Reducing the Harm and Risk of Violent Victimization: How to Help a Coworker

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The purpose of this article is to present a model that discusses how coworkers can safely intervene to support survivors of violence and reduce their risk of further victimization. There are many employees who are traumatized by the devastating physical, emotional, psychological, financial, and quality of life consequences of violent crime victimization, yet remain vulnerable for future attacks. They may be unwilling to contact criminal justice and corporate officials but may feel more comfortable discussing these matters with friends at work. These coworkers may be more willing to help if they know what they can and should do. The H-E-L-P -A- C-O-W-O-R-K-E-R model provides specific suggestions on how to listen, express concern, and connect survivors to caregivers. It proposes ways they can help survivors minimize the risk of repeat victimization by encouraging and assisting them in developing safety plans, contacting security professionals, reducing vulnerabilities, and identifying dangerous warning signs.

KEYWORDS   Crime victimization, violence, vulnerability, risk reduction

INTRODUCTION

There are too many employees who are traumatized by the consequences of violent crime victimizations, yet remain vulnerable for future attacks. The National Crime Victim Surveys (2009) estimate that there were nearly 600,000 nonfatal violent crimes against employees while they were at work, and more than three times that total who experienced violence outside the workplace

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(Harrell, 2011). Many of these victims experience devastating physical, emotional, psychological, financial, and quality of life injuries. As sad as it is to consider their initial suffering, it is tragic to think that many of these victims will have their wounds reopened.

In the immediate aftermath of the attack the victims may be paralyzed by injury, fear, self-blame, or confusion. They may want to focus on healing and recovery, but they need to act promptly to protect themselves as subsequent attacks often occur quickly (Pease, 1998; Weisel, 2005). Those who are less capable of resisting an attack may be retargeted by the same offenders (Cusson, 1993; Grayson & Stein, 2006). Others who continue to frequent locations with few social controls or the absence of capable guardians may be confronted by those prepared for violence or looking to commit crimes (Felson, 1986; Sacco & Kennedy, 2002). Despite the willingness of criminal justice professionals, corporate officials, or crime victim advocates to help, survivors may not trust or feel comfortable discussing very personal matters with them. While survivors may be willing to accept help from friendly coworkers, these coworkers may be hesitant to get involved if they are not sure of what they can or should do (Daigle, Fisher, & Cullen, 2008; Kenny, 2005).

The model discussed in the following pages provides specific suggestions on how coworkers can directly and indirectly support survivors of violence and help them reduce the risk of future attacks. It will be presented in the form of an acronym, H-E-L-P -A- C-O-W-O-R-K-E-R. The model encourages coworker involvement, action, and engaging professionals in emergency and complex situations. It contributes to proactive intervention by raising awareness of helping behaviors without compromising personal safety. It seeks to increase the motivation and confidence to get involved by suggesting effective observation, communication, and decision-making techniques.

This article will begin with a discussion of the consequences of violent crime victimization for the survivor. It will continue with the need for effective coworker intervention and provide some specific suggestions on how to assist a survivor of violence. It will conclude with some implications of coworker intervention in preventing victimization.

CONSEQUENCES OF VICTIMIZATION FOR SURVIVORS

Violent crime victimizations leave survivors with serious physical, emotional, and psychological injuries. Estimates from National Crime Victim Surveys show that 33% of robbery victims and 26% of assault victims suffer bodily harm. Many of them may experience extreme tension, anger, shock, denial, self-blame, confusion, humiliation, helplessness, worthlessness, or fear of returning to work (Giannelli, 1997; Miller, Cohen, & Wiersema, 1996; National

Center for Victims of Crime, 1992; Northwestern National Life Insurance Company [NNLIC], 1993; U.S. Department of Labor [USDOL], 1996; Walker, 1979). Over time they begin to heal, but many experience post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms involving flash backs, lack of interest in everyday activities, and physical problems such as sleeplessness, headaches, or irritability (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2000). The severity and duration depend on the level of intrusion, the survivor's ability to deal with the attack, and the type of help the person receives immediately after the event (Doerner & Lab, 2012; Tyler, 1998).

The consequences of victimization can compromise survivors' work productivity. They may feel anxious, depressed, or find it difficult to concentrate (Office of Victims of Crime [OVC], 2012). Many survivors of serious violence stay home, transfer, quit, or are fired (Gutek, 1985). In fact, nearly 14% of rape victims suffered injuries that resulted in lost time from work (Bureau of Justice Statistics [BJS], 2006). The Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA) reported that when employees eventually return to work many experienced feelings of incompetence, powerlessness, guilt, and estrangement from coworkers (USDOL, 2004). Many were less efficient due to burnout or lower morale (NNLIC, 1993; Webb, 1994). Even the threat of future violence was enough to disrupt the work life of employees (NNLIC, 1993).

Those who remain vulnerable and unprotected are at greater risk of repeat victimization. Criminals are more likely to target those that appear to be tentative, passive, easily manipulated, unaware, preoccupied, or unprepared to defend themselves (de Becker, 1997; Grayson & Stein, 2006). These individuals are thought to offer minimal risk of injury, detection, or apprehension (Cusson, 1993). Commercial robbers prefer targets that work in places that lack physical barriers, surveillance equipment, lighting, metal detectors, intercom systems, and swipe cards (National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health [NIOSH], 2006). Many have occupations with higher risks of violence as they are more likely to have contact with aggressive or unstable individuals, work alone at night, have mobile workplaces, or carry cash and other valuable items (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006; Duhart, 2001). Some must work in places with fewer social controls and higher illicit cash transactions which attract more property and violent criminals (Hockstetler & Copes, 2008; Sacco & Kennedy, 2002).

When the offender is a coworker and the management response is ineffective, the situation can evolve to more dangerous levels. Perceiving minimal consequences for their actions, aggressors may become more committed to and confident of their ability to deliver violence (de Becker, 1997). Outraged survivors or third parties may choose to confront, challenge, or degrade aggressors. They may feel they need to take matters into their own hands and intimidate or retaliate with increasingly belligerent behaviors (Kenny, 2005; Luckenbill, 1977). While survivors of violence need support and

protection after an attack, many may be unwilling to accept help from trained professionals.

THE NEED FOR EFFECTIVE COWORKER INTERVENTION

For many violent crime survivors, coworkers may not only be the best sources of help, sometimes they may be the only sources. National Crime Victims Surveys have consistently shown that less than half will report the attacks to the police (Doerner & Lab, 2012; Rand, 2009). Interviews show that many survivors do not believe the police will do anything or that the courts will punish the offender sufficiently (BJS, 2010; Maguire & Pastore, 1996). Others are unwilling to expose themselves to public scrutiny and embarrassment or believe that their victimization is a private or personal matter especially when the attackers are coworkers, friends, or intimates (Harrell, 2011, 2013; Koss, 1985; Rand, 2009).

Depersonalizing institutional procedures, job insecurity, coworker retaliation, and lack of credibility have discouraged survivors from reporting incidents of stalking, harassment, and violence to corporate officials (Holmstrom & Burgess, 1978; Jensen & Gutek, 1982; Schneider, 1993). Survivors of relationship violence may be reluctant to contact officials who may know the offender socially or even work with them (Rugala & Isaacs, 2002; Southerland, Collins, & Scarborough, 1997). OSHA (2004) found that employees may not report workplace assaults due to fears that they will be accused of negligence or poor job performance. Those with insecure employment may be unwilling to report less severe forms of violence because of fear of losing their jobs (Mayhew, 2002). Employees in subordinate positions may feel unsure whether they will be believed, blamed, or be targets of economic or physical retaliation (Schneider, 1993). Many small businesses have less capable security, employee assistance programs, medical services, legal advisors, human resource professionals, or established relationships with law enforcement or social services (Rugala & Isaacs, 2002).

As many survivors do not report their victimizations to criminal justice and corporate officials, they may turn to trusted coworkers for assistance. These coworkers may be reluctant to get involved unless they are confident that they know what to do (Tabachnick, 2009). The H-E-L-P -A- C-O-W-O-R-K-E-R model presented in the following pages provides specific suggestions on how to intervene safely during a crisis and compassionately after an attack. There are many opportunities to act as the primary helpers and other situations in which to contact professions with specific skills, experiences, and legal authority. As many survivors may not even realize that they need help, coworkers may need to encourage requests for assistance (Tyler, 1998). By making focused observations, asking compassionate questions, and having knowledge of what to do in various situations, coworkers can help

survivors deal with the consequences of criminal victimization and make them less vulnerable from further attacks.

HOW TO HELP A COWORKER

The following paragraphs provide suggestions on how to H-E-L-P -A- C-O-W-O-R-K-E-R who has been a victim of violence. It is important to remember that every situation is different and strategies that work for one victim may not work for another (OVC, 2012).

H - Honor and Respect their Decisions

If the coworker asks for help, it is acceptable to make suggestions, but let the coworker decide what is best. Some survivors, especially in domestic violence situations, may have a history of being controlled by their abusers and consistently told what to do. Statements such as "You are crazy for putting up with it," may put them on the defensive and may cause them to distance themselves. They may already be embarrassed by the circumstances and putting them down may compound the emotional injury. The coworker does not have to always agree with the survivor's decisions, but it is important to express concern without telling them what to do (Domestic Abuse & Sexual Assault Intervention Services [DASI, 2011]).

E - Expressing Concern

Even the smallest expressions of concern can reduce insecurity and help crime victims manage the trauma of the event (Tyler, 1998). This can done during a visit, a card game, or by providing a favorite magazine. The coworker can point out that the survivor is not at fault and that violence is never justified. It is important to recognize that the survivor may seem confused and not appear to grasp the gravity of the situation. These may be normal reactions for those experiencing trauma (Tyler, 1998). The coworker should never place conditions when expressing concern for the survivor.

Good friends sometimes need to provide difficult feedback when they are concerned about the survivor's safety. This should be done by starting and ending the conversation emphasizing that they respect and care for them. These conversations should include what that person will or will not due and what that person would like to see happen (Step Up, 2013). The coworker should use "I statements" discussing actual events as the coworker perceives them. When evaluating behaviors, it should be done only after listening to survivors carefully without judging them.

L - Listen without Judging

It is important to let the survivor talk at her or his own speed and listen without judging. The coworker should be patient if the survivor is silent and just needs someone to be there. The survivor should be allowed to express fears and feelings of self-blame, but eventually be helped to see that many offenders commit crimes despite any specific actions by their targets. The coworker should take a breath before speaking and follow the lead of the survivor. It may be effective to ask clarifying questions, but the coworker should not constantly interrupt or attempt to finish the speaker's sentences (Namie & Namie, 2003). It is good to paraphrase what was heard and summarize key points in the conversation. It may be effective to utilize active listening techniques such as maintaining eye contact, nodding occasionally, and showing open body language. Good listening strategies can help develop understanding and deepen the bonds between the parties such that the survivor may consider suggestions regarding safety plans (Government Training Institute [GTI], 1998).

P - Propose Safety Plans

If the coworker believes that the survivor is at risk to be victimized again, it is important to promptly suggest developing safety strategies (Weisel, 2005). There are many trained advocates that can work with the survivor to formulate a crisis response plan and provide information regarding the law, protective orders, and social services (OVC, 2012). In domestic violence cases when the person is thinking of leaving, consideration should be given toward opening a separate savings account, keeping important papers (passports, birth certificates, court papers) accessible, hiding cash, and identifying shelters (DASI, 2011). The survivor should consider memorizing emergency contact numbers, contacting workplace safety teams, and providing photographs of the suspect to management officials. Coworkers can suggest that the survivor ask the employer for help seeking restraining orders, relocating work stations, altering employee's work schedules, and providing mobile phones with preprogramed numbers (Fein, Vossekuil, & Holden, 1995; National Safe Workplace Institute, 1995). Survivors should be encouraged to secure their homes by installing visible alarms, deadbolt locks, motion-sensing lights, video surveillance equipment, exterior lighting, and removing potential hiding places (GTI, 1998; NIOSH, 2006).

Survivors and those who decide to directly intervene need to develop strategies for dealing with aggressive individuals. It is wise for them to remain calm, respect personal space, suggest solutions involving mutual gain, and demonstrate a willingness to consider the aggressor's issues (Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 1991; Simon, 1996). It is foolish to engage in threatening, uncompromising, challenging, sarcastic, or apathetic responses (GTI, 1998). It is a

good time for coworkers to ask survivors what they can do to help without jeopardizing their safety.

A - Ask What You Can Do to Help

Many survivors may be reluctant to ask for help, feeling ashamed, responsible, or in denial of the violence (Tabachnick, 2009). In these situations coworkers need to take the initiative and ask if they need assistance in reporting the incident, seeking medical attention, or securing protection. Reporting an assault does not necessarily mean pressing charges, but rather, it may involve seeking counseling and other support services. Many survivors may be suffering from internal injuries that may not be obvious, and victims of sexual assault may be at risk for sexually transmitted infections or diseases. If the survivor is hospitalized due to the attack, the coworker can offer to care for the children while a spouse visits the hospital. If there are safety concerns, the coworkers can offer to assist them in contacting corporate or law enforcement professionals. Asking questions such as "Why did this happen" and "Why didn't you do something" do not help and can serve to minimize the survivor. It may seem like victim blaming which can lessen the trust between the parties.

C - Challenge Victim Blaming

Some people think it helpful to point out how rash decisions, foolish mistakes, or carelessness contributed to the survivor's victimization, but these characteristics are often inaccurate and counterproductive. Often these comments serve to retraumatize, embarrass, or cause the survivor to withdraw. They incorrectly assume that survivors have full control over their lifestyles, daily activities, or environments. Karmen (2007) noted that situations involving shared responsibility are not common and often oversimplified especially for crimes of unexpected violence from strangers. Many people lack the opportunities and resources to alter their work hours, employment contacts, residences, or responses to sudden violence. Many battered women suffering from "learned helplessness" do not believe they can influence or control what will happen to them (Walker, 1979). Some may find it difficult to leave the abuser due to economic, social, security, and cultural factors that impact decision making. Coworkers can challenge rape myths such as "women secretly want to be raped" or "victims lie to get revenge" when they hear them (Women Against Violence Against Women, 2005). Although there is limited utility in blaming the survivor for past decisions, it can be very helpful to assist them in identifying and avoiding high risk situations that can lead to further victimization.

O - Observe and Advise of Dangerous Environmental Situations

Survivors should be encouraged to recognize and avoid high risk locations and situations in the work environment. The coworker can point out "Hot Spots" for crime such as abandoned buildings, darkened alley ways, exposed parking lots, desolate areas, drug consumption places, or places experiencing vandalism near work (Block & Block, 1995; Roncek & Maier, 1991; Sherman, 1995). Other locations with little surveillance or the possibility of intervention by bystanders are desirable to those ready, willing, and able to offend (Cook, 1983). The survivor should be encouraged to reduce their accessibility by limiting the time working alone in unfamiliar areas or being out of prolonged contact with other employees (OSHA, 2002; Pease, 1998). They can minimize criminal interest by not carrying large amounts of cash and leaving desirable products unsecured (NIOSH 2006; OSHA, 2002). If they were recently victimized at work, their employer should be encouraged to provide security enhancements in the form of escorts, panic alarms, or closed circuit television cameras to reduce their vulnerability for future attacks (GTI, 1998; Weisel, 2005).

W - Warn/Identify Personal Vulnerabilities

Coworkers can help survivors identify personal characteristics or high risk activities that may attract motivated offenders or make them less likely to resist an attack. They may attract criminals when they flaunt money or property that is easily removable, untraceable, valuable, and marketable (Clarke & Hormel, 1997; Sacco & Kennedy, 2002). These criminals are more likely to target those who appear unprotected, careless, or unable to resist (Cusson, 1993; Grayson & Stein, 2006; Karmen, 2007). Survivors may increase their risk of victimization when they engage in activities such as frequenting bars, congregating in parks, venturing out alone late at night, partying with strangers, and engaging in heavy drug use (Mustaine & Tewksbury, 1998). They should be encouraged to reduce their risk of future attacks by being crime conscious, projecting assertive body language, carrying personal security devices, traveling with companions in high risk places, and demonstrating knowledge of help sources (GTI, 1998; NIOSH, 2006; OSHA, 2004).

O - Offer Hope in Influencing Events

Many survivors of violent crime may not be ready to benefit from specific suggestions to reduce vulnerability because they feel helpless to prevent victimization (Fisher, Daigle, & Cullen, 2010; Walker, 1979). The trauma immediately after the violent event may leave the survivors preoccupied

with the psychological and physical consequences of their victimization (APA, 2000; Burgess, 1995). In extreme cases they may be worn down by a spiraling series of stresses and problems and may consider suicide. Concerned coworkers should be sensitive to changes in behavior such as poor job performance, lack of concern about personal appearance, giving away prized possessions, and talking about not being present in the future. They can empathize with the survivor's pain and despair and offer hope that solutions can be found for their problems with the appropriate help (Tyler, 1998).

R - Recommend Seeking Help

Sometimes survivors think they can resolve very complex and dangerous issues on their own. Coworkers can point out what corporate or community resources are available to assist them but allow them to choose the best approach. Many companies have Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) or a Risk Assessment and Management (RAM) team. Historically, EAPs have been used to help employees with alcohol and drug treatment, but many now have expanded their roles to provide mental health services to survivors of violence (Namie & Namie, 2003). Many companies have RAM teams that work with survivors to investigate, evaluate, and manage identified risks (Kenny, 2010).

There are many services and community resources that can help survivors with counseling and other support services (see appendix). All 50 U.S. states have victim compensation programs to reimburse eligible survivors for out-of-pocket medical expenses, lost wages, and other financial needs (OVC, 2012). Many states have Victim-Witness Advocates that can provide information and access to emergency, counseling, legal, protection, and education services. They can also provide assistance with notification, justice system orientation, impact statements, and restitution (Doerner & Lab, 2012). Domestic violence advocates work with the criminal justice system to provide shelter, mental health, medical services, financial assistance, protective orders, and emotional support (OVC, 2012). Local sexual assault programs provide free and confidential services that may include assistance during forensic exams, crisis intervention, social service referrals, psychological information, evidential preservation information, and advice on reporting the crime (OVC, 2012). It is important to stay in touch with survivors to see how things are going and remind them that someone cares.

K - Keep Connected

It is not uncommon for those who have experienced violence to become detached or estranged from individuals who could help them (APA, 2000).

In these situations coworkers need to make special efforts to reach out to survivors. If the employee is out of work recovering from a related injury, it is important to stay in contact so the employee does not feel abandoned (Tyler, 1998). The coworker could send cards, visit, or share news from the office. During a visit the survivor could be reminded of the importance of keeping legal, counseling, or medical appointments. When the survivor returns to work, the coworker can check in to see if that person needs help as things may be confusing or seem to be moving fast. Should the survivor have to go to a remote or high crime area, the coworker can accompany or call to make sure that the survivor is safe (USDOL, 2004). The coworker can suggest that the survivor asks for a security escort to parking areas when working late hours, and offer to accompany the survivor to safety seminars.

E - Encourage Safety Classes

OSHA Guidelines for Preventing Workplace Violence suggest that employees can reduce their risk of violence by participating in education programs that provide techniques to recognize and respond to escalating agitation and aggressive behaviors (USDOL, 2004). Many employers offer these types of classes to their employees as part of Continual Professional Education classes, Lunch and Learn Seminars, or Webinars. Coworkers can research which classes the company offers and suggest that the survivor attend to learn some basic skills to manage conflict. Many of these classes instruct participants on how to make themselves less accessible to criminals by avoiding high risk places such as darkened stairwells in parking garages, remote parts of buildings after hours, elevators with suspicious people, and recognizing the warning signs of potential violence (GTI, 1998).

R - Recognize and Act on Preincident Warning Signs

As repeat attacks are likely to occur soon after the initial victimization, coworkers should be especially vigilant in watching out for threats against survivors during this period (Pease, 1998). Extreme violence is rarely an isolated event, but rather, the last link in a chain of a series of progressively dangerous behaviors (Kenny, 2002). Often criminals prepare for the attacks by using subtle actions that entice, distract, or control their targets. They may use compliments, provide small gifts, or fabricate relationships to build rapport, promote trust, and stop their targets from defending themselves (Kenny, 2012). Verbal abuse, subtle insults, excessive details, or unsolicited promises are often used to confuse, divert attention, and put their targets on the defensive (Evans, 2002; Kenny, 2012). Simple assaults, threats, or calculated

displays of aggression are used to manipulate, coerce, or shock the target into compliance (de Becker, 1997; Simon, 1996).

Once recognized, these preincident warning signs should not be ignored, denied, or rationalized. It is often best to let professionals determine the meaning, risk, and appropriate responses to aggressive behaviors. The survivor should not be fooled by attempts of the aggressor to reconcile or justify the behaviors. Prompt and decisive responses provide targets with the best chance of establishing a balance of power, reducing the aggressor's control, and defusing potential attacks (Kenny, 2012; Simon, 1996).

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Criminal violence leaves many victims physically injured, emotionally traumatized, and vulnerable for further attacks. Those who work may have access to many resources that can help them heal and reduce the risk of future violence. EAPs and RAM Teams can provide or access to professionals with mental health, security, and legal advice, but many survivors may lack confidence in or knowledge of these help sources. Coworkers are not only a viable option, but often the only one for these survivors. In nonemergency situations they can comfort, watch over, and encourage safety and healing strategies. In emergency or complex situations they must know their limitations and encourage survivors to contact trained professionals with the skills to protect and support them.

There are many capable and willing coworkers who do not intervene because they are overwhelmed by emotionally charged and dangerous situations. They are more likely to assist survivors of violence when they feel it is their responsibility and are confident about what to do. The how to H-E-L-P -A- C-O-W-O-R-K-E-R model was developed to provide practical suggestions to safely and compassionately help survivors manage the consequences and reduce the risk of further violent victimization. It is not necessary for coworkers to have all the answers or solve the causes of very complex problems. It is often only essential to provide a simple word or ordinary act to accomplish an extraordinary impact on a survivor's life.

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APPENDIX: CRIME VICTIMS' RESOURCES

Centers for Disease Control 1-800-232-4636 www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention
Concerns of Police Survivors 1-800-784-2677 www.nationalcops.org

Childhelp USA National Hotline 800-422-4453 www.childhelp.org
Directory of Crime Victim Services http://ovc.ncjrs.gov/findvictimservices
National Center for Missing and Exploited Children 800-843-5678 www.missingkids.com
National Center for Victims of Crimes 800-394-2255, 202-467-8700 www.ncvc.org
National Coalition Against Domestic Violence 303-839-1852 www.ncadv.org
National Crime Prevention Council 800-627-2911 www.ncpc.org
National Domestic Violence Hotline 1-800-799-7233 www.thehotline.org
National Human Trafficking Resource Center 1-888-373-7888 www.polarisproject.org
National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health 304-285-5913 www.cdc.gov/niosh
National Network to End Domestic Violence 1-202-543-5566 http://nnedy.org/projects/safetynet
National Organization of Parents of Murdered Children 1-888-818-7662 www.pomc.com
National Organization for Victim Assistance 1-800-879-6682 www.trynova.org
National Sexual Violence Resource Center 1-877-739-3895 www.nsvrc.org
National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-8255 www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org 1-800-628-9454 (Spanish)
Occupational Safety and Health Administration 202-693-1888 www.osha.gov
Office for Victims of Crime Resource Center 800-851-3420 www.ovc.gov/resourcecenter/
Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network 1-800-656-4673 www.rainn.org
Resource Center on Domestic Violence, Child Protection and Custody 800-527-3223 www.ncjfcj.org/content/view/129/250
Stalking Resource Center 1-202-467-8700 www.ncvs.org/src
Step Up 520-621-5339 www.stepupprogram.org
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration 1-877-726-4727 wwwncadi.samhsa.gov
The Compassionate Friends 1-877-969-0010 www.compassionatefriends.org