



Dr. Dawn-Elise Snipes

Dr. Dawn-Elise Snipes has a Bachelor's Degree in Psychology with a specialty in Behavior Modification, a Master's Degree in Rehabilitation Counseling, and a Doctoral Degree in Counselor Education with a specialty in wellness in law enforcement and the emergency services. Dr. Snipes holds licenses and certifications as a Mental Health Counselor, Rehabilitation Counselor and Fitness Practitioner and belongs to the American Counseling Association and Chi Sigma Iota, the National Counseling Honor Society.

Currently Dr. Snipes serves as the Chief Executive Officer and Clinical Director for Dawn-Elise Enterprises, Inc. which has grown over the past few years to include three companies: Affordable Wellness, The Addictions Counseling Alliance and Police-Counseling.com. In addition to her private practice, she has worked for two years as the Clinical Director of a large multi-level substance abuse and mental health treatment facility in Gainesville, Florida.

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PBA wishes to express appreciation to Dr. Snipes for contributing this helpful column for the benefit of our members.

A Public Service Column for Members: A Look At Wellness

The First Few Minutes...

You deal with people in crisis nearly every day. People's reaction to trauma runs the gamut—some are just a little shaken up, others are completely devastated. Although their reactions differ, what you need from them generally remains the same. You need them to calm down enough so that you can get the information you need to do your job without having to worry that they are going to hurt themselves. Further, regardless of who the advocates work for, in most cases it will take them 30 to 90 minutes to respond (especially in the middle of the night). So it is often vital to your investigation to be able to stabilize them enough to get a statement.

People in crisis are not going to have the mental clarity to be helpful, so the first thing to do is to help them get a grip (easier for some than others). They are often still immersed in the fight-or-flight response when you arrive. In an ideal situation, one officer can walk with the victim(s) away from the immediate scene. Not only does removing them eliminate some of the disturbing visual cues, but walking will help dissipate the adrenaline. You want to help them calm down enough so they can sit down and communicate clearly. The mistake I see all too often is an overzealous officer trying to get critical information out of a hysterical victim. Once people feel safe and understood, they often quickly de-escalate and are much more helpful. So how do you do that?

First, no buts! Oh, and you *don't* understand. "I understand you are upset, but..." Will usually get you nowhere. (This is true in personal and professional life.) Eliminate those two words from your vocabulary. Most officers who have used that phrase have been given a tongue lashing by a victim at one point or another. "You think you understand? You don't understand anything..." Okay then, what *do* you say? Well, it goes against many officers' problems-solving nature, but you need to just listen. Do not try to fix it, at least not right then. Accurately paraphrase what they are feeling—this means do not use words like "upset" and "stressful." They were upset when the Gators lost. Work is stressful. This is wayyyyyy beyond that. Match the intensity of your words to the person's emotional state.

- "Hi Jane. I'm Officer Snipes. I see you are... (devastated, furious, in shock, terrified). I am going to do my best to make this as easy for you as possible"
- "Hi Jane. I'm Officer Snipes. That must have been... (devastating, infuriating, terrifying, the last thing you expected). We are going to help you get through this."
- "Hi Jane. I'm Officer Snipes. I can't imagine what you have been through today. I am sure it was the last thing you expected."

As soon as they feel heard and understood, you can almost see them start to calm down. It usually only takes a minute or two, but it often makes a world of difference in your investigation. If you are having difficulty thinking of what to say (or empathizing) imagine what you would say to

one of your family members if they were in the same situation. Have them sit down as soon as they are able to, and if you can sit down as well it helps equalize the power dynamic.

The second thing to remember is to use simple directives and reassure the person of their safety and your concern. Once the person has gotten a bit of control, *then* start trying to get details.

- "I know this must be really overwhelming. These officers/We are here to help you and make sure you are safe. What I need from you right now is to take a couple of deep breaths."
- "It must have been a shock to find him like this. We are doing everything we can to help you get through this. Right now, I need you to..."

People in crisis have difficulty with short-term memory. Give them anchors. "Where were you/What were you doing just before this all began?" This sounds the same as "Tell me what happened," but it is actually quite different. When people tell you what happened, they often start their story at the point, or immediately after the trauma. If you get them to start just before the trauma, when they are thinking more clearly, they can often give you more accurate details. As they recount the incident, they will often wax and wane in their level of



agitation. It is important to keep reassuring them that they are safe and you can see how difficult this is for them. If they have difficulty remembering physical descriptions, try to have them envision the person next to a physical object such as a shelf or doorway, and ask them how tall the person was in relation to that.

Once you have gotten the preliminary information, have someone stay with them until the victim advocate or a family member arrives. Some people will want to talk and be comforted, others will just want to be left alone. In either case, someone is there if a need should arise.

If you are in a situation in which an advocate will not be responding, it is important to provide important phone numbers and information in writing. Most counties also have a system set up in which a victim advocate will call the person the next day. To find out about your local resources, you can go to the Attorney General's Victim's Services site at <http://myfloridalegal.com/victims> and/or the Office for Victims of Crime at <http://ovc.ncjrs.gov/findvictimservices/> You will be surprised at how many specialized services are available for general crime victims, survivors of suicide, rape victims, domestic violence victims and child victims. ●



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