

A Lasting Impact: The Emotional Toll of Identity Theft



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Identity theft on the rise: What's the toll on victims?

Identity theft is largely an invisible crime; someone quietly steals your identity and uses it for financial gain. Yet, the impact on victims is real. Many lose money and time, but there's another cost that's not so easy to quantify – the emotional toll. As identity theft increases — there were 13.1 million victims of identity fraud¹ in the United States in 2013 — psychologists and therapists are beginning to examine the emotional fallout for victims.

First, many victims suffer financial stress. Second, identity theft victims may experience similar emotional effects as victims of violent crimes, ranging from anxiety to emotional volatility.

While there is still little formal research on this topic, Equifax has interviewed both experts and victims who are dealing with these issues daily. In the following white paper, we will examine the symptoms that identity theft victims may experience and why; the steps victims can take to help themselves; and advice on how to best minimize the likelihood of identity theft in the first place.

“The financial impact of identity theft can be lasting, but so too can the emotional toll as victims fight to regain their identities,” says Trey Loughran, president of Equifax Personal Solutions. “It is important to make consumers aware of the emotional effects of identity theft and tips for overcoming them.”

Every Two Seconds

Every two seconds, someone in America becomes the victim of identity theft, according to Javelin Strategy and Research². It's the No. 1 complaint reported to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), according to the agency's 2013 Consumer Sentinel Report³.

There are plenty of information and resources on how to rebuild your financial house if you become an identity theft victim. But it's often the hidden costs that can be devastating, such as the emotional toll of identity theft.

That toll can be significant. In a 2013 survey of identity theft victims⁴ by the Identity Theft Resource Center, 69 percent felt fear for personal financial security; 50 percent of respondents said they had feelings of powerlessness or helplessness; and 29 percent said they felt shame or embarrassment.

What are some of the psychological effects of identity theft?

Identity theft victims often show emotions “much the way a trauma survivor would respond or somebody who was a victim of a different kind of crime such as a home invasion or assault,” according to Diane Turner, a licensed clinical social worker and certified life coach based in Chicago, Illinois, and Tucson, Arizona.





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Turner says victims often experience emotional effects and exhibit signs of grief similar to depression and heightened anxiety such as loss of confidence in areas where they typically had confidence, sleeplessness, emotional volatility, difficulty eating, self-medicating with alcohol or food, and loss of motivation.

Because identity theft typically comes as a shock, it has an “assaulting quality” to it, Turner notes. The effects can be life-altering, impacting your health, your emotional well-being, and your relationships with others.

Effects

Financial Stress

From filing police reports to reestablishing credit, it can take some time for victims to get finances back in order. Those who already have financial hardship or are still recovering from the economic recession might feel extra stress due to financial strain.

According to [a report](#)⁵ by Harvard Medical School, stress can cause brain changes that may contribute to anxiety and depression.

“Financial is like any stress,” says Nancy Molitor, PhD, a clinical psychologist based in Wilmette, Illinois. “If we don’t remain vigilant and track our stress, we can get overwhelmed.”

Self-Blame

If the victim feels his or her identity was stolen through carelessness or a mistake on his or her part, he or she may be embarrassed and blame himself or herself for the crime having taken place. Some victims are hesitant to seek help because they believe their own actions or inactions may have contributed to the crime.

You may blame yourself for not securing your password for an account or for not shredding sensitive personal documents. While taking responsibility for protecting your identity is important, self-blame can be emotionally damaging.

Feeling Vulnerable

Identity theft is an invasive crime, and for some victims, the worst part is they can never put a name or a face to the thief.

“Trying to identify who the person was gives us this false sense of control,” Turner says. “It’s kind of an illusion, but it does make us feel better.”

Because identity theft is a faceless crime, it’s hard to regain that control, says Turner.

Ann C., an identity theft victim from New York, knows this feeling all too well after being hit twice by identity thieves within the last couple of years.

“I feel so exposed all the time,” she says.

She says she doesn’t trust others as much anymore, explaining how she even second-guesses the clerk at the grocery store who swipes her card twice.

“If victims stay in a vulnerable state, it can lead to prolonged periods of helplessness and hopelessness,” explains Molitor.



Isolation

The anonymity of the crime can also lead victims to feel isolated as they search for the person who committed the crime.

Axton Betz-Hamilton of Charleston, Illinois, and her family members were victims of identity theft when she was a child. For years, they distanced themselves from friends and other family members who could have been the culprits.

“We cut off relationships with aunts and uncles, friends of the family for 20 years,” she says.

Although she eventually found out who stole her identity, she lived for a long time with a mentality to suspect everyone. “Every time I went in a store or had a group interaction, I wondered if the person who stole my identity was there.”

Family Strife

Javelin Strategy and Research reports that most identity theft is committed by family members or friends. Everything from gambling addictions to unmanageable debt can lead someone to target a relative and steal his or her identity. When children are victims, it’s often the parents, foster parents, or other family members who are the culprits.

Betrayal by someone you love and trust can be emotionally devastating for victims. They may not report the crime to law enforcement in an effort to protect a loved one. There’s often pressure to keep the matter in the family, leaving some victims to suffer alone and recover financially on their own.

“Think of the assault of that, the trust that’s broken when someone does that,” says Turner. “If the thieves are a group of people who live in a foreign country and are complete strangers and it’s totally random, in a way it’s almost easier to recover from that. If you find out that it’s somebody who’s close to you, that’s a whole different ballgame.”

If you are a victim of identity theft, here are 12 tips to help you deal with the financial and emotional fallout.

1. Check your credit report with all three credit reporting agencies. Take note of the following warning signs of identity theft:
 - A line of credit that you didn’t open and/or with which you are not familiar.
 - An account is delinquent or in collections that you didn’t know existed.
 - Your personal information is incorrect or includes addresses where you never lived.
 - There are hard inquiries for which you didn’t apply.
 - There is a Social Security number similar to yours listed.
2. Block or close fraudulent accounts.
3. Remember to keep checking your credit report regularly; it can take months for a new account to show up on your report. You are entitled to a free credit report each year from AnnualCreditReport.com or (877) 322-828, the only authorized source under federal law.

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4. Place a fraud alert by contacting any one of the three credit reporting agencies. Equifax (as well as the other agencies) will automatically forward this request to the other two agencies. Contact each one separately to place a security freeze on your credit files.
5. File a police report with whichever police or sheriff’s department has jurisdiction over your case.
6. Report the crime to the Federal Trade Commission using its identity theft hotline at (877) 438-4338.
7. Don’t panic. “I always tell people: pause but don’t panic,” says Molitor. “Try to figure out exactly why you’re stressed. The worst thing you can do is to get overwhelmed and think worst-case scenario. Be grounded, stay in the present, and make a plan for yourself.”
8. Take care of yourself. “I really encourage people to practice extreme care, making sure they’re taking care of themselves in whatever way works for them, including surrounding themselves with supportive people,” says Turner.

For some people, family members can make a great support system to lean on as you work toward restoring your finances. For others, family members are not the best people to turn to, Turner says. Connect with a religious leader or friends to make sure you’re getting the support you need.

9. Keep a detailed journal. Feeling in control of your life can go a long way toward making you feel better. Keep records of every call you make, every letter you receive, and every day you take action toward resolving your claim.
10. Contact a victims’ assistance group. There are victims’ assistance groups out there just for people who have been affected by identity theft. They can lead you through the process of fixing the issue and offer references for further support.

Examples are:

- **Identity Theft Assistance Center:** If your financial services company belongs to ITAC, it can refer you to this free service for help.
- **Identity Theft Resource Center:** ITRC provides toll-free, no-cost victims’ assistance and consumer education.
- **Identity Theft Victims Assistance Network:** Check this website for victims’ resources listed by state.

11. Consider getting professional help. “If you are someone who has experienced identity theft, do not shame yourself or in any way tell yourself you should be past it if you’re still experiencing emotional symptoms,” says Turner. “It’s important for you to pay attention to your mental state and seek out counsel if you need it. Talk to your clergy, see a life coach or a therapist, see a professional who can help you on that healing path.”

12. Come to terms with the crime. Like any form of trauma, there isn’t a set time for a victim to be able to move forward after falling prey to an identity thief. The way to move forward, Turner says, is to accept the challenge that the crime has presented, but recognize the power and ability to move forward.

“It really is such a tremendous invasion of privacy,” says Turner. “What people really have to do is learn to reestablish themselves separately from their identity.”



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If you haven't been a victim of identity theft, here are steps to take to avoid becoming the next target.

Although identity theft isn't 100 percent avoidable, there are a number of steps you can take to help protect yourself and your family.

Since one of the biggest emotional challenges many victims face is a loss of control, Molitor says it's important to have a plan in place ahead of time in case you become a victim.

“The best thing to do is be proactive,” she says. “Make a list now and consider ‘What would I do?’ if you became a victim. Knowledge is key.”

Here are some steps for reducing your risk of identity theft:

- Keep birth certificates, Social Security cards, and other personal documents in a lockbox in your home. Make sure they are put away when someone is working in your home or even if you have a roommate.
- When disposing of documents, use a diagonal shredder, which makes documents harder to piece together than a traditional shredder does.
- Don't leave outgoing bills, government forms, or tax forms in a mailbox. Take them directly to the post office. Have your mail held by the post office while on vacation.
- Don't put your driver's license number on your personal checks. Consider writing just your first initial and last name instead of your full name.
- Don't toss credit card receipts in public places.
- Install anti-virus software, anti-malware software, and a firewall on your computer and keep them up-to-date. A tech-savvy identity thief can use a virus to get personal information from your computer without you even knowing.
- Use unique passwords that are different for each website.
- Don't put your birthdate or other sensitive information on your social media accounts, even just the month and day. A thief can figure out the year you were born by looking at your posts.
- Consider a credit monitoring and identity theft protection product, such as **Equifax Complete™**, which will alert you to changes in your credit file such as a newly opened account. Equifax Complete is available for the individual as well as the family (two adults and up to four minor children).

“Navigating the waters after falling victim to identity theft can be taxing,” says Loughran. “But armed with the right knowledge, victims can take control with minimal financial and emotional damage.”

For additional information to better understand identity theft, how it happens, and how to help safeguard yourself and your family from becoming victims, visit **IdentityProtection.com**.





ABOUT EQUIFAX

Equifax Personal Solutions empowers consumers with the confidence and control to be their financial best. Find out more about Equifax's innovative suite of credit monitoring and identity protection products at www.equifax.com. Learn about identity theft and how to help protect yourself and your family at IdentityProtection.com. Get smart information on everything from credit to retirement, all in one place at the Equifax Finance Blog, blog.equifax.com.

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