. It is not intended as a replacement for medical, therapeutic or legal advice. If you have particular concerns please contact your general practitioner, counsellor or Victim Support Service.

The Repair and Defence System

This system is responsible for cell growth, repair and immunity. When the digestive system is not functioning well, this system has limited resources to create healthy new cells and repair damaged cells. This can lead to lowered immunity and therefore higher susceptibility to viruses and disease.

Reproductive System

Due to chemical changes created by the flight/fight/freeze response and the slowing down of other systems in the body, the reproductive system can be affected. Women may experience a decreased ability to become pregnant, changes to their menstrual cycle and/or changes in libido. Men may experience sexual difficulties and changes in their libido as a result of crime.

Structural Systems (bones, spine etc.)

Any difficulties prior to the trauma may worsen due to the change in the body's ability to repair and maintain itself. For example, if you experience lower back pain prior to the crime, you may experience the pain more severely and frequently after the crime. This pain can also be intensified because of extra muscle tension as a result of stress.

The trauma may also create new structural difficulties such as abnormal muscular contractions, leading to pain, discomfort and postural problems that may be short or long term in nature.

Although you may feel that emotionally or psychologically you have overcome your trauma, you may continue to be traumatised on a subconscious level. The traumatic memory may be "locked in" to your body systems. This may be apparent whenever there is a reminder of the traumatic event and you experience:

- *Flashbacks (recurring images from the event)*
- *Anxiety*
- *Panic attacks*
- *Physical reactions*
- *Feelings that you had at the time of the crime*



Ways to Assist your Body after Trauma

Counselling and Support

Emotional recovery can impact positively on physical recovery. Talk to a friend or family member that you can trust. Write your feelings in a journal. Support services are available from Victim Support Service or other counselling organisations. Joining a group can sometimes help to recover emotionally.

Consult your Doctor

Have a general check up with your doctor to ensure there are no serious conditions that require medical treatment.

Eat Well

Your body needs to replace depleted resources. A balanced healthy diet is one way to assist in building these resources up again. Avoid excessive consumption of caffeinated food or drinks (such as coffee, cola drinks and chocolate). Caffeine is a stimulant which puts additional stress on your body. Avoid excessive alcohol and/or drug intake.

Exercise

People who are traumatised often have a build-up of adrenalin. Physical activity can allow your body to release this build-up. Start with gentle activity and build-up slowly to something more aerobic. Consult your doctor if you are concerned about which type of exercise to begin with.

Rest and Relaxation

Provide your body with the opportunity to recover. Rest allows your body time to repair itself. Get plenty of sleep to facilitate the rejuvenation of your body and mind. Slowing down your usual routine will also put less stress on your body. Acknowledge your feelings surrounding the crime (anger, sadness, fear) so that they are not internalised. Create some special time to pamper yourself. Do things that you particularly enjoy i.e. having a bubble bath, going for a walk etc.



Consider Alternative Therapies

These therapies can be an alternative or used in conjunction with medical therapies. There are many complementary therapies to choose from. These include:

- Massage
- Reflexology
- Kinesiology
- Meditation
- Acupuncture
- Yoga

Often a combination of approaches can be beneficial. Rely on friends/relatives/word of mouth or professional associations to direct you to a trustworthy natural therapist. Don't be afraid to check whether the therapist has qualifications and experience. These treatments are usually non-invasive and for most, you do not have to remove your clothing. Be clear with the therapist about what you are comfortable with.

Above all, acknowledge that it takes time to recover after a crime:

Acknowledge that being a victim of crime is a very traumatic event and that it will affect you emotionally and physically. Allow yourself some time to heal. Like any physical/emotional difficulty, there is no set time for recovery and it depends on many factors, including your commitment to look after yourself. Whilst there is no magic cure for how you feel after a crime, time, in conjunction with the above suggestions, will assist you to see gradual improvements in your situation.

Further Information

If you would like more information, please contact Victim Helpdesk on 1800 VICTIM (1800 842 846) or view our website at www.victimsa.org.