

Violations in Faith Based Organizations

When grand jury reports are released. When victims are asked to testify. When going about daily activities like turning on the news or grocery shopping brings discussions of horrific violations within your community. We realize how hard this is for many survivors, for those who have experienced similar abuse, and for the community in general. Abuse that occurred within faith settings may bring additional unique anxieties and concerns. The Office of Victim Advocate wants you to know you are not alone.

If you've been a victim of sexual assault by a member of the clergy or congregation...

Sometimes statutes of limitations can prevent healing through the justice system, but other restorative means are available to you - always.

- Remember that most sexual abuse is committed by known perpetrators who betrayed the trust placed with them, including clergy and faith leaders. Victims are never to blame for being targeted for sexual abuse.
- Allow yourself to feel any emotions that arise. You may experience physical responses to trauma, such as a loss of sleep or appetite, anxiety and the inability to concentrate. You may also feel easily startled or even confused. These are all typical responses to trauma.
- Identify your support system. If this includes a trusted individual already in your life, try to choose someone who won't feel divided by their loyalty to your faith-based perpetrator. Your local county is a good resource to help identify support groups and resources (www.ova.pa.gov > County Services).
- Practice self-care by engaging in regular exercise, identifying a safe space to relax and decompress and journaling your inner thoughts and expressions.
- Be gentle with yourself if you find praying or meditating difficult during this time. Being mindful of your emotions, your energy and your intentions helps to regulate sleep, reduce overall stress and rebuild confidence. And remember - all of your emotions and physical responses are typical responses to trauma.
- Ask your clergy/congregation - if and when you are comfortable - to bring in an outside professional to speak about sexual abuse and hold an open discussion for your community. The Office of Victim Advocate can recommend resources for you.
- Give yourself room and time to heal. Your resiliency is proven just by the fact that you are still here today, you are reading this now.
- Use your voice - if and when you are ready - to share your story and your wisdom, and to educate about the impacts of abuse. One way is through the Resilient Voices Program with the Office of Victim Advocate.
- Know your rights and personal boundaries. You are not required to speak to the media. If you choose to do so, it is helpful to have a script prepared. The Office of Victim Advocate is available to help you navigate speaking to the media.



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If sexual assault has come to light in your congregation...

Sexual assault is often unreported or may be unreported for many years. Survivors may choose not to come forward for a number of reasons including fear of not being believed, fear of retaliation or fear of being blamed. A survivor may not have recognized the behavior as abuse at the time, may have been encouraged to understand it as divine will, or may have been confused by their own love and reverence for their faith-based perpetrator. The passage of time should not discredit victims.

- Respect the privacy and confidentiality of the victims involved; they need their space to heal. Your feelings are important, too. Seek a supportive friend family member or counselor - preferably outside of the congregation - to discuss your feelings.
- Remember that there may be additional victims in your congregation that have not come forward. They may be triggered hearing additional discussion about the crimes that took place; they may also be evaluating the support of the community and weighing their own decision to come forward. Be mindful of the words you use in group settings.
- Provide support privately rather than through public displays, if you feel it is necessary to express your concern for the accused. Even if your faith leader is innocent, there may be other survivors in your congregation and some who may currently be in abusive situations. Rallying to show support for the accused alienates victims and may prevent individual and community healing.
- Recognize the importance of accountability. If your faith calls you towards forgiveness, it need not be at the expense of support to the target or victim. Trauma affects entire communities and everyone will need support.
- Turn your emotion into action. Find a local organization to volunteer with or donate resources to. Encourage your faith community to formally partner with local programs working to prevent and address sexual abuse.
- Use this time to check your congregational practices. Encourage your faith community to develop clear policies and procedures to prevent and address sexual abuse. Encourage the congregation to make discussions of sexual consent, respect and abuse part of ongoing congregational activities. Be sure to utilize theological and spiritual resources that are current and informed about sexual assault and recovery.
- Consider coming forward if you have additional information. Remember that police are professionals trained to have these conversations. Advocates are available in your local communities to accompany you so that you have support when you disclose. Local advocates are available to support you even if you choose not to disclose.
- Take time to protect your own family. Talk with your loved ones, especially children, about the rights to their own bodies and who to talk to if something inappropriate happens.

Healing is possible. You - and your community - survived. And that means you are more powerful than what has happened. Give yourself permission to work through your emotional and physical reactions. This includes the space and time needed to heal.



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