

TRAUMA EXPERTS SHARE HOW TO CARE FOR AND SUPPORT SEXUAL ABUSE SURVIVORS

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By Jamie Aten

A recent *Houston Chronicle investigative report* discovered more than 700 survivors who experienced sexual abuse by pastors and other leaders at Southern Baptist churches over several decades.

Perhaps you know someone directly affected by sexual abuse mentioned in that story.

Far more likely you know someone who has been deeply impacted by sexual abuse not connected to this current report, but who after hearing about it, had feelings of trauma and hurt triggered.

Having studied trauma over the last 15 years around the globe, I've found very few people know how to provide care or support in these situations.

That's why I've asked four leading trauma experts to share their insights for helping sexual abuse survivors. Below are some ways to help according to these Christian mental health professionals.

Diane Langberg, Ph.D., Practicing Psychologist and International Speaker Working with Trauma Survivors, Diane Langberg, Ph.D. & Associates:

For those of you who would walk with survivors of sexual abuse, listen.

Trauma and abuse mean living with the recurrent, tormenting memories of atrocities witnessed or borne. Memories that infect victims' sleep with horrific nightmares, destroy their relationships, their capacity to work or study, torment their emotions, shatter their faith and mutilate hope.

Trauma is unusual you see, not because it rarely happens but because it swallows up and destroys normal human ways of living. If you would walk alongside those who have been abused and then silenced by the church of Jesus Christ, you must learn to listen and not instruct but rather enter in.

You must, like your Lord, learn to bend, to weep with and be a comforting presence. It is the work of Christ to do these things. Such work will encourage victims. Such work will change us.

Speak little; listen well; incarnate the wounded Savior and know His blessing through you and on you.

Tammy Schultz, Ph.D., Clinical Training Coordinator & Professor of Counseling, Wheaton College:

To members of the faith community, as survivors of sexual violence who represent God (i.e., pastor, elder, youth pastor) share their freight of anguish, they need advocates who will not sweep their stories of abuse under the proverbial carpet.

Survivors need churches that are dedicated to repairing the institutional cultures that enabled violations to initially occur. They long for church leaders who will obliterate language from their vocabularies such as "moral indiscretions," "misunderstandings," "mixed signals," or "sexual incidents," rather than acknowledging these experiences as the dehumanizing violations, and often crimes, that they were.

Far from being inconsequential, minimizing verbiage serves to hurl additional hurt. When survivors of sexual violence choose to share their stories of sexual violence, it is important that church members refrain from theological treatises explaining why the abuse occurred.

Even when survivors voice questions like: “Why did God allow this to happen?”, there are sometimes deeper spiritual questions lying below the surface like, “God, did it, do I, matter to you?” and “God, do you care how much this hurt me?”

And to these questions, survivors need space to lament over the grievous harm done to them. They need representatives of God who will say “I am so sorry” and “This was wrong.”

And they need advocates in the church who will be steadfast in their efforts to hold perpetrators wielding power and influence accountable. Survivors need churches that are dedicated to repairing the institutional cultures that enabled violations to initially occur.

Jenny Hwang, M.A., Managing Director, Humanitarian Disaster Institute at Wheaton College:

When it comes abuse survivors, creating a safe space for their stories is the first priority, of course taking into consideration that medical needs have been met.

A safe space means offering to listen without judgement, empathy, confidentiality, and most importantly, letting the survivors choose what they do with their stories and honoring their decision.

Organizations and institutions that represent places of healing (e.g., hospitals, churches) should receive training on basic trauma care and abuse in which they can learn to identify signs of abuse and handle situations in a way that doesn't perpetuate harm, including reporting abuse.

It is also crucial that we treat abuse survivors as more than just their abuse. We don't want to minimize the ways in which the abuse affected them, but we should remember that the abuse does not define who the survivors are and will be, and avoid unintentionally creating stigma and labels.

Heather Davediuk Gingrich, Ph.D., Professor of Counseling, Denver Seminary:

When survivors finally gather enough courage to talk about their abuse, one of the worst things that can happen is that they are directly or indirectly blamed for their own abuse, or are accused of lying.

Survivors need to be heard and understood; not just once, but over the long haul. They need Christians who are willing to walk beside them in their process of healing, however long that takes.

Many could benefit from counseling, and may need financial help to pay for it. Individuals, specific churches, or the denomination as a whole could help by funding counseling for survivors.

When individuals have been harmed by church leaders, the response of other church leaders is crucial. Survivors need other church leaders to stand up for them and other survivors.

They need church leaders to say, “What happened to you is not ok, and we're going to do everything in our power to help keep it from happening to someone else” and then to actually follow through and advocate for change.

Survivors' relationships with God are inevitably damaged, particularly when an early representative of God is the perpetrator.

When congregations are better trauma-informed, their leaders and congregants will be better able to allow survivors to wrestle with hard questions such as “Why did God not protect me?” and “Why was I the one who was victimized?” without offering simplistic, over-spiritualized answers that might only drive them farther from God.

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