

How to Respond to Victims in Crisis

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A thorough understanding of domestic and sexual abuse is essential when offering help to a victim. Often, victims are viewed to be responding in an irrational manner to what others may view as a standard or rational situation. Surviving trauma impacts the way information and memories are stored. For instance, when a victim seems unclear on the timeline of events or forgetful, this is likely due to the trauma they have experienced. They should not be discounted or not taken seriously because of it. Victims of domestic and sexual abuse often use survival and coping skills that are very rational to them in the face of the irrational, dangerous situations they face in their daily lives.

The victim is taking a courageous step in coming to you for help, and that courage must be met with equal compassion and understanding. If you are working with the victim on an ongoing basis, you may need to limit your interactions with the abuser to insure the victim's safety and trust. If the victim is female and expresses discomfort in speaking with a male clergy person, make every effort to refer her to a woman clergy person. If one is not available, ask how you can provide her services in a way that would make her more comfortable. If you are a female working with a male victim who prefers to speak to a male clergy, make every effort to accommodate his request.

When responding to victims in crisis, it is important to:

1) **Protect confidentiality.** The victim needs to know that information shared with you will be protected by you and only released to others when they have given you written permission to do so. Let the victim know the limitations to confidentiality, and your need to report any disclosure of child abuse/neglect. Do not confront the abuser with allegations or ask for the abuser's side, and do not share information with others who might bring information back to the abuser. Victim safety depends on this.

2) **Believe the victim.** This is a crucial component to being trauma-informed. The victim's ability to trust you will grow in response to you expressing belief in all that the victim tells you. Remember that the victim is also likely to minimize, deny and blame him/herself for the violence done towards them. Expressing doubt when a victim discloses will likely result in them not coming back to the faith community for help and not reaching out to other resources equipped to help them in this serious crisis.

3) **Listen with an open mind.** Empty your mind of biases and prejudices; put aside your perceptions of this person and the family. Focus your complete attention on all that the victim has to say; listen without judgment. Reiterate what the victim has said so they know you have heard and understood.

4) **Ask direct and clarifying questions.** Your ability to address this sensitive subject with candor will give the victim assurance that it is OK to talk about it. Do not use vague terms like "violence" and "threats." Help the victim name the abuse they are experiencing. Use specific terms, such as "hitting," "name-calling," "isolation," etc.

- 5) **Be cautious in expressing emotion.** It is good to be empathetic when listening to a victim recount their experiences. However, be careful not to react with disgust, anger, doubt, or shock. Extreme reactions can trigger the victim or make the victim reluctant to continue to share their experience. Keep your emotions in check.
- 6) **Address moral and religious concerns.** A victim's faith can be a powerful resource for survival or a roadblock to safety, depending on the victim's view and experiences. This is an opportunity to emphasize the love, safety and support found in faith traditions and communities.
- 7) **Give referrals, especially to local agencies.** Offer to let the victim call the local crisis center to learn all of the options available to address the abuse and to create a safety plan. It is important the victim sees that the faith community supports accessing outside resources to address the victim's needs more completely.
- 8) **Express concern for the victim's and children's safety.** Ask questions to better assess safety needs and help develop a safety plan. Encourage the victim to put away financial resources for an emergency if possible. If the abuser remains in the faith community, plan ways to allow the victim to maintain fellowship while preserving safety. If the victim requests it, help the victim find a safe place to go.
- 9) **Tell the victim they are not alone.** Stress that domestic and sexual violence can happen to anyone. One in 3 women and 1 in 4 men will be physically and/or sexually assaulted by an intimate partner in their lifetime. Local agencies provide support and information for all victims of domestic and sexual violence.
- 10) **Respect and support the victim's choices.** Understand that the victim is the most knowledgeable about the relationship and is capable of making the right decisions at the right time to protect themselves and the family, even if that means staying with the abuser. Do not have expectations or pressure the victim to take action one way or another. Instead, outline the options, and let the victim decide. Continue to support after the decision has been made, even if you do not agree with it. Isolation is a key way abusers control their partner, so continued support can help the victim feel more comfortable to attempt changes in the relationship, even if it doesn't happen soon after the abuse is disclosed.
- 11) **Acknowledge the victim's courage and that they are not responsible for the abuse.** The best way to keep communication open is to let the victim know that faith tradition does not condone the abuser's behavior, the victim did nothing to deserve the abuse, and that the victim is doing the right thing by finding safety. Acknowledge the courage it takes to come forward. Assure the victim that you will honor the disclosure and the faith community will do what they can to provide support.
- 12) **Set boundaries, and know your limits.** If something is beyond your expertise, make appropriate referrals and seek help from your local crisis center, community colleagues and other resources.

13) **Do not physically touch a victim without permission.** Many victims experience severe physical or sexual trauma and can be triggered by touch. Ask permission to hug, hold a victim's hand, etc. Never become emotionally or sexually involved with a victim.

14) **DO NOT IGNORE THE ABUSE.** Doing nothing sends a message to both the victim and the abuser that the abuse is condoned by those who know about it. When someone says, "We don't want to get involved," what the victim likely hears is, "You're not important enough for me to become involved" or "I don't believe you." Ignoring abuse, like not believing a victim who discloses, can determine whether he or she feels comfortable enough to seek help from the faith community or other resources.