



LIFE

AFTER

CRIME

Megan Jackson looks at the after affects of crime

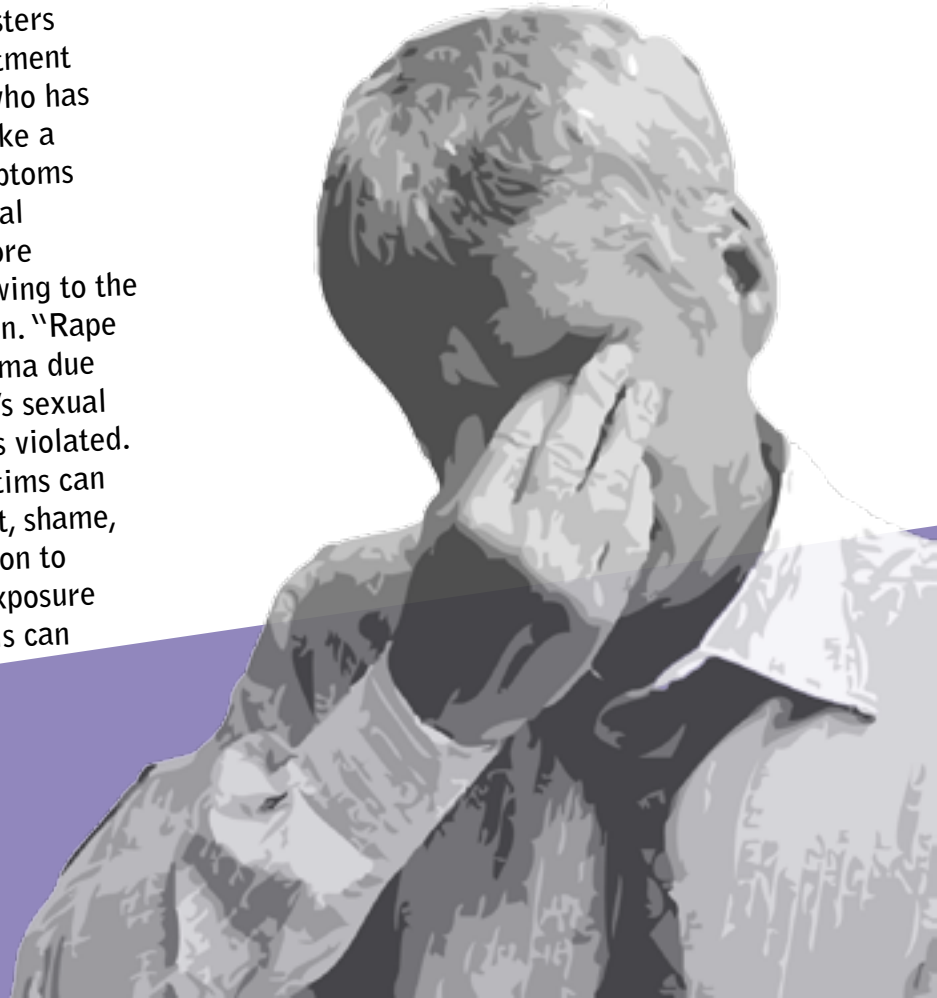
Living in South Africa, crime has become an inescapable reality. No amount of security – high walls, electric fences, guard dogs – or vigilance can make one a hundred percent immune to the potentially damaging effects of crime. Even if you have never personally been a victim of crime, the statistics are stacked against you. You may, one day, fall victim to a violent crime or need to comfort and support a friend or family member who has. Your best defence is to arm yourself with the knowledge of the possible effects of such an encounter, enabling to you better deal with the aftermath or allowing you to provide support for others who may have gone through it.

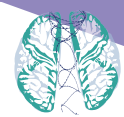
According to Anita Unni, a Masters student in the Psychology Department at Rhodes University, someone who has experienced a traumatic event like a violent crime often displays symptoms of anxiety, fear and horror. Sexual violation is associated with a more complex symptomatic picture owing to the distinctive nature of the violation. "Rape differs from other forms of trauma due to its sexual nature - the victim's sexual autonomy and bodily integrity is violated.

In cases of sexual assault, victims can also experience feelings of guilt, shame, self-blame and sorrow in addition to fear and anxiety". Following exposure to a traumatic event, individuals can

develop Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD has the potential to severely debilitate a trauma victim. These symptoms include flashbacks of the trauma, and feelings of intense anxiety and fear as well as avoidance of reminders of the trauma. If you or someone you know is displaying these symptoms, it is imperative that you urge them to seek professional help. PTSD is a serious psychological condition, and it is not safe to let it go untreated.

In a case where the violent crime took place in ones own home, the home environment itself can become associated with the attack, and therefore creates a sense of threat which leads to feelings





of fear and anxiety. Unni stresses that to feel secure in ones own home again it is important to identify the source of ones distress, and also to determine the likelihood of those fears being realised. "If an individual resides in a particularly dangerous area, the probability of them being victimised again is much greater than someone who lives in a relatively safe and secure neighbourhood. It is important to objectively evaluate the nature of ones fears and act in ways that ensure that you are safe". This may include increasing security measures in your home, or even moving to a safer neighbourhood.

Having been a victim of a violent crime does not mean that your life has to change dramatically, or that the experience is going to haunt you for the rest of your life. For Irene Ellis, being attacked in her own home did not mean the end of her life as she knew it. She came home one day to find a man in her house. He threw her onto the floor and demanded to know where her cell phone was. He even threatened to take her life. Throughout the ordeal Irene remained surprisingly calm. She knew from the way he was dressed and the way that he spoke that he would never follow through with his threat.

Instead of letting the fear and anxiety of such an ordeal take over her life completely, Irene took control of her own emotions. She refuses to become "neurotic" about crime, and continues to live her life much like she did before the incident. She has since been for self defence lessons, and is confident that if something like that were to happen again, she would be able to defend herself. Even though Irene is adamant that one must not become neurotic about crime, she still believes that it is important to feel

as safe as you possibly can. "[Security] is a necessity. It would be silly not to have security measures in your home".

A traumatic event can be extremely harrowing. As such, it is vital for people to seek social support in the aftermath of a trauma. According to Unni, the support of friends and family is particularly beneficial and has been shown to act as a 'buffer', and can prevent the development of symptomatic reactions such as PTSD. Speaking to a therapist can also be helpful if the individual is experiencing difficulty coping. It is important to remember that individuals differ in their responses to a traumatic experience depending on their past experiences and their personality. Even though you or a friend is not experiencing any symptoms of fear or anxiety now, symptoms may arise at a later stage.

