

A Guidebook for Clergy on...

Sexual Assault,

Trauma 

Spiritual Healing



Sexual Assault, Trauma and Spiritual Health



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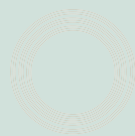
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The Texas Association Against Sexual Assault (TAASA) is the statewide organization committed to ending sexual violence in Texas. A non-profit educational and advocacy organization based in Austin, TAASA member agencies comprise a statewide network of more than 80 crisis centers that serve rural as well as metropolitan areas. Founded in 1982, the agency has a strong record of success in community education, youth outreach, law enforcement training, legislative advocacy, and curricula and materials development.

Sexual Assault, Trauma and Spiritual Healing

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Introduction

A sexual violation is the most intimate and arguably the most profound of all violations that a human being could experience. Sexual abuse, in any form, is traumatic and often confusing for the victims. Individuals, who are traumatized, especially at the hands of others, require support, understanding, and validation for what they are experiencing and trying to overcome. Unfortunately for the victims of sexual abuse, there is often a cloak of silence surrounding these issues, making receiving support and validation a difficult task.

Throughout history society has tended to attach a stigma to the victims of sexual crimes. Because of this, victims often keep this painful experience private. Many fear that they will not be believed or perhaps even blamed for what has happened to them. The inability, or reluctance, to seek support and validation makes recovery especially difficult for these individuals. In the last 30 years, grass roots organizations have begun to reach out to this population of victims. However, religious communities are often still reluctant to broach these topics with their congregations.


“For centuries the message has been effectively communicated: speak not about rape, incest, child molestation - especially in church. So the sin of sexual violence...has remained unmentionable.”¹

Sexual assault victims are left with various types of wounds from which they must recover. Some victims may be left with physical injuries and scars. All victims of sexual trauma will be left with some form of emotional or psychological wounding. Perhaps most troubling of all, however, is the spiritual injury that results from this most intimate form of violation and betrayal. A sexual violation might be understood as a wounding of the soul. It does violence to one's very spirit. Because these injuries are so personal and so profound, they often result in painful existential searching and questioning. Many of these philosophical concerns are best addressed within spiritual and religious contexts. However, since religious communities have often avoided these issues, the sense of isolation and betrayal can be even more pronounced for sexual assault victims seeking spiritual support and guidance.

There are many reasons that these topics have been avoided. Clergy and their faith communities may feel awkward or ill equipped to discuss these issues. There are many myths and misunderstandings about the nature of sexual abuse. We are loath to believe that this type of dreadful behavior is so common, and so we cling to denial as a way of preserving our belief in a safe and just universe. Whatever the reason, we must prepare ourselves within our faith communities to address these issues with intelligence and compassion. Texas statistics indicate that one in five females will become a victim of sexual abuse in her lifetime, and one in twenty males will also fall victim to sexual crimes (Busch, 2003). These are staggering numbers. We must acknowledge that our churches and synagogues are full of individuals struggling to overcome sexual trauma. There are many wounded souls that are in need of assistance on their path to recovery.

The responsibility of ministers and church leaders is great. Religious leaders are often seen as the “mouthpiece of God” and have tremendous power and influence with believers and even to some degree with non-believers. It is extremely important to become educated about victims and sexual abuse issues before attempting to counsel with this population. Even the most seemingly innocuous comment, made in innocence or ignorance, can create further injury for victims and hinder their ability to cope and recover.

¹ Sexual Violence: The Unmentionable Sin, An Ethical and Pastoral Perspective by Marie Marshall Fortune



The seriousness of these “second injuries” cannot be overstated. The inability to heal one’s soul and find spiritual peace can result in suicidal ideation or even spiritual death.

This guidebook will provide the reader with legal definitions of sexual assault and what constitutes consent. Common myths will be discussed and the facts about these issues will be clarified. Sexual violence, the nature of trauma, and post-traumatic stress syndrome will be explained. Specific spiritual concerns such as virginity, pregnancy, and forgiveness will be discussed. Finally, a practical guide for providing assistance and crisis intervention will be provided.

Sexual Assault Defined

Sexual acts, committed by one person against another, without that person’s consent, are considered sexual violence. The legal term for this is sexual assault, and it is against the law. If someone forces another person in any way to have sexual relations with them, even if they have had sex with that person before, it is sexual assault. Rape is often thought of as intercourse forced upon a female victim by a male assailant. However, this is only one form of sexual assault. Sexual assault includes all sexual acts, regardless of the orifice involved, regardless of the method of stimulation or penetration, and regardless of the genders of the victim and the assailant. Further, although sexual assault is an act of violence, physical violence, such as a punch or a slap, does not have to be present in order for an act to be a sexual assault. The vital part of the legal definition hinges on the term consent.

What is Consent?

Consent means that both parties freely and willingly participate in sexual contact as a result of mutual interest. Consent means agreeing to, or choosing to, participate in any activity with a partner. Force or threats of bodily harm, injury, or death may be used to gain sexual access to the victim. The victim may acquiesce because of an inability to escape. This does NOT equal consent.

Consent is only possible when there is equal power between both people. This is the reason that a child can never give legal consent to an adult. A person who is mentally handicapped cannot give legal consent. A person who is asleep, passed out, or highly intoxicated cannot give consent. Further, consent is not when someone is too afraid to say ‘no’ or to fight back. Victims often submit out of fear, this is not consent.

A perpetrator may gain access to a victim through pressure. An unwilling partner might be coerced or intimidated into sexual activity by a person in a position of power or dominance. Employers, clergy members, and police officers that use their position to gain access to nonconsenting sexual partners fall into this category. Individuals who are pressured or manipulated into a sexual relationship because they fear what might happen if they say no, are not willing, consensual partners.

Not all sexual assaults provide sufficiently clear information or evidence to produce a strong enough case for an arrest and court proceedings. Just because a case is not pursued within our legal system, does not mean that a sexual assault did not occur. In fact, comparatively few sexual assault cases actually result in an arrest and a conviction. Further, 84% sexual abuse cases are never even reported to the authorities (Busch, 2003). The bottom line is, if someone perceives that they have been sexually victimized we must

take them at their word and respond with compassion and nonjudgement, regardless of the legal status of the case.

Myths and Facts

There are many misconceptions about sexual abuse. These commonly held myths contribute to the problem of people responding inappropriately to victims of sexual trauma. Many people, including victims, still perceive a sexual attack as the fault of the victim. It is important to understand the facts so that we can provide intelligent and educated responses to those we seek to assist.

Myth: People often agree to sexual activity or intercourse and later change their minds, or feel guilty, and then cry "rape".

Fact: According to the F.B.I. an estimated 2-4% of all reported rapes are considered false reports. This is the exact same statistic as for any other felony crime.

Survivors are often aware of this myth and are, therefore, reluctant to make a report or even tell anyone what has happened for fear they will not be believed. However, when one considers the scrutiny and embarrassment generally associated with claiming sexual abuse, it seems obvious that few people would be likely to subject themselves to this for the sake of a lie. Further, regardless of how the situation might appear to others, the victim is the one who knows best whether or not there was consent. Therefore, as counselors and spiritual guides it is imperative that we assume a supportive role with the victim. It is not our job to interrogate or determine fault, but rather to offer support, unconditional love, and guidance toward spiritual healing.


Myth: Only young, attractive women get raped. Some women could never be raped because they are too old, ugly, fat, etc.

Fact: Rape is a nonselective crime. All women, and men, are potential victims of sexual assault whether young, old, fat, slim, pretty, or ugly. There have been rape victims ranging in age from infants to 90+ years of age. Rape victims come from both rich and poor neighborhoods. They are married and single. They are from all different races and religions.

Myth: Rape is a spontaneous crime.

Fact: Rapes are usually planned ahead of time. In rapes involving one attacker, 58% were planned ahead of time. In rapes involving two or more attackers, more than 90% were planned. The rapist usually plans a situation where the victim will be vulnerable and unable to receive help from others.

Myth: Most rapes occur at night in public places.



Fact: Most rapes occur in the afternoon or evening in the victim's home or place of employment. Fifty percent (50%) of reported rapes occurred in the victim's home. As a result, many victims suffer increased trauma since the violation occurred at a time and place they believed they were safe.

Myth: Rapists are dirty, degenerate, sex-crazed, maniacal, insane, poorly educated men from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Fact: Rapists come from all economic, racial, religious, educational, and social backgrounds. Over half of convicted rapists were married at the time of the assault and living what appeared to be socially normal lives. Rapists are primarily between the ages of 17 and 30, but may be of any age. They tend to blend into society at all levels and fit the norm in every other way.

Myth: Some victims ask for it by the way they dress or by their actions.

Fact: Sometimes people do things that are negligent or irresponsible, such as drinking in excess, hitch hiking, or leaving the door unlocked. However, this negligence does not erase the responsibility of the person who took advantage of the opportunity to commit a crime. Most rapes are planned and based on the offender's perception that a victim is an easy and vulnerable target, not because of what they were wearing at the time. No one ever "asks" for it, or deserves to be victimized even if their behavior places them at high risk.

We would never think of telling someone that was injured by a drunk driver that it was her fault for driving on a holiday. We would never think of telling a man that his wife's murder was his fault because he did not make sure that none of the windows in the house could be opened and crawled through. Yet, victims of sexual abuse are still commonly blamed for their own victimization. An individual's naiveté, ignorance, carelessness, or even poor choices, do not justify sexual assault. The one we must hold responsible is the person who chose to commit the sexual offense.

Myth: Rape is committed by strangers.

Fact: 75 per cent to 85 per cent of all sexual assaults are committed by someone known to the victim. Some reports indicate that over half of all sexual assaults occur on dates.

Most sexual assault cases fall into the category of either acquaintance or date rape. An "acquaintance rape" is one committed by someone known to the victim such as a friend, relative, classmate, or neighbor. A "date rape" occurs while on a date or between persons who expect to have, or may even already have, an intimate relationship. These scenarios can be somewhat vague and convoluted because they inevitably result in one person's word against another's. Again, we must remember that our role is not that of investigator but rather to provide compassion and support.

Myth: If a woman asks a man out, goes into his apartment, or lets him pay for the date it means she

wants sex, and the man is entitled to assume that he can have sex with her. Some men have indicated that they felt “led on” and believed that this justified rape.

Fact: The ultimate decision to proceed or decline sex lies with each individual and must be mutually consensual. Nothing gives one human being the right to force sexual contact on another person. A person may have had sex with someone in the past or may even be married to that person; this still does not give the other party the right to have sex with them whenever they wish. Both parties must be willing and must choose to engage in sexual contact.

Date and acquaintance rape cases tend to be longer in duration than stranger rapes. These incidents sometimes stretch over hours or may, in the case of child victims or assailants in positions of power, even consist of repeated incidents. Date rape is likely to occur on first or blind dates. Lethal weapons are rarely used. Verbal threats, pressure, drugs and alcohol, and physical force are used to intimidate and overpower the victim. Females in their last year of high school, freshman year of college, or in the summer between high school and college are major targets of these type of attacks.

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Sexual Violence and Trauma

What determines whether an incident is traumatic? The DSM IV defines a traumatic event as something that is: outside the range of usual human experience and that would be markedly distressing to anyone, e.g. serious threat to one’s life or physical integrity; serious threat or harm to one’s children, spouse, or other close relatives and friends; sudden destruction of one’s home or community; or seeing another person who is being (or has recently been) seriously injured or killed as a result of accidental or physical violence.

After over a decade of work in this field, this author has noted that incidents that threaten or destroy an individual’s belief system tend to be especially traumatic. Many cling to the belief that the righteous will be blessed and protected while those who are evil will be destroyed. This translates into an expectation that good things will come to good people and evil people will attract evil experiences. However, many good and righteous people have bad and even evil things happen to them in their lives. The realization that living a righteous life does not shield us from evil can be quite traumatizing. Sometimes these experiences cause a crisis of faith.

Sexual abuse is one of the most intimate and personal forms of violence a person can experience. The victim may or may not have perceived an imminent threat to his or her life, but certainly there is a troubling loss of control over one’s own body and immediate environment. Even if a weapon is not used, this level of control creates a threat to one’s physical well-being, integrity, and an implied threat to one’s life. The one space that we believe we are in control of, our own body, is violated and controlled by another person. This, of course, is a traumatic experience with far-reaching effects.

Traumatic Stress

Common stress creates a combination of neurological and endocrine response mechanisms that can affect and alter every organ and function of the human body. Stress can cause sleep and eating disturbances, fatigue, and moodiness. Prolonged stress commonly results in physical illness such as ulcers, high blood pressure, heart disease, and lowered immune functions. Many other physical and mental health problems have also been linked to stress.

Traumatic experiences result in an extreme form of stress called traumatic stress. Traumatic Stress is an extremely intensive stress arousal response that follows a traumatic experience. Traumatic stress can last for days, weeks, months, and even years.

Traumatic stress produces a wide range of symptoms. An individual's response to a traumatic event is quite personal and subjective. No two people will respond in exactly the same way to the same type of incident. One's beliefs, expectations, life experiences, coping mechanisms, and available support systems all effect the way he or she will respond, and eventually come to cope with what has happened. Symptoms of traumatic stress include:

- Sleep Disturbances and Fatigue- Some may suffer from severe insomnia while others may not be able to do anything but sleep. Dreams and nightmares are a common symptom. Trauma victims may also experience extreme fatigue as a result of the inability to sleep peacefully.
- Inability to Concentrate- There is a biochemical response to trauma. Glucocortoids can cause damage to the language and logic memory functions of the brain. Memories may be disjointed and the chronology of events may be difficult to organize. Traumatic stress makes it difficult to focus, concentrate, or think in a logical, systematic way. Many who suffer from traumatic stress notice a decrease in their ability to perform at school and at work.
- Eating Disturbances- When our bodies are in crisis reaction mode, blood is diverted from our major organs and channeled to our extremities. This prepares us to run or fight, but interferes with digestion. Some victims find that they suffer from nausea, an inability to eat, or feeling ill after they eat. Traumatic stress can trigger ulcers, heart burn, weight loss or in some cases even overeating as an attempt to self-nurture.
- Triggers and Anxiety Attacks - Exposure to sights, sounds, smells, etc. that are connected to the traumatic memory can trigger a crisis reaction. Smelling the cologne that was worn by the assailant, for example, may cause extreme anxiety or a reaction of panic. If the victim was attacked in an elevator, he or she may have difficulty riding in an elevator because it triggers an anxiety response. Some victims may have difficulty with some forms of sexual activity because it triggers the traumatic memory. Sometimes those who suffer from anxiety attacks are not aware of what has triggered the sense of danger and panic. These reactions are quite troubling to the victim and often cause them to feel that they are "going crazy". These reactions are, however, quite normal. Identifying the triggering event should help alleviate the panic reaction. These symptoms should begin to subside and become less frequent in time. If they do not, the victim should seek professional help.
- Sexual Dysfunction - Victims of sexual abuse may have difficulty engaging in consensual, loving, sexual contact. Sexual touch may trigger a crisis response and cause feelings of danger and panic.

Further, victims of sexual abuse are often quite fearful of being vulnerable to another person. Trusting someone enough to enjoy a sexual relationship can be extremely difficult for some survivors.


On the other hand, some victims, especially victims of chronic childhood sexual abuse, tend to struggle with promiscuity and often engage in risky or somewhat abusive sexual relationships. This is a normal reaction to being abused by someone who is intimate with the child. In these situations the child often confuses sexual contact with much needed love and affection. Although the sexual abuse feels bad and frightening, the intimacy and affection feel nurturing to the child. This creates a great deal of confusion for some victims as they attempt to understand and embrace their own adult sexuality.

- **Hyper-vigilance** - Traumatic stress often causes an inability to relax and feel safe. Victims often suffer from an extreme sensitivity to perceived danger and threats. They may show signs of extreme defensiveness, or be quick to anger. They may be quite jumpy, unable to sleep deeply, or unable to be still and relax. Victims may have a fear of being vulnerable and have great difficulty trusting others.
- **Substance Abuse** - Victims suffering from traumatic stress may try to self-medicate. In an attempt to finally relax, sleep, or stop reliving the experience, victims may turn to alcohol, drugs, painkillers, or other numbing substances.
- **Physical Illness**- Victims frequently complain of headaches, stomach-aches, and neck and back pain. Victims may find that they are ill frequently. Traumatic stress has been linked to ulcers, high blood pressure, heart disease, sexual dysfunction, lowered immune function, chronic fatigue, depression, and other illnesses and diseases.

When individuals continue to experience a specific series of symptoms, feelings, and behaviors for more than one month following a trauma, they may be suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. If you suspect that someone you are working with might be suffering from PTSD, you should assist him or her in finding a good therapist who specializes in traumatic stress, and encourage that person to pursue specialized help. PTSD symptoms can be quite debilitating and interrupt every aspect of the victim's life. Effective treatments are available and the victim should be able to choose among several possible options. It is important, however, to seek a therapist who specializes, and is experienced, in working with trauma victims. Traumatic stress is frequently misdiagnosed, and therefore many have had unsatisfactory experiences when seeking help. Contact your local victim assistance agency or rape crisis center for reputable referrals.

Trauma and Loss

Coping with a traumatic experience closely resembles the experience of grief and loss. Victims of sexual assault and trauma do, in fact, grieve many losses. Although there may not have been a death, there are numerous losses that these victims must come to terms with. Most of these losses represent permanent changes in the victims' lives. These are things that cannot be replaced or returned to a pre-crisis state.

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- Loss of Innocence - Victims of sexual trauma will never look at others, themselves, or the world in quite the same way. Loss of innocence is a major issue for child victims. Many survivors of child sexual abuse mourn the childhood that they never had, and will never get back, for the rest of their lives.
 - Loss of Safety - Even if the perpetrator goes to prison, many victims never feel completely safe again. Most of us live with at least the illusion of safety. We do not think of something terrible suddenly happening to us for no apparent reason. Victims of sexual assault no longer have the illusion of safety.
 - Loss of Trust - Victims often have difficulty trusting others again. This is especially true for victims of acquaintance rape. The inability to trust affects all of one's relationships and makes it especially difficult to establish and maintain an intimate relationship.
 - Loss of Virginity - Victims who were virgins prior to the assault often find this loss quite troubling and may question how this affects their personal identity and spiritual cleanliness.
 - Financial Loss - Victimization often comes with great financial expense. There are medical bills and loss of wages. Victims sometimes have to move or relocate as a result of the crime. Some victims have even lost their jobs due to missing work or an inability to concentrate and perform up to standard.
 - Loss of Relationships- Spouses, significant others, family members, and friends sometimes blame the victim or become impatient with the difficulty of the recovery process. This sometimes results in the loss of significant relationships in the victim's life.
 - Loss of Faith-Sexual abuse and trauma often result in the victim's loss of faith: loss of faith in others, their own judgment, the criminal justice system, and even loss of faith in God.
 - Loss of Future - Victimization often brings with it the death of the future as we imagined it. Often times victims must re-envision their futures to include this traumatic event as a defining event in their lives. Loss of jobs, relationships, faith and beliefs all require us to re-define our plans for and visions of our futures.
 - Loss of Control - Loss of control and the feelings associated with having been helpless are probably the most profound and troubling of all the losses. Loss of control is closely tied to traumatic stress reactions. Loss of control of one's property and environment is upsetting, but loss of control over one's most personal space, one's own body, is especially traumatic. Regaining a sense of control over one's life is a primary focus of recovery.

Crisis Reaction

There is a normal and predictable human response to trauma that occurs in all of us when exposed to a traumatic situation. This is called the crisis reaction. When humans perceive danger or a crisis of some kind our physical response is one of fight, flight, or freeze. We do not reason or logically choose this physical reaction. Rather, this basic instinct for survival simply takes over in times of crisis.

When our bodies produce a fight or flight reaction our heart rate increases, we produce large amounts of adrenaline, and some of our physical senses become quite heightened while others may shut down. These chemical changes may take a long time to normalize. Some victims find that they suffer from anxiety attacks, or extreme hyper-vigilance for some time after the incident due to the overload of adrenaline in their systems. Some suffer from chronic anger, rage, or overly defensive reactions to perceived threats. Some victims will need professional assistance to help their physical bodies recover from these changes in chemistry and brain function that result from a trauma.


A frozen fright reaction produces physical shock, disorientation, and numbness. Victims who freeze during the attack may struggle with feelings of guilt and shame because they feel that they should have fought back or put up more of a struggle. It is important to reassure these victims that frozen fright is a survival instinct. It is not their fault that their system chose this method of survival. The “fault” for the attack remains with the assailant. Numbness may persist for an indefinite period of time. When the numbness finally subsides the victim may experience rage, depression, or dramatic emotional mood swings. These are all normal reactions to what has happened. However, if things do not begin to normalize within a couple of months, professional help is probably needed.

There are three basic stages of a crisis. The first stage is known as Impact. This occurs in the immediate aftermath of the traumatic event or when victims initially confront what has happened to them. The next stage is referred to as Recoil. This is characterized by a flood, or great upheaval, of emotions. The final stage is Reorganization. During this phase victims must reconstruct their beliefs and their sense of equilibrium (Bard & Sangrey, 1979).

Impact

When an individual first realizes what is happening or has happened to them they enter into crisis mode. When victims talk about the Impact phase they often describe feeling like they have been punched in the face or struck from behind. The impact of a traumatic event literally takes one’s breath away and leaves them shocked, numb, and in disbelief. Some victims experience denial, which ranges from a total inability to recall what has happened to simply viewing the situation as not as bad as it is in reality. This is nature’s way of protecting us from the full impact of a traumatic event until we are more able to cope with the situation. Victims have been known to repress memories of sexual trauma for days, months, and even years.

The goals of crisis intervention in this stage include addressing the immediate needs of the victim such as physical and safety needs, the need for emotional support, and the need for information. Helpers must suspend judgment, listen with empathy, normalize the victim’s reaction, and predict and prepare the victim



for future reactions. Further, it is important to begin to return a sense of control to the victim as soon as possible.

Recoil

A natural reaction to being struck is to pull away from, or recoil, from the trauma. The Recoil stage is characterized by a cataclysm, or a deluge, of emotions. Victims are often reeling with overwhelming and chaotic emotions. They may feel anger and rage and then sorrow and depression. Victims may feel relief that they are alive or the abuse is over and then be struck with fear and feelings of panic. This emotional roller coaster is exhausting and many victims describe feeling that they are “going crazy”.

Victims often experience a kind of existential crisis during this period. Questions about who they are, what they can believe in, and the purposefulness of it all often arise. Some question the very foundation of their beliefs as they struggle to make sense of what has happened to them. Issues of grief, trust, and faith are often prevalent.

The goals of crisis intervention during this stage include validation of the victim’s reactions to the trauma, support, empathic listening, and normalizing and predicting their reactions to traumatic stress. Helpers must be patient with the wide range and often changing emotions and thoughts of the victim. Thoughts and feelings may seem chaotic during this stage. However, this is simply the victim’s attempt to grasp the situation and attribute meaning to this new experience. Remember to suspend judgment and offer unconditional love and positive regard to those you are assisting.

Reorganization

The Reorganization stage is where victims begin to regain a sense of equilibrium in their lives. This involves coming to terms with the losses they have experienced, regaining a sense of control and personal empowerment, re-establishing trust, re-defining the future, finding meaning again, rediscovering the self, and often re-defining their values and beliefs. These are the goals of crisis intervention in the Reorganization stage. This stage is where we hope to achieve real spiritual healing and find peace and direction once again.

Crisis Intervention

Crisis intervention is the act of providing assistance to those who have been traumatized or are in crisis. The goal is to reduce the severity of the crisis and help the victim overcome or master the crisis and its repercussions. Individuals seeking help may have multiple issues that are interfering with their lives. However, the crisis or trauma should be addressed alone. Attempting to solve too many issues at once will be overwhelming and unproductive. When the crisis is mastered satisfactorily victims will be able to give full attention to other issues that may be disrupting their lives.

Safety

When offering assistance to victims in the early stages of crisis, it is important to first assess for their immediate needs. First and foremost, is the victim now safe? If the person is still in an unsafe environment, assisting them in finding safety must be your first priority. Even if the perpetrator no longer poses an imminent threat to the victim, he or she may not feel safe. Help victims identify strategies that will help them feel safe and secure. It is important to provide a safe space for your visits. Reassure victims that they are safe when they are here with you and be sensitive to their insecurities and fears. Some victims may not feel safe behind closed doors, alone, with a man, for example. In this case perhaps meetings could take place in an open space with others nearby or within view.

It is also important to give some thought to how you will handle situations where the victim's abuser is a member of your congregation or a member of the clergy. Discuss these scenarios with the leadership of your church and decide what your policies will be should this situation arise. The one place that people should always feel safe and secure is in their chosen place of worship and within their faith communities. If the perpetrator is also a member of this community the victim loses this safe haven and this source of support.

Confidentiality

Assure victims that your conversations are confidential and always keep these confidences. There are only a couple of exceptions that would require breaking confidentiality. Always be open and honest and tell those you are working with about these exceptions. Let them know that if you feel that they might take their own life or the life of another that you will need to share that information with those who can offer professional intervention. If you are talking with a child victim, let them know that if you receive information that indicates that they are in danger of further abuse that you will need to share that information.

Identify Support

People in crisis need a great deal of emotional support. Help victims identify their own personal sources of support. Ask who they would most like to be with when they are hurting. Resources might include family members, old friends with whom they have lost touch, a co-worker, or other members of their congregation. The more sources of support they can identify the better. This will help alleviate their feelings of isolation.

Empathic Listening

As victims discuss their thoughts and feelings it is important to suspend all judgment. One of the most helpful things we can do for victims of trauma is to truly listen with empathy. Listening with genuine compassion, empathy, and nonjudgment will help the victim feel safe and begin to trust again. Providing a safe place that is free of judgment allows victims to explore their true thoughts, feelings, and fears. This is the beginning of regaining some sense of control and re-establishing meaning in their lives.



There are six simple steps to empathic listening.

1. Stop: Stop all distractions. Go to a quiet place where you will not be disturbed and can give your full attention. Turn off telephones and pagers. Do not take notes.
2. Look: Give the person eye contact. This shows that you are interested and that you respect him or her.
3. Listen: Really listen, with your whole heart and soul. Listen for what they are not saying as well. The part they avoid talking about may be the most painful aspect of the experience for this person.
4. Ask Questions: Ask questions only to clarify what they have already told you. It is not appropriate to ask questions to satisfy your own curiosity. It is not appropriate to ask probing questions or to ask for more information than they have chosen to share. When we listen to empathize we give the speaker the control of the conversation.
5. Paraphrase Content: In a few short sentences, reiterate what you have understood them to say. Use your own words and be brief. This is simply a way of making sure that you have understood the content of their message correctly.
6. Paraphrase Feelings: In your own words, tell them what you understand them to be feeling and experiencing. They may not tell you directly what they are feeling. This step requires you to use insight and intuition. Letting the person know what you believe they are feeling communicates a genuine interest and concern for what they are experiencing.

Normalize

The crisis reaction often makes victims feel as though they are going crazy. During the Recoil stage, in particular, victims experience such a wide and rapidly changing range of emotions that they may feel unstable or abnormal. It is important to reassure victims that their thoughts, feelings, and physical symptoms of traumatic stress are normal and natural responses to extremely stressful and unusual circumstances. Feelings of rage, anger toward God, and fantasies of revenge may be especially troubling to the victim. It is imperative that you assure them that these thoughts and feelings are natural and not an indication that they are unstable or immoral. When victims feel shamed by these reactions they may try to hide these feelings rather than discussing and working through these natural stages toward recovery.

Predict

An important function of crisis intervention is to predict and prepare the victim for future traumatic stress reactions. Educate victims about triggers and flashbacks, feelings of rage, and crises of faith. Prepare them for the inevitable grieving process and help them identify the losses that they have experienced as a result of the traumatic event. Prepare victims for the long road toward emotional and spiritual healing. Remind them that this is a process that takes time and will certainly not be resolved over night. However, assure them that in time they will find peace, happiness, and meaning again.

Plan for Coping

Help victims identify their support systems and encourage them to gather supportive others around them. Encourage them to give special attention to taking care of themselves as they work on healing. Ask them what places and activities make them feel safe and secure, warm and loved, and nurtured. Encourage them to engage in these activities often. They should focus on getting a good night's sleep, exercise, and eating healthy and regular meals. Spending time outside in the sunlight and appreciating the beauty of God's creations can be quite healing. Some victims find writing poetry or keeping a journal to be therapeutic and healing. Prayer and meditation are also soothing and can help victims find a sense of calm and peace.

Finding Equilibrium

There are several major issues that must be resolved during the Reorganization stage. The primary issue victims must address is regaining a sense of personal empowerment and control in their lives. Helpers and spiritual guides should encourage victims to be independent, make decisions, and take control of their lives. Sometimes making a police report or confronting the perpetrator feels empowering to victims. Assist them in identifying things they can do that will re-establish a sense of control in their lives.

Victims must learn to trust again. You can facilitate this process by being someone who is trustworthy, compassionate, and supportive. Victims often incur further injury from those who are supposed to help them. Police, medical personnel, counselors, and even pastors and ministers often injure victims out of ignorance or carelessness. These "second wounds" are often even more hurtful than the sexual assault because it is caused at the hands of someone the victim believed they could trust. Helpers, especially clergy and spiritual leaders, must be extra cautious of causing second wounds.


Victims often find that they must redefine their values and beliefs in a way that is deeper and more compatible with their newfound maturity and wisdom. Victims must find new meaning in life and a new vision of the future. Toward the end of this difficult journey, many discover that the most difficult and painful experiences in their lives were the very experiences that revealed their greatest strengths and deepest character. Great wisdom and compassion are discovered in the wake of great trials. During the final stages of recovery, help victims identify the wisdom and strength they have discovered as a result of this difficult experience.

What to Say and What NOT to Say

People struggle to say the right thing to those who are suffering. Most of us want to help alleviate the pain and often say things that were intended to bring comfort. Unfortunately, our attempts to comfort are often the very comments that cause more injury. Review the following suggestions for what to say and what not to say to those who are suffering. Consider your words carefully before consoling or counseling with someone who is suffering from a traumatic experience.

DON'T SAY

Well at least... or, You can be thankful that...



In an attempt to make the incident seem less devastating people often try to get victims to “look at the bright side”.

This is insensitive and makes people feel defensive. When our world has been turned upside down, there is no bright side at that moment.

You are lucky that...

Again, this is an insensitive comment. No one who has been sexually abused is “lucky”.

You’ll get over it.

In time and with lots of support, most victims of sexual assault recover and heal. However, it is questionable whether or not anyone really “gets over” traumatic, life changing events.

I understand how you feel. I know what you are going through.

The fact is, you do not understand how another person feels about their personal experiences. We can only guess and make assumptions about how others feel, especially if we have not had the same experience. We can try to imagine how we might feel in similar circumstances. However, this is not the same as knowing how another person feels about their experience.

Be strong.

Victims need a safe place where they can feel and express the overwhelming and often frightening emotions that they are experiencing. They do not need the added pressure of trying to be strong or denying what they really feel. They need a trustworthy and supportive person to allow them to be completely honest.

DO SAY

You are safe here.

I’m glad you are here.

Your reactions are normal.

It’s not your fault.

I can’t imagine how you must feel.

I’m sorry this happened to you.

How can I help?

Spiritual Concerns

For many individuals, profound traumatic experiences result in painful existential searching. Victims may find themselves preoccupied with difficult questions about existence, good and evil, justice and fair-

ness, spiritual beliefs, faith, and God. Many will question the very foundation of beliefs they have built their lives upon to this point. This questioning can lead to a sense of being lost and adrift with nothing to trust or believe in. Recovery will be dramatically affected by how well these issues are resolved for the victim. Victims frequently ask questions and struggle with issues that will be discussed at length in this section.

“Why would God cause or allow this happen to me?”

Assure them that God is never the author of evil. God would not cause nor purposefully introduce evil into their lives. We live in an imperfect world with imperfect people. We are all granted freedom of choice and, unfortunately, some use that freedom to make choices that are evil or destructive and hurtful to others. Throughout history kind and righteous individuals have experienced tragic events. There are many things in life that seem to indicate that there is no justice or logic directing life's events. Although we do not have the ability to understand all things in this immediate moment, it is possible to find spiritual peace and purpose in life again. This is why we must have faith. When we fixate on the unfairness of what has happened, and allow ourselves to grow in bitterness and anger, we block our own ability to heal and to grow. Encourage victims to ask a more purposeful question: “How can God help me to heal, find peace, and gain wisdom from this difficult experience?”

“Why me? What did I do to deserve this?”


Assure them that no one ever deserves to be raped or abused. It is not their fault that this happened to them. The choice to commit this offense belonged to the assailant. Perhaps the victim was trusting, naïve, or even careless, and this made it easy for the perpetrator to prey upon them. This, however, does not mean that it is their fault or that they deserved for it to happen.

“Does God see me as unclean? Have I lost my virtue or my chastity?”

This can be a particularly difficult issue, especially if the victim lost his or her virginity as a result of the assault. However, morality and virtue are spiritual qualities. While the perpetrator may have stolen the person's physical virginity, chastity and virtue cannot be taken from you. These personal qualities are for each of us to protect or to give away. Victims of sexual abuse are not in control of what happened to them. Assure them that God does not view them as unclean, but rather loves them dearly and grieves their loss and pain along with them.

Pregnancy

An unfortunate result of sexual abuse is sexually transmitted disease and/or pregnancy. A pregnancy caused by sexual assault exacerbates the trauma reaction for victims. Remember that feelings of powerlessness and loss of control are the primary issues causing trauma. Sexual assault survivors are already struggling with intense issues of powerlessness as a result of having lost control of what happens to their bodies. Pregnancy compounds these issues of loss of control. In addition to the assault, something profound and life changing is happening inside her body, and it was not something of her choosing. This will likely cause her to feel even more powerless.



An unwanted pregnancy naturally leads to personal and spiritual searching, but a pregnancy that is the result of rape or incest poses an especially complicated dilemma for the victim. The question of how to handle an unwanted pregnancy raises ethical and spiritual concerns. People tend to have very strong feelings and beliefs about this issue, and so the topic is often emotionally charged. Be cautious of your reactions to the victim's feelings. She may feel that her body has been taken over by something very wrong and evil. It is important to offer support and compassion for what she is experiencing. There is already a great deal of shame and guilt inherent in this experience for victims. Judgmental reactions and advice will cause further injury and complicate the recovery process.

There are three possible choices of how to handle an unwanted pregnancy. The woman can choose to give birth and raise the baby with the hope and prayer that she will be able to embrace and love the child. She can give birth and give the baby to adoptive parents with the hopes that the child will be raised in a loving and supportive home. Finally, she can choose to terminate the pregnancy with the hope that God will forgive her, she will be able to forgive herself, and she will be able to be at peace with this decision. Although some, and possibly all, of the choices may seem unacceptable to her, it is important to emphasize that she does have choice. She can take control of this situation and handle it the way that she believes is best. Regaining a sense of control is a vital part of the recovery process.

Although it may be tempting, one should never tell a victim what she must or even should do. This only emphasizes her perceptions of being powerless by making it seem as though she doesn't have choice. While you may believe that there is only one acceptable or appropriate choice, it is imperative that it is clear to her that she has the power to take control of the situation and make the choice that she believes is best for her. After all she is the one who will ultimately live with the consequences of that choice.

Clergy and spiritual guides have a certain amount of responsibility to direct others toward righteous and spiritually sound choices. Explore each of the three scenarios with the victim. Discuss the personal and spiritual benefits and challenges associated with each choice. Be clear about the official position of your religion on this issue. While most denominations condemn abortion, several of them make an exception in cases of rape or incest. These denominations generally state that in cases of rape or incest the decision should be made prayerfully and is between the woman and God. Be compassionate and suspend judgment. Encourage the victim to seek wisdom and guidance through prayer, and pray with her that she will have the courage to make the best decision possible. Assure her that God loves her and will not abandon her as she walks this difficult path.

Trust and Betrayal

Traumatic experiences often shake the very foundation of our beliefs. A sexual assault, in particular, may challenge one's beliefs about safety, fairness, and trust. We generally go through our lives feeling reasonably safe and in control of our environment and especially of our own bodies. A sexual assault destroys our belief that we are in control of our own safety and our own bodies. Sexual abuse may destroy the victim's belief in the trustworthiness of others. It may destroy the victim's trust in him or herself and the ability to accurately judge the character of others and his or her own potential safety. Victimization may also destroy one's belief in a fair and just universe and even make it difficult to trust in God. These feelings, while natural, can result in a profound sense of being alone, unsafe, and adrift.

Many victims experience a profound sense of betrayal, and for some this includes feelings of estrangement from and betrayal by God. These are natural feelings and are not an indication of the victim's inherent righteousness or rebellion. Most of us tend to believe that if we live a faithful and righteous life we will be blessed. When bad or evil things then happen to good people, they are often left to wonder why God would abandon them in their hour of need. These thoughts can lead to confusion, questioning, and doubt.

Victims should be reassured that these feelings are natural and understandable. Even Jesus, in the darkest hours before his death, wondered aloud why God had abandoned him. Suffering, unfortunately, is part of the human experience. Assist victims in finding the courage to trust and have faith that God loves them and wants them to find peace and happiness again. Reassure victims that the fact that God did not save them from this awful experience is not an indication that God does not love them. It is simply the reality of living in an imperfect world with imperfect people who have the freedom to make bad choices.


Anger

Anger is a natural and even a desirable part of the recovery process. This emotion comes from a good place and is motivated by the necessary feelings of love and protection of oneself, as a child of God, who deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. Righteous anger can be purposeful in recovery. It can give us the strength and motivation to carry on, to survive and move forward, rather than giving up. A victim should never be made to feel guilty for feeling anger or rage, even toward God. These feelings of confusion, doubt, betrayal, anger, and especially feelings of abandonment and anger toward God, for not preventing the awful event, must be addressed carefully with the victim. One should be cautious about taking a victim's anger away too soon. This is often the motivating force behind surviving and rebuilding a meaningful life.

We must, however, caution victims about directing energy toward destructive anger that fosters feelings of hatred, bitterness, or a desire for revenge. These feelings cannot coexist with spiritual peace and the healing of a wounded soul. If we hold onto bitter anger and hatred we block our own spiritual growth, health, and healing. Victims should be encouraged instead to direct this anger in purposeful ways. This powerful emotion may give them the courage they need to make a police report and pursue legal proceedings. Some victims get involved in anti-violence movements, or volunteer at rape crisis or child abuse centers. Some find it helpful to write angry poetry or to express themselves through art and music. Encourage victims to pray often and express their anger and fear openly to God, and to ask for healing, understanding, and spiritual peace.

Forgiveness

The question of forgiveness is often the most difficult and complicated spiritual issue that a victim must confront. Many victims ask if they are required to forgive the person who abused them. Forgiveness may seem like an unreasonable expectation given the seriousness of a sexual offense and the severity of injury to the victim. Many have grown up with the belief that one should "forgive and forget". However, how is it possible to put something so life changing and obviously unforgettable behind you? How can we, and should we, forgive those that are not repentant or apologetic for the terrible and hurtful things they have done to us? Further, does forgiveness mean not seeking justice or pressing charges? Does forgiveness mean embracing the offender, loving him, and welcoming him into your life? These choices seem counterintuitive and perhaps even dangerous given the nature of the offense.



These questions are profound and complicated for anyone to seek answers to. Clichés and simple platitudes are not appropriate responses to these deep and thoughtful questions. Spiritual leaders must be prepared to discuss these issues at length and must be well versed in the doctrine of their belief system. Most importantly, be aware that the answers to these questions depend a great deal on each individual's definition of forgiveness.

A common misconception is that forgiveness is a feeling toward the offender. Some believe that they have only forgiven when they can feel good toward and even embrace the person who violated them. In situations of abuse, embracing the perpetrator may not only seem illogical but could, in fact, be dangerous. Forgiveness can, instead, be viewed as a choice, rather than a feeling. Regardless of how angry and betrayed I may feel, I can choose to give my energy and attention to more purposeful thoughts and actions. I can choose to refuse to give the perpetrator any more power and control in my life by refusing to be overcome or distracted by hate and bitterness. This approach is empowering for victims because instead of passively waiting for a feeling that may never come, this gives victims the power to make a conscious choice.

The Greek word translated as “to forgive” means “to leave behind”. This does not mean that victims should forget or deny the abuse. It does not mean that victims must embrace the perpetrator or refuse to seek justice. At some point on the path toward spiritual healing, however, victims may find that they can leave the matter behind. Moving toward forgiveness in this manner can open the heart and soul, and make room for love, peace, and meaning to more easily enter one's life.

When we view forgiveness in this way, it may be relevant to explore the question of who forgiveness is really for. The perpetrator does not really need the victim's forgiveness. Ultimately, this matter lies between the offender and God. Forgiveness, it seems, is most beneficial and purposeful for the individual that does the forgiving. By letting go of bitterness and hate, we set ourselves free to discover spiritual healing and peace, thereby allowing our lives to be defined by strength and joy rather than cynicism and grief.

As we explore the issue of forgiveness we cannot overlook the issue of forgiveness of self. A life consumed by guilt and regret also cuts us off from healing and spiritual growth. Victims must forgive themselves for having been powerless, perhaps for trusting someone who did not deserve to be trusted, or for not having done more to prevent or stop the abuse. Compassion for one's own humanity and suffering is essential. It is only when we are able to take an honest look at our own human frailty and embrace, forgive, and truly love ourselves that we are able to offer that same gift to others.

A sexual trauma often causes a profound wounding of the soul. While a victim may recover physically, and learn to cope emotionally, true peace is only possible when spiritual healing is also present. Providing guidance, for those who are suffering, toward spiritual peace is an awesome responsibility and a humbling honor. May God grant you the wisdom, compassion, and insight to assist your brothers and sisters in finding solace and spiritual peace.

Scriptural References

Feeling that God has forgotten you:

Psalm 13

Romans 8: 38-39

Fear and Worry:

Psalm 27

Matthew 6: 25-34

Philippians 4:6-7

Doubt:

Mark 11: 22-25

James 1: 5-8

Troubled:

John 14: 1

John 14: 27

Doubt and Lack of Faith:

Matthew 17: 20-21

Romans 8: 38-39

Hopelessness:

Matthew 19:26

Recommended Readings

Through the Storm: A New Testament for Those in Crisis, IBS Publishing, 1999

This book is excellent and has lots of scriptural references in it. It is published by the International Bible Society.

God and the Victim, Edited by Lisa Barnes Lampman, Published jointly by Wm. B. Eerdsmans Publishing Co. and Neighbors Who Care, 1999.

Helping a Neighbor in Crisis: How to Encourage When You Don't Know What to Say, Edited by Lisa Barnes Lampman, Tyndale House Publishers, 1999

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Notes

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