

Survivors' Wisdom

by Barbara A. Blaine, Founder of the Movement of Survivors
Abused in Religious Communities

Acknowledge your courage

It takes courage to acknowledge that we've been abused, and it is not easy to even admit it to ourselves. Just calling us or visiting this website is a big step. We honor your courage.

Know that you are not alone

There are hundreds of thousands of survivors of child sex abuse. The scale of harm is similar across religious and secular institutions such as churches, schools, sports teams, and the Boy Scouts. Most of us believed that we were the only victim of the perpetrator who abused us. Over time, we have learned that there is rarely, if ever, only one victim. While we were being abused, we were isolated and felt extremely alone. Now it is possible to join with other survivors to find healing. We do not have to be alone anymore. If there isn't a support group meeting in your city, would you like to start one? Your local rape crisis center may offer group therapy sessions that are free of charge. You might also find it helpful to go to counseling. Whatever you decide, know that others also suffer like you.

Don't go to the church or institution first

Many survivors have approached officials of churches and institutions for help, guidance and/or healing. Many of us went to report our abuse after building up loads of courage and strength to face these officials because we wanted to make sure that our perpetrators didn't abuse anyone else. However, many officials were insensitive and acted like they did not know how to respond to us. We were looking for healing and consolation, but found further victimization. Here are some of the responses received by officials and institution leaders across the country:

Sometimes they acted kindly, then ignored the promises they had made to "investigate" our allegations.

Usually, they said that we were the first person to ever come forward to allege that the perpetrator is a sexual molester. Many of us found out later that we weren't the first to come forward and that officials and leaders had known about our perpetrators for years.

Some officials tell us that they are sure that the perpetrator would never do such a thing. We must have misunderstood or misinterpreted their attention.

Sometimes it was suggested that we were bad for even saying such a thing—somehow it was our fault.

Some officials want to keep it quiet and 'in-house' where they help with counseling. We strongly recommend that you think twice before agreeing to this arrangement.

Sometimes, survivors later learn that their first encounter with an official was recorded without their knowledge or permission.

Frequently, officials wanted us to tell them all the "details" and, in some cases, then turn around to use these statements as evidence against us.

Other considerations for concern

When first beginning to deal with the abuse, we might not have all the facts straight regarding places, dates, times, etc. Frequently, our memories are refreshed with many details only as we engage in the healing process, taking days, months, even years to fully uncover. If we've disclosed some details one day and recall more later, we will be discredited for being inconsistent about the details.

We have been taught to trust our officials, priests, teachers, ministers, coaches, etc., implicitly, so we approach these leaders with full trust and disclosure. We look up to them, and they are in positions of authority and power over us. They, on the other hand, do not trust survivors. They may even view you as "the enemy." While we think they are trying to help us, they are, in fact, building a case against us without our knowledge. Things said during initial meetings can easily be twisted to be used against you and have been used against many survivors.

Some survivors have gone to institutional and church leaders and have been hurt by doing so. Some of us were strung along for months while the church leaders waited for our statute of limitations to run out on any legal action we may have had. Know your legal rights before you take any action.

Most survivors want to ensure that our perpetrators are removed from being able to abuse others in their position as trusted priests, ministers, coaches, and teachers. We'd like some apology for what we've endured. Sometimes we want an apology or acknowledgment given to our parents. Sometimes we want the responsible institution to pay for our counseling or other expenses we may have. We want restorative justice.

We have learned over the years that when we have filed lawsuits, the church and other institutions become accountable. Unfortunately, without any legal obligation to promises made by the offending institution to you, there is little chance that you will get what you bargain for. No one is bound to do anything for you unless there is a legal contract or court order mandating that it happen; it is probably best not to trust anyone who wields power. Many survivors feel much worse after some interactions, sometimes more pain than from our actual abuse.

Don't go alone!

If you still decide to go to church or an institution, don't go alone. Taking someone with you provides a witness, supporter, and advocate for the event. Take notes. Don't believe what you hear just because they said it. Check it out with other sources before relying on what they tell you. Have a prepared time limit for how long you will meet with them and stick to it. Prepare ahead of time what you will and won't tell, and stick to your prepared plan. Protect yourself. Keep track of all the info you give them and the exact details of what you tell them — they are keeping track, so you should too.

Seek alternative help

As an alternative to going to officials, we recommend that you go to a trusted family member or friend or seek professional help from a counselor. Many others have gone through a process of healing from sexual abuse. We do not have to reinvent the wheel. We may as well learn from others, and for many survivors, a professional counselor is very helpful.

Learn your legal rights

The church and institutional officials have lots more information about our abuse than we do. They know the legal system, but most of us don't. We can choose to exercise our legal rights or not, but it is empowering to make the choice. Without knowing, we don't make the choice.

Healthy Survivors

Many survivors are burdened with 'troubles,' addictions, and health problems. The pain and betrayal we felt while being abused were intense. We had no knowledge of how to cope with the experience of being abused, as well as the feelings that came because of the abuse. All of us found a way to survive, or we would not be here today.

The problem is that many of the coping mechanisms we used to survive the abuse are not healthy. Here are some of the types of problems we have: Alcoholism; drug addiction; over-eating, under-eating or other eating disorders; co-dependency, finger-nail biting; promiscuity; detachment from intimacy; sleep disorders; religious fanaticism; stomach or intestinal problems; or an overall attitude of anger. If any of the above are a problem for you, I recommend that you seek help. Now that we are not being abused, we don't need to rely on the unhealthy coping mechanisms we used in the past. Help for these types of problems will liberate us and allow us to face the significant issues of our abuse. In peer support meetings, we do not address addiction issues and recommend that survivors seek help for these from other sources.

Facing the issues

Acknowledging and facing the issues of our abuse can be extremely time-consuming and require lots of energy and emotions. As a result, many of us have felt completely drained, with months of feeling tired and overwhelmed. When we feel this way, it is easy to become irritable and short-tempered. Many survivors have found it helpful to:

Keep our significant others (spouses, parents, roommates, bosses, anyone who is in close proximity to us) aware of what we are going through. While they will never know what it feels like to be us, they may find it helpful to deal with us (our mood swings, tears, tempers, etc) if they know what we are coping with and that we are in pain. Some of our significant others have found it helpful to get their own counselor to learn how to support us through the healing process. Being a significant other to a survivor is not easy, and we survivors need to be aware of how difficult it can be for those around us.

Take time off to "feel the pain". If we attend counseling or a support group on Monday nights, we find a babysitter for the rest of the evening or take off work on Tuesday mornings. Frequently, when we are dealing with our abuse, new thoughts, emotions, memories, etc., come up at any moment, with any trigger. Sometimes it is easier to deal with it knowing when there is a specific time that we will have to deal with the issue.

Exercise. Of course, dealing with our emotions can make us want to curl up into a ball and crawl under our desks rather than getting up and moving. But in the long run, we will feel better if we get up and take a long, vigorous walk, go for a bike ride, or whatever we can do to move our bodies.

Do something soothing. Take a long, hot bath. Drink some herbal tea. Eat a dark chocolate candy bar. Get a massage.

Set boundaries and keep them. Setting limits protects us from sharing too much or from ignoring our needs. Setting limits and keeping them empowers us to take control of some aspects of our lives. At one time, we may have been helpless and powerless. Taking charge of our lives is empowering. Claiming power is a momentous experience of healing. It enables us to take back what was taken from us when we were abused.

Do something artistic or write in a journal. Many survivors have found this helpful; you might too. Writing and drawing have allowed our emotions to take over, releasing painful feelings. By telling the story in our journals or drawing it in our sketch pads, we broke the silence and told the secret. Breaking the secrecy becomes healing and helps us face more of the truth.

Take time to rest. Dealing with our abuse is exhausting. Acknowledge that and give yourself a break. The troubles that arise will not last forever, and when you are through it, you might find that you don't need as much rest.

No matter how bad it feels now, it will improve, and you will feel better. Many survivors take years to work through the pain of their abuse. Be patient. The path to healing will come, even if you don't recognize it all at once. Happier days will be there for you.

Create an opportunity to laugh.

Everybody is unique!

Everyone's experience of healing from abuse is unique. While many of our experiences of abuse were similar, everyone heals in their own way. There are no rights or wrongs. Mostly, we have learned that it's best to trust our own judgment and those of the people who know us best and love us most. By sharing our experiences in a supportive environment, such as a peer support group, we have learned from each other and continue to do so. We don't give advice to each other, rather we learn from others' experiences and then apply what fits to our own experiences.

We are the victims (survivors)!

The abuse was not our fault, no matter what we did or didn't do to stop it or prevent it. No matter whether it felt good or bad. No matter whether the abuser bought us gifts, took us out to eat, or took us to fun places. No matter if we enjoyed their company. No matter if someone else had warned us to stay away from them. No matter what, the responsibility for a vile perpetrator molesting us rests squarely on them. They were in a position of authority. We looked up to them. We trusted and believed what they told us. They should not have touched us. They abused their position of authority. They used their position to victimize us. They had no right to do this. They are criminals, and what they did was a criminal act. We are victims of their crime. We are innocent. We have been wronged. We deserve to have the wrong made right. That will mean different things to each of us, but we all deserve to be made whole, as much as that is possible.

This guidance was written by the founder of *Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests*, SNAP, Barbara Blaine, in 1988.