

The Cries of Crisis: How and When to Help

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As I am involved in speaking at various churches and training groups to help women in crisis, I sense a growing awareness, particularly of women in leadership that the church needs to stand in the gap. Many women in our society are suffering terribly and governmental agencies are not able to meet the needs adequately. More importantly, the Body of Christ has been called by God to care for those in need. If women who are battered and abused cannot find help and comfort within that Body, where can they really expect to go? How can we expect them to truly believe that God is our refuge and strength in time of trouble, if we ourselves are absent when that trouble hits?

In an effort to give you a start if you are interested in helping women in crisis, I want to first list some general suggestions. Second, I want to give you some specific dos and don'ts for responding to women suffering from childhood sexual abuse, rape, or domestic abuse.

General Suggestions:

1. Many churches are forming an official board or unofficial group of women who are studying the issues of abuse and violence in women's lives. These women meet regularly to study Scripture and books related to these topics and to pray. One of the results is an informed group of women who can respond effectively when the need arises.
2. One outgrowth of such a group is that should a woman in the congregation need assistance or need to appear before the board (or elders, or a task force, etc.), she will not have to do so alone. It can be terrifying as a survivor of sexual abuse or the victim of male violence to walk into a room full of men alone. If a group like the one described above is ongoing in a church, then a knowledgeable woman is available to come alongside. It also means that the perspective of women is available when decisions are being made.
3. Many churches are inviting Christian professionals to come and help train them to respond to crises. These professionals provide information such as hot lines in your area, the best psychiatric hospitals, programs for perpetrators, the laws about reporting child abuse, and a list of Christian counselors and their areas of expertise. Those women in the church who are under the care of a counselor still very much need the involvement,

support, and love of women in their church community. Indeed, in my experience, they will do much better if they have such support.

Responses to a Woman Whose Husband Is Abusive

DO:

1. Treat the matter seriously. Sometimes it is literally a matter of life and death.
2. Let her talk. You may find it uncomfortable to listen, but she needs to talk. Talking is often how we process traumatic events and make decisions.
3. Emphasize that you do not blame her for the abuse (even though she may blame herself). No matter what precipitated the attack, it does not justify abuse of any kind.
4. Believe her. Sometimes stories of abuse seem unbelievable to us. Human beings do some very hideous, bizarre, and unbelievable things to one another.
5. Tell her it is not God's will for her to suffer abuse.
6. Try to determine the frequency and severity of the abuse. You need to help her decide if her life is at risk. Keep in mind that many women minimize what has happened. ("Well, it's just a few bruises. At least he didn't break any bones.") You may need to help her find a safe place to go.
7. Learn where the local shelters or safe houses are in your area. Call the Salvation Army or the YMCA. The Center of Women's Policy Studies in Washington, D.C. (202-872-1770) keeps an up-to-date file that can help you locate resources close to your home or church.
8. Assure her that leaving home does not necessarily lead to divorce. It is often the only action that will motivate the abuser to admit the problem and seek help. Often, leaving is the only response that will save the marriage.
9. Only the abused can make the decision as to what course of action she will take. Pray with and for her. Set out the truth as you see it, but let her decide. It usually takes many, many attempts for a woman to take a stand against abuse in her home. She usually loves her husband and desperately wants her marriage to work. Periods of peace and calm often follow episodes of violence. He will be strongly tempted to come home and enjoy the tranquility. She will often try to deny the reality of the abuse, excuse it, or be quick to assume genuine change with the first "I'm sorry."
10. Understand that men who are abusive have very powerful denial mechanisms. They will not usually seek help except under duress. They will not stay in treatment unless others (such as men in the church or the courts) hold them accountable. They need to be continually reminded that any abusive treatment, physical, verbal, or emotional is wrong. None of it is acceptable to God.

11. Keep in close contact with the woman. If she has to separate from her husband, she will need continued support—emotional, maybe financial, baby-sitting, help with a job search. Realize she will be traumatized by the abuse, by the separation, and by the prospect of handling her life and her children on her own. Take the initiative in staying in touch.

12. Encourage her to keep a record of the abuse, especially if she requires medical attention.

13. Offer to go with her should she choose to sign a restraining or protection-against-abuse order. It is traumatic to sign an order against the man you married. The police can help with that process.

14. Advise her to keep an extra set of keys, driver's license, money, and clothes in a safe place in case she has to leave in a hurry.

15. Remember that wife abuse is a felony in many places.

DO NOT

1. Treat the problem lightly. It is easy to assume it cannot be that bad. Domestic violence can be deadly. (3-6 million women are battered each year.)

2. Offer pat answer or platitudes. ("He didn't mean it. I'm sure it will be okay.")

3. Accuse her of causing the abuse (e.g. due to lack of submissiveness). No matter what she has done, her husband is responsible for his behavior.

4. Send her home if she has been beaten or her life has been threatened, physically or verbally.

5. Try to provide more counseling or advice than you are equipped to give. If you do not know what to do, get her to someone who does.

6. Give up on her when she seems unable to carry out your suggestions or keeps changing her mind about what to do. I have worked with many women in abusive marriages who take 1-2 years to sign a restraining order.

7. Minimize the wrong or the impact of verbal abuse. Abuse that leaves no marks is just as damaging and can easily destroy a woman and her children.

8. Say he didn't mean it or that we all make mistakes sometimes. Abuse is not the same as a thoughtless or hurtful remark. It is not simply poor communication skills. It goes far deeper than that.

9. Encourage her to go home because he cried and said, "I'm sorry." Abusive patterns take a long time to change.

10. Repentance is not just verbal, but consistent change demonstrated over time.

Responses to a Woman Who Has Been Sexually Abused

DO

1. Recognize the honor given to you should someone decide you are a safe person to tell. Never underestimate the courage it takes to say, "I was sexually abused." To bring to light what has been a well-kept secret for decades is terrifying.

2. Realize that the sexual abuse of a child has deep and enduring consequences. This is especially true when the abuser was a family member, the child was very young, or the abuse has been kept secret for a long time.

3. Be willing to witness great pain. If you walk alongside a woman who is facing sexual abuse, you may witness deep and wrenching pain, hard questions, and anger. Many of us are very uncomfortable with such emotional displays and simply want them to go away.

4. Be willing to believe the unbelievable. Being the confidante of an incest survivor brings you face to face with some of the most evil and twisted practices human beings commit on one another.

5. Examine your own attitudes before God. Coming alongside a survivor of sexual abuse forces you to face your own preconceptions about sexual abuse, your own areas of sexual confusion and pain, good and evil, justice and injustice, attitudes about males and females, etc.

6. Assist her in seeking professional help. The consequences of sexual abuse are complex. Help her find someone who has expertise in this area.

7. Form a support network for her while she is healing.

8. If she is married, help her husband find support and assistance in understanding the issues. He will need counsel in order to come alongside his wife in helpful ways and so he does not hurt further or slow down the healing process.

9. If she is single, she may need a place to stay at times. Being alone with tormenting memories and nightmares is terrifying.

10. Understand that dealing with memories of trauma almost always results in nightmares. She may go through months and months of night terrors. She may need someone she can call at 3:00AM. If you form a network of two or three women, this can be shared so it doesn't fall on just one person.

11. Find out if she has a drug or alcohol problem.

12. Take any suicide threats seriously. She needs to notify her counselor or be taken to a medical facility if she threatens suicide.

13. Remember that incest is a criminal act.

14. Understand that healing takes time. God has created us to live in time, and so we heal in time. Healing from sexual abuse is not a quick process. Our God is a God of redemption, but He often works through people and over time. BE patient, and then be patient some more.

15. Be aware of your vocabulary, your timing, and your body language. When you sit before someone in great pain, immediate words of hope and peace are often our first response. Don't rush in. Listen. Scripture says that to speak before we hear is foolish. Words of love and hope will only begin to make sense as you flesh them out in your relationship to her. I remember praying earnestly for a woman I was working with and asking God to show her how much He loved her. His answer was, "You show her. You want her to grasp how much I love her, then demonstrate that love to her."

16. Be prepared for repetition. She will need to tell her story many times and need to hear your assurances and support repeatedly.

DO NOT

1. Think that incest does not occur in seemingly good families. It does. It happens in pastors' homes, choir directors' homes, and in the homes of, "Oh. He was such a fine man."

2. Minimize what happened. (At least you weren't killed.) Abuse that occurred even once and never went beyond fondling is serious and has shattered many lives. No matter how mild, any sexual abuse is a direct violation of the law of God.

3. Imply that she is to blame for the abuse. Help her see that a child cannot say, "No," effectively. Nothing a child has done, no matter how provocative, is justification for abuse.

4. Excuse the abuser. Whatever his problems, it is not a mandate for incest.

5. Be afraid of her anger or guilt. It will be intense. If there is no emotion with the telling, she is probably still denying the effect of the abuse.

6. Simply tell her she must forgive and forget. To tell her to forget is ludicrous. Keep in mind that she needs to face the truth before she even knows what is in need of forgiveness. Keep in mind that forgiveness in the heart of anyone is the work of the Spirit of God. She can go to God asking Him to teach her how to forgive such an evil, but she cannot simply make herself forgive.

7. Think she is simply trying to get attention by telling her story. Sexual abuse is

shattering. She has been neglected and abandoned by those adults who were called by God to protect and care for her. She needs attention and you are right to give it to her. Love her and then love her some more.

Responses to a Woman Who Has Been Raped

Statistics suggest that one in ten women will fall prey to a rapist at some time during her life. The thought of rape strikes terror in the hearts of women. In recent years attitudes toward women who have been raped have changed. However, there are damaging misconceptions that still exist.

DO

1. Let her know it is often better to have given in to her attacker than to resist.
2. Assure her that the rape was not her fault.
3. Encourage her to write down the details of what happened. She will find it easier to do immediately rather than later when she is being questioned or pressured to remember.
4. Everything you can to persuade her to report the crime.
5. Encourage her to go to the ER or police immediately, if the rape has just occurred.
6. Go with her to report the attack or to the ER. It is very traumatizing to be examined by a male doctor immediately following a rape.
7. Encourage her to seek professional help. Someone trained to deal with the emotional effects of rape will be able to help her sort through what has happened.

DO NOT

1. Evaluate the victim according to a preconceived stereotype of what kinds of women get raped.
2. Press for details of the sexual attack.
3. React with visible shock, horror, or disgust.
4. Accuse her of being partially to blame.
5. Discourage her from reporting the rape.
6. Criticize her for not resisting hard enough.
7. Urge her to just forgive her attacker and not report it.

8. Even hint that she might have been spared if she had asked God for help or done some other thing.

Responses to Any Woman Who Is Suffering

1. Write notes of encouragement. Notes can lift spirits and be read again and again.
2. Do not wait for someone who is suffering to call you. She probably has little or no energy to take the initiative in reaching out.
3. Find ways to relieve her of the repetitive, mundane tasks in her life (cleaning, meals, child care, etc.).
4. If she is able, include her in some fun activities. Fun can be a momentary distraction from pain and suffering.
5. Pray for her and with her faithfully.
6. Know that you do not have nor can you have answers to all problems. Your presence in the midst of pain and suffering is a gift. Do not feel obliged to fix or provide a solution to everything.
7. Take care of yourself, spiritually, physically, and emotionally. You cannot be available in effective ways for those who are suffering if you are burnt out. We often respond to suffering with one of two extremes. We either distance ourselves from the suffering or we absorb it like a sponge and then collapse.

Incest is evil. Violence against women is evil. Chronic pain, cancer, depression, and broken marriages can all take a toll. First of all seek after Christ. In addition, pursue beauty—in music, in nature, in art, and in friends. We live in a world full of evil. However, we worship a God of beauty and order. Do not lose sight of that fact.

Helping Women Suffering from Depression

DO

1. Remember this is not simply a case of the “blues” or a personal weakness.
2. Remember that depression is often debilitating. It affects behavior, thoughts and feelings, and often incapacitates the sufferer.
3. Understand the sufferer may be extremely sleep-deprived. Neither mind nor body functions well when lacking sleep.
4. Treat those who are depressed with tender compassion.
5. Give them credibility when they express the extent and depth of darkness and fear they

are experiencing.

6. Encourage them to seek and stay with treatment.
7. Maintain as normal a relationship as possible.
8. Point out critical or negative thinking gently without being critical or disapproving.
9. Gently encourage the depressed person to get involved in activities she once enjoyed.
10. Point out signs of improvement, although she may not recognize them.
11. Pray for her. She may, in fact, be unable to pray for herself.
12. Engage (with her permission) others to pray faithfully for her as well.
13. Remind her carefully and gently that God is merciful and gracious and the God of all comfort. Depression results in guilt and self-condemnation. She is feeling great darkness and struggles with doubts. Hope for her when she has no hope.

DO NOT

1. Lose patience with her. A depressed person often brings out anger in others, and it is tempting to tell them her to “snap out of it.”
2. Criticize her or say things that blame or condemn.
3. Be surprised or annoyed if you notice improvements in her before she does.
4. Ignore suicide threats. Her doctor needs to know immediately.
5. Use harsh or unkind language. It will never help.
6. Urge her to do what is out of her power to do. If you can, gently divert her to something else that is helpful, remembering she cannot concentrate well and has little energy.
7. Urge her to just “get over it and go on.” If she could, she would. Some suppose people cling to their depression. That is akin to assuming someone would be happy to suffer from anything.
8. Tell them terrible stories about others. They are easily made anxious and tearful.
9. Refuse to let her give voice to her troubles. David often poured out his troubles and complaints to God.

Hints for Hospital Visits

DO

1. Sit on a chair rather than stand. It is easy to feel like Exhibit A lying down in bed.
2. Walk out of the room when the doctor arrives.
3. Call before you visit.
4. Talk with the patient, not about her to others in the room.
5. Keep your visit short. She is sick.
6. Leave when others arrive. One woman spoke of having sixteen people all visiting with each other in her room.
7. Bring the outside world in. The world can easily get very small when a person is sick.
8. Be sensitive to the patient's level of strength.
9. Offer to pray or read Scripture. Let her choose and keep it short (one verse is fine—her mind is tired.)
10. Ask if there is anything she would like to share with you or have you pray about.

DO NOT

1. Visit too long. You can always ask how long she would like you to stay.
2. Sit on the bed.
3. Bring small children. She is easily overwhelmed.
4. Talk about your problems. She is the reason you are there.
5. Say, "I know someone who..." and then proceed to tell her about how awful it was.
6. Ask her if her roommate is nice. Her roommate is sick too and probably has ears.
7. Impose your own beliefs regarding the cause of illness and the only right way to heal.
8. Be so afraid you'll do it wrong that you don't go visit.
9. Overreact. Expressions of shocks, horror, or disgust are not helpful.

Making Home Visits when a Woman Is Ill

DO

1. Call before you come.
2. Be specific in your offers to help, (e.g., "I'd like to come and do _____ and stay for _____ minutes").
3. Ask for specific chores that are difficult or impossible for her to do. List possibilities (laundry, change bed linens, ironing, weed garden, etc.).
4. Bring food in containers that do not need to be returned.
5. Send cards and notes of encouragement. If you offer a verse of Scripture, choose one and write it out.
6. Pray with her if she is comfortable with that. Keep it short.
7. If she is caring for a family member, offer to stay with the patient or loved one for a specific amount of time so she can do others things around the house, sleep, or go out.

DO NOT

1. Stay too long. You'll wear her out.
2. Talk about your problems.
3. Bring small children.
4. Ask general questions like, "Is there something I can do?" She will probably say, "No."
5. Be afraid to visit. She is isolated.
6. Be afraid to ask her to let you know what is helpful and what is not. We will make mistakes and need to be taught by those we desire to assist.

General Suggestions

1. Know your limitations. Diagnosis and treatment should be done by those with training and experience in a given area.
2. Compassion and understanding are always appropriate responses.
3. Know the resources available in your area.
4. When making a referral, make sure the person is qualified. No one is an expert in all areas. Check credentials, training, and experience.

"And we urge you...warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone" (1 Thess. 5:14).