

Victims of violent crime don't fit mould

January 14 2014, by Rob Payne



Research suggests the need for a new forgiveness model for victims of violent crime.

A Murdoch University School of Law researcher says traditional theories of forgiveness don't work for victims of serious crime.

Dr Courtney Field said interviews with victims of violent assault, [sexual assault](#) and [child abuse](#) as well as those who had loved ones murdered revealed the need for a new approach.

"Traditional models view [forgiveness](#) as a social process oriented towards reconciliation, but for the people I spoke with, reconciliation was very far off the radar, and in many cases not even feasible due to issues of safety," Dr Field said.

"These people tended to resent the prescriptive nature of traditional models, often comprised of steps that you follow to return to a positive place, and felt forgiveness was often pushed upon them.

"While they all moved towards forgiveness, it was personal – resolving the intense psychological weight of dealing with the event so they could survive – and had very little to do with the offender."

The on-going project, which is also looking at the complexities of revenge, has identified four stages of resolution for victims of violent crime: self-awareness, letting go, perspective-taking and moving on.

The process begins when people recognise the profound impact of the event and the incredible feelings of disempowerment that [violent crime](#) creates.

They then have to let go of negative feelings, thoughts and behaviours and gain perspective, which can often mean accepting the randomness of the crime.

"In 2011, male [victims](#) of assault in Australia were more likely to be attacked by a stranger than a person known to them," Dr Field said.

"A victim's first question is always 'why me?' There is a suspicion that they've done something to bring the assault onto themselves, because we have a desire to believe in a just world in which bad things happen for a reason, but that's a cognitive fallacy."

Dr Field said he was amazed at the resilience of those he met.

"The fact that these people carry on – often with incredible vigour – is a phenomenal testament to the human spirit," he said.

"It doesn't necessarily mean that their grief is any less, even if the event happened years ago, but they are able to have something positive as well."

More information: Courtney Field, Jaimie Zander, and Guy Hall. "Forgiveness is a present to yourself as well': An intrapersonal model of forgiveness in victims of violent crime." *International Review of Victimology* 0269758013492752, first published on July 3, 2013. [DOI: 10.1177/0269758013492752](https://doi.org/10.1177/0269758013492752)

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