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# Helping Victims And Survivors Maintain Emotional and Physical Well-Being Throughout Court Proceedings

This tip sheet is designed for victim service professionals or victim advocates (VSPs) to help victims and survivors of mass violence incidents or terrorist attacks (MVIs) throughout trial proceedings relevant to their cases.

Ideally, victims or survivors of MVIs should each have a personalized care plan to use throughout all court processes. A companion tip sheet specific to MVI victims/survivors – “Coping Tips to Help You through Court Proceedings” – features guidelines for creating a personal care plan and mitigating stress during court processes, and briefly explains the role of VSPs.

This tip sheet offers a framework for VSPs in order to support victims and survivors before, during and after any court proceeding. “Predict” and “prepare” are elemental concepts in helping victims and survivors on their road toward healing, to the degree possible. These concepts are particularly important as they encounter the court processes, which can often be confusing, frustrating and often out of their control.

**The National Mass Violence Victimization Resource Center is located on the Medical University of South Carolina’s Charleston campus as part of MUSC’s Department of Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences, and receives funding from the Department of Justice’s Office for Victims of Crime**  
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## Things to help victims develop a personalized self-care plan

- Help them identify a strong support network with three-to-five people with whom they can rotate reaching out to for support. This can include family members, neighbors, friends, co-workers, spiritual supporters, and/or VSPs. Determine in advance of court hearings whether any victims want a member of their support network to accompany them.
- Advise them to plan to bring a photo ID, to dress comfortably and bring an extra layer of clothing – such as a sweater or shawl – in case the courtroom is cold.
- Since many courtrooms do not allow cell phones, advise victims that it can be helpful to have print photographs of themselves and/or their deceased loved one that they can slip in their pocket or purse (having images of happier times ready to look at may be helpful). Advise victims that while they will likely be unable to view the photos on their cell phone during the proceeding, it will be helpful to have them readily available on their phone in an easily-accessible file for viewing in between or after proceedings.
- Advise victims about helpful calming techniques that can help mitigate stress during trial proceedings. Our Tip Sheet/Guide “[Managing Distress: Grounding Tips for Crime Victims, Survivors and Family Members of Mass Violence Incidents](#)” is available on the Center’s website.
  - A simple calming technique to recommend is: Breathe in and slowly and count to four, hold for four counts, and breathe out and slowly count to four.
  - Help victims to learn and practice two additional calming techniques.





## Things to do to help them prepare for the potentially-wide range of court hearings

- Be sure to clarify your role as their VSP and the potential range of services and support you can and cannot provide.
- Help victims understand:
  - Their constitutional and statutory victims' rights under law, both state and federal
  - How such rights are relevant to specific court hearings
  - That victims' rights and services are different in state and federal jurisdictions
- Provide information (written and verbal) about the court processes. Be prepared to answer any questions and dispel any myths or misunderstandings victim/survivors may have. Ask a member of the prosecution team to address specific legal issues when needed.
- Explain any provision and statutory guidance related to victim privacy, and/or confidentiality of communications (including any limitations to either).
- Arrange a visit to the courthouse and courtroom prior to the beginning of the trial to help victims become familiar with the physical and surrounding spaces:
  - Review secured parking areas and include information regarding daily transport procedures, like escorts and routes to and from the courthouse's secured areas.
  - Provide guidance on entering secured courthouse areas, to illuminate unnecessary delays upon entering or exiting.
  - Provide map with layout of the courtroom during court processes (and any "overflow" rooms). Include a schedule for seating MVI victims and where all parties will be seated (Judge, Jurors, Attorneys, Defendants and Court Security).
  - Identify key areas designated for victims' use (restrooms, quiet room, victim family gathering space, etc.).
- Prepare a schedule/calendar for lunch, respite times and identify places. Include options available (venue and costs) with adjustments in times as directed by the court's schedule.
- Remind them to limit their conversations in public areas such as elevators, hallways, stairwells, bathrooms, snack areas, etc. Conversations can be overheard and misinterpreted.





## Things to do to help them prepare for the potentially-wide range of court hearings (continued)

- Identify any needs that victims may have for accommodations (this can be accomplished through a survey or personal interviews with victims at least one month in advance of court hearings). Develop a plan to meet accommodation needs of victims, to the degree possible.
  - Accommodations can include:
    - Translation or interpreter services
    - Physical or intellectual disability needs
    - Dietary restrictions
    - Spiritual needs, among others
- Identify any medications they take and advise them to prepare to have enough to last throughout each court process.
- Help victims consider and think about what parts/how much of the proceeding they want to attend. Eyewitness accounts and crime scene photos may be a part of some proceedings and can be very difficult for them to hear and see. If possible, identify any potentially disturbing testimony that may occur in advance of the proceeding so that victims can make an informed choice about whether to attend.
- Explain to victims why it might be a good idea to avoid watching, reading or listening to the news or scrolling through social media coverage of the trial. Some media reports can be hurtful and retraumatizing. They can mitigate potential stress by limiting this type of exposure.
- Inform victims of other support services, such as emotional support animals. Research and be prepared to locate available resources.
- Help victims plan for what to do after a hearing. Assist victims in making plans for non-court related activities to focus on after hearings and when court is not in session.
- Remind victims that if they feel overwhelmed, clinical support is available to them. If possible, mental health services should be available at the courthouse as a victim service. If not, those resources should be readily accessible and available in a secure, private space.
- Have a resource list and capacity to make referrals for victims who may request mental health support and/or any other types of assistance.





## Tangible things for victims to have/do throughout court proceedings:

- **Mints** to put under their tongue (strong mints – like Altoids – are recommended). Explain that mint can help ground them.
- **Water!!!** Encourage sipping water throughout the day to stay hydrated, to help with grounding, and to regulate breathing. Some courthouses don't allow people to bring water into the building with them, so identify water fountains inside the building or have water available as part of the resources you provide.
- **A seat cushion.** Most courtroom benches are wooden and can be uncomfortable to sit on for extended periods of time. A cushion or lumbar support may be helpful.
- **A blanket or extra sweater** because courtrooms can be chilly.
- **Something to hold in their hands** to keep them busy. This will help release energy. Silly Putty, stress balls and river rocks are good for this. A river rock is easy to place in pockets and to rub energy. For added benefit, victims can put the rock in the freezer overnight – the cold temperature also helps with grounding.
- **A notebook** to write down questions for the prosecutors or the VSPs about court events.
- **A journal** to write/doodle in or a coloring book for adults.
- **A packet of tissues.**
- **Practice other grounding/calming techniques** – reading their favorite poems or scripture passage, or thinking about and visualizing a good experience.
- **Have their support team ready** and support person of the day available – in person, by telephone and/or online.





## Help victims predict and prepare for outcomes of hearings or the trial:

If possible, identify victims' specific wishes relevant to the outcome of the trial. Be prepared for a wide range of wishes that are unique to each victim. Victims or survivors may feel differently about the outcome of the trial/hearing, and they are all entitled to their individual beliefs.

Do not make any promises about the outcome of any hearing, or the overall trial, such as, "It is an open and shut case;" "They will be found guilty;" "This prosecutor never loses." The VSPs' plan should be "If this happens, then this..."

Let victims know that no one can predict the outcome. It is a judicial process with results determined by human beings' interpretation of the applicable laws.

Encourage victims/survivors to think about how they might feel if the case is not adjudicated the way they think it should be. Recommend that they talk over their feelings with their counselor/therapist.

Remind them that if they are in the courtroom during the reading of the verdict, they must maintain their composure – no loud outbursts of any kind are allowed. Tell them you will explain everything to them afterwards.

### Additional resources:

Our Tip Sheet: [Managing Distress: Grounding Tips for Crime Victims](#)

