

A Guide to Empathizing with Survivors in Our Community

- We fully condemn the behavior of these individuals
- There is no excuse for sexual assault of any kind
- There are violations, plain and simple.
- We are on the side of justice. We are in solidarity with the survivors.
- We stand with you.
- We hear you and we see you. We are working toward educating ourselves and the community on these issues.
- Any member of the congregation who has been violated in any way will always be heard, helped, and are encouraged to come forward with their stories. It takes a lot of courage and strength to come forward.
- It's not your fault. You didn't do anything to deserve this. You are not to blame.
- To all the sons and daughters of our church, we care about you and we love you and we vow to do everything in our power to protect you.
- Our goal is to create an environment free from fear and shame. We are your family and we care about your safety, as well as your physical and mental well-being.
- Violence of any kind is born out of fear and hate – two things that have no place within the Coptic Orthodox Church community
- **YOU ARE NOT ALONE.**

“Tips for Talking with Survivors of Sexual Assault.” RAINN, 2020, www.rainn.org/articles/tips-talking-survivors-sexual-assault.

Marin, Vanessa. “How to Support a Friend or Loved One Who Has Been Sexually Abused.” <https://www.nytimes.com/publisher>, 28 Feb. 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/02/27/smarter-living/sexual-abuse-assault-support-mental-health.html.

What to Do When a Survivor Shares Their Story

- Remain calm.
- Listen
- If the abuse is recent (within the last week), it is important to seek immediate medical attention through the Emergency Department or an immediate call to a Primary Care Provider
 - A medical provider will assess what type of medical exam – if any – is needed and help with the process of reporting the abuse to the Department of Children and Families.
- Offer support. Make sure to check in on them periodically.
- Refer to the following suggested talking points:
 - *“I believe you.”*
 - *“This is not your fault. You did nothing to deserve this. You are not to blame.”*
 - *“It took a lot of courage for you to tell me about this.”*
 - *“I stand with you.”*
 - *“I hear you and I see you.”*
 - *“You are not alone.”*
 - *“I care about you and am here to listen to help in any way I can.”*
 - *“I’m sorry this happened. This shouldn’t have happened to you.”*

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What to Do When a Survivor Shares Their Story

- There are a lot of reasons people do not disclose abuse right away. These reasons can include shame, guilt, fear of not being believed, fear of being removed from the home, or even fear of bodily harm to the child or the child's family.
 - The person may fear getting the perpetrator in trouble, especially if it's someone close to the family (which in most cases of sexual abuse it is).
- Young children may not have the language to communicate it or understand that it's wrong, especially if a trusted adult is telling them it's okay.
 - In most cases of sexual abuse, the perpetrator is someone who the child trusts. If a child discloses abuse to you, it must be reported to the Department of Children and Families. The Child Abuse Hotline is **800-792-5200**. **You can report anonymously.**

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What Not to Do When a Survivor Shares Their Story

- Don't blame the person for what happened.
 - Avoid questions that may make the survivor feel like what happened was their fault, such as asking what they were wearing, if there was alcohol or drugs involved, or why they were where they were. Remind them that the only person responsible for the violence is the person who committed the violence.
- Don't ask for additional details.
 - When someone experiences a trauma, it's normal to want to try to understand what happened. However, pushing for details or asking lots of questions could retraumatize the survivor by forcing them to relive the experience, and may result in them withdrawing from the conversation. Instead, create an open dialogue space where they can share information in a way that feels right for them.
- Questions should be open-ended, and not pointed, like:
 - *"Thank you for sharing this, can you tell me more about that?"*
 - *"How did that make you feel?"*
 - *"You are so brave for telling me! Is there anything else you want to tell me about?"*

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What Not to Do When a Survivor Shares Their Story

- Children often feel they need to have an answer to every question an adult asks. So, if an adult asks, “where did he/she touch you” the child will feel they need to have an answer.
- Also avoid re-asking the child if they are “sure” or to re-tell what happened. If the same question is asked over and over, the child may think the initial answer they are giving is wrong and feel they need to change the answer
- Don't tell them what they should have done or should do now.
 - Although it may be tempting to jump in and tell them what you would have done in their situation, or take control of the situation so you can help the survivor through this, they are likely just asking for you to listen and support them. Pressuring them to make a certain decision or to report if that's not something they want to do will put additional stress on them during an already stressful time.
- Don't set a timeline for when they should be “over it.” Sexual violence is traumatizing and dealing with that trauma will likely be a long process, potentially even one that is lifelong. Every survivor's recovery journey will be different, and there is no set timeline for survivors to follow to heal.

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Avoid Using Phrases Like...

- “Just pray about it.”
 - While the power of prayer can provide comfort and solace during hardships, this should not be the only response one gives to someone who is confiding in them. When this phrase is used as the only response, it implies that there is no other action that you or the confiding party can take. It may also imply that you're not willing to help the survivor seek out actions that may lead to the justice they seek.
 - Try saying: “Let’s pray about it and we will also...”
- “Forgive and forget.”
 - We must understand that for a survivor, not only was the experience of the assault itself traumatic, sharing their story can be traumatic as well. The process of forgiveness is a long, hard road and we must be respectful of the fact that the survivor may not be in a position where they are ready to entertain that idea.
 - Try saying: “It’s okay to be angry. It’s okay to feel however you feel. Your feelings are valid, and I am here for whatever you need.”
- “You shouldn’t speak out about this. It will ruin his/her/your reputation.”
 - Our culture has placed a heavy emphasis on the idea that reputation is everything. If a survivor shares their story and the response they receive is that they shouldn’t share their experience for fear of someone’s reputation, they may be led to believe that what other people think is more important than their physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing. When a survivor comes to you with their story, it is important to affirm their value; support them with love and an open mind.
 - Try saying: “It is important that you know how loved you are. Being open and truthful about something bad that happened to you does not change that one bit.”

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Avoid Using Phrases Like...

- “This is between him/her and his/her Father of Confession.”
 - We are a community, and we are One Body - Christ’s Body. When one part hurts, we should all hurt. When a crime is committed within our community and the victim of that crime asks for help, we have a duty to care for them and to help them seek justice. Yes, there are times when priests receive privileged information in confession that they cannot disclose to the police. But this does not apply to all information, including information that priests discover outside of confession.
- “We shouldn’t judge.”
 - The concept of judgement is not the center of discussion. Again, we must ensure that it is the survivor and their overall wellbeing that is the focus of the conversation. In the end, it is about keeping people safe and healthy, as well as making sure that this trauma does not happen to another person. The goal is not to shame the perpetrator and label them as a bad person. The goal is to name the act that was committed as a crime.
- “It’s just a few bad apples.”
 - While this may be true, even one bad apple spoils the whole bunch. We can accept the reality that some mistakes happen, but there are some mistakes that should be considered to be “never events.” Furthermore, even if we accept the unfortunate reality that these things may happen, we must emphasize the role of servants and clergy in preventing, reporting, and addressing these issues if they arise.

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Some Resources on Sexual Assault

- National Child Traumatic Stress Network is a great resource for information (<https://www.nctsn.org/>)
- Stop It Now! prevents the sexual abuse of children by mobilizing adults, families and communities to take actions that protect children before they are harmed. Phone: 1-888-PREVENT (1-888-773-8368)
- The Department of Children and Families (DCF) Child at Risk Hotline: 800-792-5200
- RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network) is the nation's largest anti-sexual violence organization. RAINN created and operates the National Sexual Assault Hotline - 1-800-656-HOPE (1-800-656-4673)
- an abundance of materials and educating resources can be found at their website as well (<https://www.rainn.org/>)

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