

A Victim's Guide to Speaking with the Media



Offering support, assistance and information.

Why would the media want to talk to me?

The media's job is to report on stories it thinks the public wants to know about. The media often report on crime. If you are a crime victim, the media may want to interview you.

Journalists try to get the victim's side of the story to put a human face to a tragedy. They do this to help the public understand what it means to be a victim so their coverage is fair.

You can decide if you want to give an interview or not. Being a victim does not mean you have to give up your right to privacy. It is a personal experience that does not have to be shared with the public. It's okay to say, "I don't want to say anything now."

What rights do I have if I'm asked for an interview?

If the media asks you for an interview you have the right to:

- tell your story
- say "no"
- choose to have a friend or family member speak for you
- set the time and location of an interview
- have someone else with you during the interview for support
- provide a written statement instead of giving an interview
- give or refuse to give personal pictures

- ask that offensive pictures not be used, although media may still use them
- exclude children from interviews
- refuse to answer specific questions
- demand a correction when the facts in a report are inaccurate, although the media may not have to correct them
- file a complaint with the reporter's bosses if the reporter is unethical or abusive
- request or deny interviews with specific reporters

What are the benefits of speaking to the media?

News accounts of a specific crime may help law enforcement catch criminals and prevent others from becoming crime victims.

The news can also change how the public sees crime. Media reports have been a positive force in getting the community to speak and act out against crime and violence.

What are the drawbacks of speaking to the media?

The media may not report what you said, the way that you said it, or intended it to sound. You can ask the media for a correction when they get something wrong, but they may not do it.

You cannot expect the media to look out for your best interests. If you are a witness in the case, you may hurt the case by speaking to the media before you testify. This is especially true if

you are a victim who will also be a key witness at the trial. Your story can and may be used by the defence lawyer(s) to discredit you or the case. If you want to speak with the media, the safest time is after the trial is over.

The police and the Crown attorney may not be able to share certain information with you if you plan to share it with the media. They have to try to make sure the trial is as fair as possible.

If I decide to talk to the media, are there guidelines I can follow?

Here are some tips to keep in mind if you choose to be interviewed:

- Talk to the Crown attorney or the police before you agree to talk to the media.
They cannot tell you what to do, but may be able to provide you with some information that will help you decide how to best handle the interview.
- Ask what the story is about or how your interview will be used in the story.
- Ask who else the reporter plans to interview for the story.
- Prepare for the interview by listing the questions you think the media may want to ask you and think about how you would answer them.
- It might be helpful to write an outline or statement in advance.
- Be brief and concise. Use simple, clear statements. If you edit yourself, the media will have less editing to do and what they report may be more accurate.
- Have two or three main ideas or facts that you want to tell them and say them right away.
- If the interview is being broadcast on TV or radio, ask if it will be live or taped, then edited.
- You can control the information you share. You can set limits and tell the reporter you won't discuss some things.

- Once you've said something to a reporter, you can't take it back or expect them not to use it.
- Never speak "off the record." Everything you say can be used.
- Never give false information or lie to a reporter. If you can't answer a question, just tell them you can't answer it.
- Don't guess or speculate about the case. Stick to what you know.
- When you talk to a reporter, remember you are also talking to everyone in their audience – thousands of readers, listeners or viewers.

What kinds of questions might media ask?

Doing an interview can be very emotional. Questions sometimes seem hurtful or unfair. The media may have lots of questions specific to your case. Here are some common questions:

- What happened? When? Where? How?
- How has this affected you and your family?
- Tell me about your loved one. Who was he or she?
- How do you feel?
- Who was involved?
- Why did it happen?
- What was the cause?
- What would you like to see done now? Who's to blame?
- Who should pay for this and how?

Some of the material presented on this fact sheet has been modified from material found in:

- "Crime Victims and the Media" Minnesota Centre for Crime Victim Services.
- "Getting Through the Maze: A Guidebook for Survivors of Homicide" by Sue Simpson, (2002) Mennonite Central Committee.