



Ministering to Victims of Sexual Abuse

If you are ministering to a victim of abuse and the victim is a child (under the age of 18), you are legally required to report the sexual abuse to the police immediately. It does not matter if parents or others prefer otherwise: you are legally required under penalty of law to report.

- **Validate them**
 - Reiterate that abuse is never the victim's fault, EVER
 - Tell them you believe them
 - Explain that you intend to support them
 - Tell them they are brave for sharing the truth
 - Say things like, "I am so sorry that happened to you" and avoid making negative faces, noises, or jokes.
 - Avoid phrases and words like "aww", "bless your heart", "you poor thing" etc. and instead say things like, "thank you for sharing"
- **Help them remember that sexual abuse is against God's word**
 - Remind the victim that God and His word are against sexual abuse
 - Remind them that it hurts God that someone hurt His child
 - Remind them that they have value because God created them and that that value cannot ever be changed or taken away from them
- **Remind them of God's character**
 - God hates abuse
 - God is clear about His feelings about sexual assault, and caring for victims, in the Bible
 - Deuteronomy 22: 25-27 "But if the man meets the engaged woman out in the country, and he rapes her, then only the man must die. Do nothing to the young woman; she has committed no crime worthy of death. She is as innocent as a murder victim. Since the man raped her out in the country, it must be assumed that she screamed, but there was no one to rescue her."
 - 1 Thessalonians 4:3-6 "It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the

- pagans, who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister.”
- Jesus cared for the hurting, broken, and mistreated, and He will care for you
 - Matthew 25:44-45 “Then they will reply, ‘Lord, when did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and not help you?’ “And he will answer, ‘I tell you the truth, when you refused to help the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were refusing to help me.’”
 - The bleeding woman
 - Mark 5:25-34
 - The demon possessed man
 - Mark 5:1-20
 - The woman at the well
 - John 4:1-41
 - Jesus ministered to women and His ministry was facilitated by women.
 - Mary the mother of James and Joseph, Mary the mother of James and John, Mary the sister Lazarus, Martha, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, the women who provided for Jesus with their resources [Luke 8:3], the unnamed female followers of Jesus [mentioned throughout the gospels who followed Jesus and listened to His teachings]
 - Jesus ministered to women, was friends with women, was cared for by women, and did ministry with women at a time in history when women were considered property, lesser-than, and looked down on by society
 - God is the God of comfort
 - 2 Corinthians 1:3-7
 - Psalm 23:4
 - God is the God of peace
 - John 16:33
 - Philippians 4:6-7
 - 2 Thessalonians 3:16
 - God is the God of healing
 - 1 Peter 2:24
 - Psalm 30:2
 - Psalm 147:3
 - God is the God of redemption
 - Romans 3:23-24
 - Titus 2:11-14
 - God is the God of justice
 - God is the Judge and justice is His, even when we aren’t able to see people brought to justice on earth.

- Psalm 9:16
 - Psalm 11:7
 - Psalm 33:5
 - Psalm 50:6
 - God can carry your burdens
 - Matthew 11:28
- **Provide them with Biblical support**
 - Don't use Bible verses or phrases to try to quickly dismiss abuse or "make it all better". Instead, help the survivor understand that God understands their deep pain and can provide them with healing, comfort, peace that passes all understanding, and is a safe place while they grieve. Stay away from saying things like "Everything happens for a reason" and "time heals all wounds". Say helpful things like, "Healing takes time" and "God can carry your burdens for you and give you rest".
See scripture references above
- **Don't push someone to forgive**
 - You can counsel someone to forgive using the Bible without being pushy and forceful. No one can force someone to forgive. Forgiveness is between a person and God alone.
 - Let a person heal with God in their own time and space. You can encourage forgiveness because it is Biblical and it provides freedom, but don't rush it or push it on someone. It can make them feel like what happened doesn't matter or isn't a big deal or that they are at fault for their abuse.
 - Forgiveness is not the same as trust or reconciliation. A person can forgive without ever having to have a relationship or interaction with the person who abused them again, which in many cases is the most helpful and safe thing for the victim.
- **Clear up any spiritual abuse**
 - Some victims may have been told things about God, His word, or abuse that are not Biblical or true. Sometimes abusers manipulate scripture or Biblical concepts to make their victims comply. Many people who try to cover up abuse use scripture to silence victims and make them think it's unbiblical to speak up. These spiritual abuses can harm victims in extreme ways and morph how they view God and His character. Ask the victim if they've been mistreated in any of these ways and help them see clearly who God actually is and what His Word actually says.
 - Encourage them to seek God's truth and true identity on their own as well through prayer and the Bible.
- **Give them the proper spaces to speak about their trauma**
 - Not every occasion or location is a safe, healthy, or appropriate place to speak about abuse. Not every person is safe or appropriate to speak to either. Help the survivor indicate who in their life is safe to talk to and what kind of places and spaces are appropriate. **NEVER** silence a victim or tell

them not to tell the truth about their abuse. If you notice they may be sharing their story at a place or time that isn't helpful or safe, redirect them to the safe places and safe people where/with whom they can share their story and work through their emotions in a healthy, productive way.

Understand the neurobiology of trauma

- There are four main areas of the brain that are impacted the most by trauma: the hypothalamus, pituitary gland, amygdala, and hippocampus.
 - The amygdala is constantly scanning the environment for things that could potentially kill it. It memorizes threats to be prepared for future danger. It is hardwired to remember trauma.
 - The pituitary gland is the center for sending signals to all other glands in the body where hormones are released. When the body endures trauma, the pituitary gland tells the adrenaline glands to release adrenaline. It also processes emotional reaction.
 - The hypothalamus quickly send information to the pituitary gland. It acts as a switchboard for the brain.
 - The hippocampus decides what things are important to remember. It processes sensation [through the five senses].
- Hormonal response to trauma
 - The following are the hormonal responses the human body can release during a trauma:
 - Catecholamines are a form of adrenaline for fight or flight response
 - Cortisol determines the body's energy level. If the body has enough energy, it can fight or run. If the body doesn't have enough energy, it will freeze
 - Opioids are pain blockers and may block emotions. The result of the body releasing opioids is a "flat response" where the body doesn't feel anything or have any emotion. The body can release opioids to avoid extreme mental or physical pain when it detects danger and high risk situations.
 - Oxytocin is the "feel good" hormone. It promotes a good feeling, and is released to suppress pain. This can result in many behaviors that may seem strange, i.e. laughing, joking, smiling, bonding with perpetrator
- If the sexual assault has just occurred, a victim needs time to consolidate their memories. Sleep helps consolidate memories, so 2 sleep cycles are recommended before any in-depth interviews with law enforcement.
 - Victims often will recall the events of their assault more and more over time, even weeks or months, because they need time to process and reflect while enduring their body's trauma responses.

The Utah Coalition Against Sexual Assault's Training: The Neurobiology of Trauma