

What to Say (and Not to Say) to a Sexual Abuse Victim

My friend “Jake” attended a men’s conference last weekend in a western state. After one of my sermons—which dealt with the topic of freedom from sexual sin—a dark memory from his past surfaced in his mind. He began to sob, and two men seated near him put their arms around him and began praying.

When Jake came to the altar for prayer a few minutes later, he spilled his guts to one of the prayer counselors. Through tears Jake described how he had been sexually molested at age 14 by a Baptist pastor. (He had gone to the church on a Saturday to mow the grass.) He felt so afraid during the ordeal that he stayed silent. He felt paralyzed as the pastor fondled him. When he went home he couldn’t tell anyone, not even his father.

Jake is 67 today. He kept this ugly secret hidden for 53 years.

On the morning after Jake received prayer, he told me that he felt a hundred pounds lighter. “The feeling of shame and guilt is gone!” he said. “I feel so loved by God and my brothers.”

I gave Jake a chance to share his testimony with the men later that morning. He explained that he felt so ashamed after the abuse incident that he quit sports. He was afraid other boys would know what happened to him when he changed clothes in the locker room. He crawled into a shell and then pursued a life of sexual promiscuity with girls, mainly to prove he was still a man.

Yet when Jake finally opened his heart and talked about the painful incident last weekend, God’s healing power flooded his soul—even though the wound had been concealed for decades.

I'm glad Jake found healing in that church last Friday. But after he shared his testimony, one brother walked up to him and made an unfortunate remark. He told Jake: "You know, you could have stopped that man if you'd wanted to." Thankfully Jake got more prayer from some of his friends that morning to counteract those insensitive words.

There are probably people in your church who have experienced the same type of traumatic sexual abuse that Jake did. They need love and support. When you minister to a victim of abuse they need to hear encouragement and affirmation, not suspicion or judgment. Here are five things you should say in this situation:

1. I'm really sorry that happened. Galatians 6:2 says we are to "bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ." When someone goes through something traumatic, he or she needs to know we are there to support them. Victims of abuse are tempted to think no one will believe their story. You can say, "That must have been horrible." You can also tell them you believe them.

2. You are not alone. Remind the person you are part of a faith family that offers love and healing to people in their situation. Abuse victims are tempted to hide their experience because it is so embarrassing—yet true healing only comes when we bring our darkness into Christ's light. If you are counseling them, stay in touch and set up another time to meet—or get the victim connected to a support group.

3. That was not your fault. The most common lie an abuse victim believes is, "I must have done something to deserve this." The devil is an accuser, and he uses abuse to destroy a person's identity and self-worth. Use your words to counteract those lies. In Jake's case, he did nothing to prompt this older man to abuse him—and the abuse itself was a criminal act. He needs to know he did not invite the abuse. (Note: If the person who abused the victim is still alive, and it

happened when the victim was under age, you should report the incident to the police.)

4. Can I pray with you now? Jesus Christ has the power to heal an abused heart, and any follower of Christ has the anointing to pray for abuse victims. Isaiah 61:1 says: “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor; He has sent me to heal the broken-hearted.” You can pray for the victim to experience healing after they have shared their painful story. Jesus can remove the emotional stain that abuse brings. (Some abuse victims may feel uncomfortable being touched when you pray, so be sure to ask their permission before you lay hands on their shoulder.)

5. Can I help you find counseling? Prayer ministry at an altar can be powerful, but most abuse victims need additional follow-up. Do not just pray and then announce, “Now you are healed!” Encourage the person you are praying for to seek more counseling, preferably from a professional who has Christian values. Most abuse victims have layers of hurt piled on top of their pain, and they will need time to process their healing. Sexual abuse is like a serious car accident—it may require extended time for healing. If your church has a counseling ministry, refer them to that resource immediately.

Jesus brings good news to the abused, not shame, condemnation or put-downs. When victims of sexual abuse come to your church, make sure it is a safe place for them to find total transformation. {eoa}