

# Responding to Victims of Sexual Assault

Sometimes clergy need to respond to victims of sexual assault. Here are some words of guidance written by a certified sexual assault nurse examiner.

Sexual assault is one of the most traumatic victimizations that one can experience. Due to the very private nature of the acts committed, it can be very humiliating. Not only does the victim experience the most devastating physical violation during the assault, but then they must endure repeat psychological victimizations if they choose to report the incident and are required to retell the story to strangers. Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is difficult for intimate partners to discuss their own sexual activity privately. Imagine having to discuss a more violent version face to face with uniformed staff who question every statement that you make. Following what seems like an interrogation, they have you remove all of your clothing so that they can examine your body for evidence and take photographs of your injuries. What dignity you thought you had left, quickly melts away as you endure the forensic exam. Blood is taken, hair is pulled from your head and even from your pubic area. Every place that was touched by the assailant must be swabbed for evidence. As the examiner touches your body you are reminded of the horrific events that you survived. When the exam is complete you are relieved. You rush to the shower to wash away the filth that you feel from the attack and from the exam. This relief is short lived as you realize that your journey has just begun. You must now endure the social stigma attached to rape, the institutional response from those who claim to “help”, and further victimization from the legal system. It takes a team to support and encourage a victim through this process.

Those who respond to a victim of sexual assault immediately following the event are in a very unique position. That initial interaction can determine the course of the case for the victim as well as their path to recovery. Keep the following tips in mind when you are called to serve.

- Create a safe and comfortable environment. Maintain a safe distance so as not to invade their personal space. Remain on the same eye level with a non threatening posture. For example, do not stand over the victim or cross your arms.
- Develop a rapport. Victims are more likely to communicate with you if they trust you and they feel as if they can communicate openly with you. Be careful of your responses and your facial expressions when you talk with them. Do not appear that you are judging any choices that they have made surrounding the assault. Remember to listen.
- Help them gain control. During the assault they had little or no control. Encourage and empower them by offering them simple choices. For example ask them if they would like to stand or sit. Ask for permission before touching them. Don't assume that your touch will feel safe to them.
- Be supportive and compassionate. Offer to call a family member or friend. Suggest a medical evaluation and an advocate. Remember that none of these are required and should be offered to victims as an option. Respect their decision to continue with the process or to stop.
- Expect them to question their faith. They may think they deserved the assault because of a past sin. Validate their feelings as you reassure them of God's love and forgiveness. Remind them that this was not their fault and that they did not deserve what has happened to them.

- Know your own limitations. You may not know how to respond to certain comments or how to maintain your composure if the victim has extensive injuries. Do not fill silence with clichés; rather allow the silence to speak to them. Excuse yourself from the room when you are no longer able to be supportive. If you are unable to return know who you can call to stand in for you. Remain connected with community partners.
- Remain neutral. Remove every preconceived idea you may have about sexual assault and a victim's response. The perpetrator can be a spouse, family, co-worker or stranger. No two victims respond the same. Become familiar with the continuum of victim responses and meet the victims where they are on that continuum.
- Educate yourself. There are lots of dynamics surrounding a sexual assault that you may not be familiar with. Learn more about the forensic exam, common reactions to sexual assault, unique needs of victims, the legal system, etc.
- Encourage ongoing counseling. Recovering from sexual assault can be a difficult and lengthy process. Encourage the victim to seek counseling to help them travel that road.

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