

II. AID TO PERSONS WHO ASSIST VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE

A. Identifying Battered Women

Though any woman has the potential to become a battered woman, she may not be able to disclose or expose the violence she undergoes because of the social stigma and shame attached to it. She may hide it to avoid further victimization. But a trained eye can detect the following characteristics: diminished self-esteem, uncertainty, anxiety to please, inability to plan for the future, depression, a suicidal tendency, mood swings, nervousness, irritability and inability to concentrate.

She may also have self-destructive tendencies like drug or alcohol abuse or reckless driving, and may inflict wounds on herself or develop eating disorders. She might have extreme bouts of dependency and independence, blaming others or herself. She alternates between seeking revenge or finding excuses for the abuser. She may also ask questions such as 'What is the point anyway?' or 'Is this my fate?' or 'Who really cares?' and so on.

B. Identifying the Batterers

There are two general categories:

- The antisocial batterers who have very little self-control are highly irritable and violent in most situations.
- The classic batterers who are violent only with intimate partners and their children.

Men in the second category have explosive tempers limited to their private life. In public, they appear nice and courteous. But they suffer from low self-esteem and a need to control people and objects. They are afraid of becoming 'losers' and so are very



Finding the way up

possessive. They might imagine their spouses as being unfaithful and accuse and beat them for even talking to other men. They might be very suspicious and constantly pry into their partner's personal belongings for evidence of 'misbehavior,' ask probing questions or frequently telephone to check on them.

Batterers often have very strict and traditional ideas about women and their roles. They are anxious to prove their superiority even by beating their partners. They are usually highly dependent on them and often do not know how to meet their own needs. They do not make friends easily, or express their feelings or communicate freely. They may have seen their fathers beating their mothers or might

have been beaten themselves as children. They do not accept responsibility for their negative behavior and minimize or deny their violent acts.

Helping the victim to heal and the perpetrator to repent and reform lies at the core of reconciliation. But care needs to be taken that reconciliation as seen from the victim's viewpoint differs from that of the perpetrator.

C. Understanding Victims of Rape

Recovery of a victim takes place in several stages beginning with intervention followed by long years of support.

The first stage is called the 'rape trauma syndrome' in which the victim goes through disorientation and disruption of normal coping mechanisms, shock, fear (including fear of retaliation), anxiety, withdrawal, crying, unexpected outbursts, self-blame, intrusive reliving of the events of the rape and other classic post-traumatic symptoms such as nightmares, sleep problems, startle responses, hyper-vigilance and physical symptoms such as nausea and headaches.⁴⁴

The second stage is the 'recoil or pseudo-adjustment stage.'⁴⁵ This stage might last for several months or years when the victim appears to be coping and can assume normal activities. In this stage, the victim needs the assurance that the counselor is not bored or annoyed with the victim's preoccupation with the crime.

The third stage is the stage of 'integration.' But any reminder of the past act might evoke the horror of their experience.

D. Steps to Take When Someone Tells You Her Story of Victimization⁴⁶

1. **Create an atmosphere of safety and welcome** for victims-survivors to speak. Victims know very well when they are not welcome. If you put up posters, announce information, talk about violence women experience, they will begin to come to you.
2. **Believe the story.** Many victims are threatened with worse abuse if they tell. Sometimes the abuser may be someone you know and trust, and they may fear that you will not believe them. Give them praise and encouragement for telling you. To tell takes courage and strength, and it may be important to say so to the victims.
3. **Validate the feelings.** Victims are afraid, often ashamed, and sometimes afraid also that they are going crazy, if they are having bad nightmares or flashbacks. These feelings are normal to someone who has been through such a crisis.
4. **Emphasize safety.** Victims often minimize and deny the pain they are experiencing, and the threats to their well being. If you use the word 'safety' when speaking with them, it can help them to make their own safety a priority for them.
5. **Affirm that the victim is NOT to blame.** Many cultures tell victims that the violence is their own fault. Abusers also often tell victims this. You may wish to say firmly, "You do not deserve abuse" or "I do not believe that you are to blame."

APPENDICES

6. **Respect, support and empower.** You may have strong ideas about what the victim should do. You may want a battered woman to leave her husband, for instance. But if you give her orders or tell her what to do, in a way you are doing to her just what her abuser has done. Instead, inform her of resources and options in your community. She may not be aware of agencies available to help her. Support the decisions that she makes, even if you do not always like them or agree with her. Your support now may help her to make different choices later. Help her to expand her choices, in however small a way. You may be able, together, to imagine some creative possibilities she might not see by herself. If a battered woman chooses to stay where she will surely be abused again, she might be afraid that you would abandon her. It may be useful to say, "If you stay with him, I will be concerned for your safety. But I will still be here for you if you need me." You may be able to help her think of new ways in which she can be safer while remaining at home and working on her other resources, so that at some later time, she may be more ready to leave.
 7. **Remember the other family members and friends.** When abuse happens to someone, there are other victims besides the one who is directly hurt. Children who witness family violence, for instance, are also harmed by what they see. Those who love rape victims also suffer with them. In families where there is evidence of incest, the distorted family dynamics harm everyone. Sometimes, women are helped to make new choices if they understand that their children are also being harmed by the violence the women experience directly.
 8. **Victims may have spiritual crises as a result of their abuse.** Theological empowerment is as important as social and economic empowerment. Listening to the faith connections that are made by victims may be important learning to you. Provide good information about the many strong role models in the Bible, as well as about the ways in which sexism affected the tradition. Offer some new options, of a loving God rather than a judging God. There may be questions we need to be well prepared for like, "Why did God allow this to happen?" or "Where was God when I was suffering?" Be aware that grace is present in healing and in the support of the community for the one who is harmed. God calls us to "...bring liberty to the captives and the opening of the prison to those who are bound." (Is 61:1)
- Above all, the victim must be able to trust that what she confides in a listener would be kept strictly confidential. If necessary, a clear agreement should be reached beforehand on what part(s) of the conversation could be shared and with whom.