

Developing Protocols: Journeying with Victims of Abuse, Part 2

Abuse happens in intimate relationships in every corner of society, regardless of faith or background. As Christians and especially leaders of a church or ministry, how we respond may unconsciously represent to victims how God responds to their painful experience. As such, we have a special responsibility to respond with care, compassion and willingness to enter into their suffering. That may mean becoming uncomfortable and getting involved in matters that seem too personal or messy.


Organizations should be prepared with a policy for responding to reports of abuse. Having a thoughtful policy to guide us helps us move forward with support despite anxiety, lack of experience and blind spots. Your organization's policy should emphasize a protocol for ensuring the safety of individuals at risk of relationship abuse. Offer safety and discretion in every interaction.

Here are some pointers as you think through establishing policies and procedures. Please keep in mind, this is a guideline and is not exhaustive. Each organization should consider its unique needs as it develops a protocol.

- 1) **Take every disclosure seriously and be supportive.** The response to the first time an individual discloses abuse is critical. If the response is dismissive, in any way blames the reporter, or minimizes the abuse, the individual may figure that they are to blame or that they are wrong to question the behavior of their loved one. A disbelieving response may leave individuals at risk.

We should be willing to ask questions and get involved when someone is at risk of being harmed, even if the suspected perpetrator is a beloved member of our church or even a respected leader. This may go against our ingrained notions of who can abuse or when. For example, pregnancy may seem as though it would provide protection from harm, but abuse, in fact, escalates during pregnancy. Remember that individuals may be capable of abuse even if they show no signs of violent or abusive behavior in other relationships.

- 2) **Build a team.** The team should be trained and ready to respond to reports of abuse and provide support to maintain confidentiality and protect the safety of the reporter of abuse. Consider that someone might feel more at ease with a team that includes both men and women. Also, include special protocol for how to proceed if the allegations are against members of the staff or even response team. Build in support for your team. It is stressful to walk with others through the brokenness of abuse, especially when perpetrated by loved ones.

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- 3) **Train your team how to assess the immediate risk of harm.** You may want to compile a list of questions to ask when abuse is suspected. Know how to develop a safety plan and ensure they have a safe place to stay. [October's tool](#) offers help with assessment and creating safety plans.
 - 4) **Know your state's mandated reporting policy.** If you become aware that a child is involved and potentially at risk in a domestic violence situation, you may need to call your state's mandated child reporter hotline.
 - 5) **Compile a list of local resources and emergency hosts.** Suggested resources for domestic violence support:
 - a hotline number
 - information on local shelters
 - options or a list of church members who may be willing to house someone temporarily if such a need arose
 - a list of counselors for referral
 - 6) **Assess your budget.** Your organization may decide to set aside funds to provide temporary shelter for those in need. Remember that the location of any shelter or accommodation should be safely guarded information to be kept within the team.
 - 7) **Provide help to both individuals, but not couples counseling.** Do not try to engage in couples counseling if one partner alleges abuse. This can be dangerous and potentially send the message that abuse is something for which both partners are responsible.

However, make sure you have protocols in place to care for both of them individually, including the one accused of abuse, especially if both partners are members of your ministry. Taking care of both may mean referring to another organization. You may want to think through who you can refer to and how you and your ministry would continue to play a supportive role. Jesus came to heal the sick and acknowledging that sin-sickness resides in all of us gives us the ability to respond with care to those who may have caused harm.

- 8) **Don't hurry the process:** Do a thoughtful study, including perhaps creating a set of standards, of what true repentance, change, requirements of reconciliation and trust look like. Understand that deep change is slow and difficult. Be willing to seek consultation from professionals with expertise.

Psalm 9:9-10 - The Lord is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. Those who know your name trust in you, for you, Lord, have never forsaken those who seek you.

Resources Page:

As you begin to develop protocol in a new area, you may need additional resources. With that in mind, we want to offer a non-exhaustive list of resources we have found helpful in counseling victims of abuse.

1) Diane Langberg

Psychologist with expertise in working with trauma survivors

dianelangberg.com

2) Leslie Vernick

Counselor with specialty supporting individuals in difficult and destructive relationships

leslievernick.com

3) G.R.A.C.E. Godly Response to Abuse in a Christian Environment

An organization empowering Christian communities to recognize, prevent and respond to abuse

www.netgrace.org

4) Lundy Bancroft

Consultant on domestic abuse and child maltreatment

www.lundybancroft.com