Supporting a rape survivor

A faith leaders' guide

Faith ACTION to end Gender-Based Violence

WE WILL SPEAK OUT South Africa
FAITH COMMUNITIES ENDING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Rape is not just a physical violation but has the potential to destroy a person from the inside out. Survivors can be any age, race, gender or class. Rape is one of the most traumatic experiences a person can have, because of the sense of helplessness and all the confused emotions it causes. Rape survivors often blame themselves. They also feel dirty and disgusted by their own bodies, which can lead to sexual problems in intimate relationships in the future. Some are overwhelmed by fear and may isolate themselves and trust no one. Many survivors cannot return to work due to severe anxiety attacks going out, or just a loss of concentration. Social responses which make light of their experience, judge them, or excuse the perpetrator are forms of secondary abuse and can add much to their suffering and slow their recovery.

Often, survivors question their faith and wonder how God could have allowed their abuse to happen. Other times, they look to their faith leader to help them through the ordeal. When survivors have help and support there can be healing which is why faith leaders need to be supportive.

So, what can you do as a faith leader to support a rape survivor?

> **"When you are raped, your spirit is attacked. That is why we need our faith leaders."**
>
> **– Ms Nompilo Gcwensa, Chair, Phephisa Survivors Network**

Signs and symptoms

Physical:
- Genital injury
- Pregnancy
- Sexually transmitted infections and HIV
- Additional injuries may result from being struck, pushed, stabbed, or shot

Psychological:
Short term responses:
Most victims experience one or more of:
- Fear
- Nightmares
- Sleep problems
- Anger
- Embarrassment
- Shame
- Guilt

Immediately after an assault, a victim's behaviour can range:
- From talkativeness, tenseness, crying, and trembling
- To shock and disbelief without showing emotions, just smiling, or not moving

Later responses:
- Avoidance reactions
- Physical exhaustion
- Never expressing emotion
- Depression
- Anger that may be displaced on to helpers

A beautiful room full of light

When I look at this room it brings me joy,
Happiness and my heart beats fast
When I look at it, but then you came into that room
You destroyed everything you made it a dark evil room
The bed that was full of red roses is now full of red blood.
I dare not look at that mirror I see a sad girl tears dropping down
there is darkness
I can feel some shadow in the dark
a sparkling nightgown is not shiny anymore
it's all in pieces and full of blood
when I look at the bed again I see a body sleeping, a body without breath, arm without warmth,
mouth without a smile, eyes full of tears
in their sleep I cannot wake it up but the room is about to fall apart.

A poem for my rapist: The Fear of a Dark Room written by a 12-year-old girl who was raped when she was 9, and whose rape case came before court. Quoted in The Witness, 17 April 2014.

Emotional support

The most important way to help a survivor is to be there for them and support them in any way possible.

- Create a safe and confidential environment where a survivor feels comfortable disclosing their experience and seeking assistance.
- DO NOT ask the survivor what they were wearing or what they were doing there or if they led the perpetrator on.
- Don't let the survivor take responsibility for what happened (even if you feel they could have acted differently). Rape is NEVER a survivor's fault!
- Be gentle with whatever information you offer. A survivor is unlikely to remember everything you tell them as they are still in crisis mode. Later on, you may have to go through what you said earlier on.
- Support any action the survivor took during the rape – the most important thing is that they coped and got away with their life.
- Affirm their courage and that they got out alive. Trauma is worsened by the sense of helplessness. Helping them to see that they did what they could, can give them courage to go on.
- If you can accompany them for further investigation or care, make sure service providers treat them with respect. Let them see you are actively protecting them.



Practical Support

The following steps are crucial:

- It is vital to act quickly to support the rape victim to become a survivor.
- Gently advise the survivor not to wash until they have had medical assistance. This is very unpleasant as the natural reaction is to want to wash and wash. Place any clothing in a paper bag as it may be needed for forensic purposes
- If possible, stay with the survivor if they want you to, as they will be frightened and disorientated. And it will help them to know a person who cares about them and believes what has happened is by their side.
- If possible, take the survivor to a Thuthuzela Care Centre (TTC) or make sure someone can accompany them. They provide holistic services and ensure all the necessary steps are followed in a supportive environment.
- If there is no TCC nearby, get them to the nearest hospital and ask for the District Surgeon. The doctor should be available at any time of day, so make sure they are called.
- Make sure that the survivor is tested for HIV and is given access to anti-retroviral treatment within 72 hours of the rape, to protect them from possible HIV infection.
- The survivor may have strong symptoms of nausea or other stress symptoms like shock and anxiety. Ensure that they are given the treatment they ask for to manage the immediate trauma.
- Make sure that medical staff do not force anything on them but listen sensitively to their needs. This includes the gathering of forensic evidence – make sure the doctor or nurse explains what they are about to do and asks for their permission. Just going ahead can feel like another violation and cause further emotional damage.



Rape

There is no difference between being raped
and being pushed down a flight of cement steps
except the wounds also bleed inside.

There is no difference between being raped
and being run over by a truck
except that afterwards men ask you if you enjoyed it.

There is no difference between being raped
and losing a hand in a mowing machine
except that doctors don't want to get involved
and police wear a knowing smirk,
and in small towns you become a veteran whore.

There is no difference between being raped
and being bitten on the ankle by a snake
except that people ask you if your skirt was short
and why you were out alone anyhow.

There is no difference between being raped
and going head first through a windshield
except that afterwards
you are afraid
not of cars but of half the human race.

- Marge Piercy

Thuthuzela Care Centres (TCC)

- The survivor can report gender-based violence, including rape, directly to a TCC (based at community clinics or hospitals). Check on Google for the nearest TCC and accompany them there.
- A TCC is a one-stop shop where staff will assist the survivor to:
  - o get immediate medical attention
  - o access trauma counselling
  - o open a police case (immediately or at a later stage)
  - o access ongoing counselling
  - o prepare for court (if the case goes on trial).

Legal and Other Steps towards Justice and Healing

- o Advise them of their rights or ask a legal officer at the TCC to advise them.
- o They need not lay a charge immediately (or ever) but they need to understand their options.
- o Do not force them to lay a charge if they are not ready.
- o If the perpetrator is someone close to them and they are not ready to lay a charge, advise them to at least get a Protection Order (See the pamphlet on Domestic Violence)

Faith Support

Offer faith support such as prayers or rituals, making sure this does not replace but complements the emotional and practical steps you take.

Reassure the survivor that God loves them unconditionally and in every circumstance, God is with them even if they feel like they are in hell. (If Christian and it is appropriate, remind them that Jesus descended into hell too, before He rose again.)

Be sensitive not to pressurise a person who is not of your faith. The most powerful witness in a time of crisis is the compassionate presence of a faith leader.

IF THE ALLEGED RAPIST IS A FAITH LEADER OR A MEMBER OF YOUR FAMILY OR INSTITUTION:

Listen carefully to the survivor's story and tell them you believe them. Do not make excuses for the perpetrator.

If the alleged perpetrator is a faith leader, do not hesitate to open an investigation according to the policies and procedures of your faith institution. If no policies exist, report to your immediate senior and insist on an investigation. But be sensitive, and ensure you listen to the survivor's fears and needs and do nothing they are uncomfortable with.

Do not isolate the alleged perpetrator but be willing to offer counselling support towards rehabilitation. This should not replace accountability mechanisms.

Interfaith Online Platform:

WWSOSA:

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Faith ACTION

FAITH COMMUNITIES COLLABORATING TO END GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE