

Advice from an advocate

Aug 9

Becky H: — I've worked as an advocate for victims of sexual assault and domestic violence for 20 years now, in King Salmon (AK). I cover about 16 different villages, but only about 5000 people. I've worked with both victims and perpetrators. In these communities, everyone is connected to everyone, and everyone has an opinion about how things play out, and there is no one in the community who is not affected by this. Similar to our fellowship.

I experienced child sexual abuse as a child, by someone in our fellowship. I bring that up, not so you can feel sorry for me, but to remind you that there are people among you where their meeting has not been a safe place. This is a big storm, and for a lot of people it's a storm they've never contemplated before. But for me, it's been a part of my whole life. I can tell you from experience that no matter how mild the abuse may seem, it affects me to this day. I've had to do a lot of work to find a way to heal. It has even affected my career choice, it's why I have my job, advocating for others.

An advocate is someone who supports, represents, or is a voice for someone who may have trouble advocating or speaking for themselves. Being with them in a meeting, accompanying them to places where they feel unheard or intimidated, etc. Being an advocate is not controlling anyone. We have a saying in the organization I work for, "Each person is an expert on their own life." As advocates we don't say, "This is how we're going to fix this situation for you."

Being an advocate is listening, letting that person explain what living in their world is like, and then helping them find ways around obstacles they've been facing. Just remember that the advocate role is not to fix, not to control, or to make decisions for them, but to listen and support. To be with them in their journey.

This is something I learned really early on: There is no such thing as an "innocent victim", that perfect person that never did anything wrong in their life (talking about adults, not children). If you're looking for this person/victim to have no faults of their own in order to be willing to help them, you're on the wrong track. Your job is not to judge them or their choices. Your goal needs to be to see this person as someone who needs support. You should not pick apart their story.

Do not say anything or ask any questions that might shift the blame onto the victim. You just can't do that.

In advocacy (this is true for elders too), you may not be the right person to advocate for someone. Maybe you're too close to the person, you have a conflict of interest, or you're too close to the perpetrator. Or maybe you're too angry at what's happened to the victim, or have some conflict in your own life that will hinder. It is always okay to find someone else to help. But don't leave them hanging! If you do this, it's really hard on the victim. It was really hard for them to tell you in the first place. Victims feel a huge amount of shame.

I feel shame for things that happened to me when I was 5 years old. As if I could have any responsibility for it! Shame is a huge part of the victim experience. So, stay calm, listening to understand, but not to judge. An advocate is not an investigator. Listen and support. As advocates, we also don't need to decide if their story is true or not. We need to fully accept their experience, and support and help as you can from there.

As you enter the conversation, really check your motives. Is your goal to help them get over it as fast as possible? Would disbelieving their story make your life easier? Would it be easier to have this go away quickly? If you have those feelings, it's best to involve somebody else, to bring somebody else in to help. There is no shame in that, really. In my organization, we pass clients to each other all the time. Maybe this situation is too big for me, or I have a conflict here.

Things that are always okay to say to victims: - Thank you for telling me, for trusting me. - It takes a lot of courage to do what you are doing.

It's not an easy thing to bring your own victimization to someone else, there is a lot of shame. Make them feel and know that they did the right thing by bringing it to you to get help. The greatest gift you can give them is to believe them.

Another thing that is safe to say to a victim, especially if they were a child, is that none of this was their fault. There's no way a child could have invited this kind of thing into their life. There's no way a parent, through improper parenting or any other fault, could have invited this into their home. The only fault belongs to the person who chose to exploit the child in this manner.

I want to point out that children internalize things that they don't understand. Any new experience, such as when a child is toddling around in their home and gets hurt, the first thing they do is look to the parent to see how they should respond. If the parent gasps, the child cries. They are looking for context all the time, for all new experiences. If the child doesn't get the proper context for what has happened, they will turn it inward and it will become their own fault in their mind. Personally, I thought I must be a particularly disgusting person. How else could this have happened to me? So, when people tell you about how they have been hurt, you need to tell them it is not their fault. The burden belongs to the person who made the choice to harm, to exploit. When someone comes to you, they need to hear that the harm was the result of something that was in the abuser's heart, that it's not the victim's burden to keep

carrying by themselves. The burden should be carried by the person that made the choice to harm.

The consequences must also to be borne by the person who made that choice to harm. It shouldn't be borne by the victim, the families who are trying to protect their children or unknowing people trustingly going into a situation, not realizing that they should not trust it.

I always normalize whatever emotion people are expressing, I tell them "That makes sense." If people are really mad, sad, feel sorry for the perpetrator, if they never want to go to meeting again, whatever...! say "That makes sense." There is no emotion anyone can feel that is wrong to feel. Not that all of those emotions are all safe to act upon, but it's okay to validate it. It's okay to be real. Whatever they feel. It's okay to be really angry, sad, to grieve for lost relationships. It's okay to feel any and all those things. Make sure to leave the conversation open ended. There may be more to tell! Many victims will come to me and give me the bare details of their story. At the beginning of the story, I can see that they're gauging me to see how I'm receiving it. If I were to seem too shocked, or disbelieving, they would just clam up. Before they've really begun, you've already hurt them by not receiving their story.

Avoid asking 'why' questions. "Why were you there?" "Why did you go into that bedroom?" Getting into the details distracts from what they're trying to tell you. Avoid interrupting to get details because that can feel threatening or disbelieving. Victims may tell their story in a disconnected way. That is part of how the brain handles trauma. A really harmful question is often asked is, "Why did it take you so long to tell?" The hard part of this is the victim often has tried to tell, but their parent(s), authorities, or someone else in their lives, has either not believed them or not done anything about it. Telling needs to be in their own timing; everybody is ready to talk about abuse in their own time.

One harmful thing that was said to me was, "It could have been worse. At least it wasn't violent." Don't tell people that it could have been worse! That's just a way to minimize it, and that statement is very damaging.

People might ask, "Are you sure? Maybe you misunderstood what happened." We might like to believe it was all a mistake. It's very easy to cause a child to doubt themselves, that maybe they didn't experience what they thought happened. Then, they internalize it, and believe "this is about me being a bad person." Don't say or ask anything that could shift the blame to the victim. For example, asking, "why were you....(in that room, doing that thing, up that late, etc.", or "What were you wearing," or, "what did you do to attract his attention?" Those are all things that directly or indirectly shift responsibility and guilt from the abuser and onto the victim.

I especially want to bring up a phrase that is used a lot in our fellowship: "You need to forgive and forget". It's common advice to tell someone to, "Just forgive." By the way, the "forget" part is not in the Bible. The forgive part is. However, victims are often told right away that they need to forgive, and whether it's meant to or not, it is weaponized against the victim. In essence, the

victim is told to quickly come to the place of forgiveness so the person that did the harm can get off the hook. Forgiveness by the victim and the abuser regaining privileges must be two completely separate things. Jesus, on the cross promised that the thief next to him would be in paradise that day, but he didn't let him off the cross. The thief still died that day. So, I don't think it's fair to connect the victim's forgiveness of perpetrator to the perpetrator regaining all his old privileges. Forgiveness is a really deeply personal and difficult thing. Today I forgive and will re-forgive many times. I still probably have to work on that more. And "Just (simply) get over this..." there is nothing 'just' (simple) about it. This is a life sentence, for children! People don't 'just' get over this.

Don't use scripture, like, "All have sinned and fallen short ..." It is a mistake to equate the sin of child sexual abuse to sins such as fornication or adultery. Child sexual abuse is a sin (and serious crime) where there is something lost that can never be the same again. I would equate it to child sacrifice.

Confidentiality - sometimes well-meaning people will go and share a victim's story to other people in order to make sure the case goes forward, to get a situation handled or to make a point. But remember, this person has trusted you, and just because you know the story, doesn't mean you have permission to share it. Your role is to help them decide what they are going to do with their story.

As adults in Alaska, there is no statute of limitations for this type of crime (child sexual abuse). So, no matter how many years have passed, the victim can report it. Mandated reporters - my job (advocacy), clergy, healthcare workers, teachers, etc. all are mandated reporters. We are mandated to report if there is a reasonable suspicion that other children are currently in danger. I didn't realize that it read this way until all of this started. We are mandated to report no matter how long ago it happened, or how old the victims are now, if there is a reasonable suspicion that other children are in danger. Even though you know that you must report it, you should still let the victim take the lead on how/when it is reported. Support the victim, go with them, but don't just go blasting off without the victim's awareness and permission. Do not share the story with others without their express permission, especially on Facebook or any other social media.

I wrote a document called Responding to Adults Disclosing Child Sexual Abuse. If anyone wants access to it, I can give it to you later.

There is another document I have written called Confronting Adults About Abusive Behavior. Some months ago, some overseers asked me how to conduct conversations with the perpetrators. I put this together to outline common patterns of response when a person is confronted with what they have done. General patterns are: deflecting, shifting the blame, trying to make the victim responsible, claiming that it's all a misunderstanding, that the victim is too sensitive, and or that people are out to get them. They might say, "These people have something against me and that's why they're making up these stories." Another common

pattern is a bid for sympathy: that they can't help themselves, for example, it is because they are in a celibate ministry. That is just a bid for you to be sympathetic with their situation, to the end that you will excuse their behavior. Another pattern seen is the normalizing or minimizing of their behavior, claiming that lots of people do this, and that it's not a big deal. Lastly, they may even accept partial responsibility, maybe for just the few cases where there's proof, but in all other cases, they deny, deny, deny. They will try to appear honest by accepting that one proven fact that they can't actually get away from. They will try to minimize or deny all the rest of the cases.

I like to set those patterns out as a way to listen to an abuser. It's not wrong to be kind, but it's right and good to be firm, and to help them be accountable. I feel that helping people to be honest and holding them accountable is kind. The bible says that someday everything will be known, so it's actually better if we have time to deal with it now.

When someone goes to a person to confront them with what they're guilty of, often the first thing they want to know is, "Who told you about this?" And, "Who is this person who has accused me?" The first and most important thing to remember is that we need to protect the victim's identity! An abusive person's first thought is often to strike out at the person who dared to share the secret. They will strike either directly or indirectly; can strike out at those not directly involved, at family, or make up or reveal other types of accusations so as to distract and do damage. So, when I talk to someone who is guilty of something, I'm really careful not to share any information that would point back to the victim. Also, if the victim gave you any details about what happened to them or what their experience was like, don't arm the perpetrator with any of that personal information.

An abuser might try to guess who accused them, because they already know what they're guilty of! They will try to find out what you know. Keep redirecting the conversation to accountability, honesty, and what they need to do to make it right. Encourage them to deal with this now, that this is a merciful thing to be given the opportunity to deal with it today, instead of waiting until the judgment day.

Ask them not to have any contact with any accusers or victims. Recently I've seen a lot of weaponized apologies. They will write a big flowery apology to the victims and the victim's family, but include all sorts of seeds of excuses and minimization, making it clear that they don't take full accountability. I've recommended against asking or encouraging them to apologize any time soon, at least not until they have gone to some pretty intensive treatment. Only when they are ready to take full accountability for what they've done, are they ready to write an apology.

Discourage those who have allegations against them from trying to gather support for their side of the story. Like a lot of people, their first thought is defensive. "I'm going to get my posse together that believes in me." They immediately want to build this defense. It's a common human behavior, but it really doesn't belong in our fellowship. I think it is a kindness

to them to keep reemphasizing who exactly is responsible for where they are today. "It's not anybody else but you." We don't have to be cruel, but it's just the right thing.

Help them accept the consequences of their actions and that it's not tragic to accept the consequences. Consequences are built in. Our laws are designed with consequences, and we all need to accept that. And it's good to help them accept and honor all the boundaries people have set for the sake of safety. I find it to be really telling how an accused person responds when you try to set boundaries. Many people will immediately push on the boundary. People with abusive behavior patterns hate boundaries, they hate to be limited. If a person has truly, truly repented from what they have done, they would completely understand that people are afraid to be around them and would self-separate because they would never want to harm anyone again. If they are pressing to get back to full privileges, that is always a sign to me that the person has not reached the stage of accountability. I recommend therapy as a way, not to get back to former privileges, but rather to gain an understanding of who they are and how they got to be where they are today. It will help them learn how to be a safer person, and that's a good thing for all of us both inside and outside of this fellowship.

Special note: All of the above is regarding communicating with adults. If this is a current crime where a victim is still a child, then throw out all above advice. Call the authorities! Listen to the child, confirm that they were right to tell their story, advocate for them. Do not interview them. We are not investigators; we are not law enforcement. Child Advocacy Centers:

<https://www.alaskachildrensalliance.org/find-a-child-advocacy-center-in-alaska/>

If anyone wants any more information about how to report, what we do as advocates, and in what order to do things, I'm always available. You can call me anytime. I've written things that are guidelines. My documents are always 'drafts' because this is an ever-evolving situation that we're all working with here.

Question from DJ: — "What if this was happening, and I had no idea? How can we spot these things?"

Becky - My abuser was very hands-y. I remember calculating how to get out of the building, without allowing him to touch me. So, watch for extra touching when it doesn't make sense. He would grab us and rub his whiskers on us, and maybe people saw that and thought it was odd, but I was raised that I needed to obey all adults. Don't raise your children like that! I trained my children to understand they have rights over their own bodies. Watch for extra touching, or someone picking up a child that doesn't want to be held, or making them hug them, against their will. Watch for singling out a child for special attention.

DJ - "Did your parents notice it?"

Becky - They were newly professed, and they thought the friends were perfect. They knew all about dangers in the world, but felt they could trust people in the fellowship.

Comment from S: - There are sometimes patterns of behavior that both perpetrators and victims can manifest. One good place to start learning about those patterns is in the Ministry Safe course. Though I realize that these are sometimes very hard things to spot.

Becky - In the case of most abusers, it is not an impulsive act that just happens in one moment. Often people who have been groomed by the perpetrator or people who really care for them will say, "Well there were only these two or three episodes." There's this desire by loved ones to minimize these crimes. But the reality is, there is a long road between that first intrusive thought, entertaining that thought, fantasizing about it, zeroing in on someone (grooming) that they could actually abuse, and finally to actually carry out the abuse. There are thousands of opportunities to repent during that process, and to never harm anyone. By the time a person has actually touched a child, they've already gone a long way down that road. This is why it's such a critical thing to protect children: because the predator has come a very long way to get there, and it's not an easy problem to solve with just a little bit of therapy or an "I'm sorry." They have created a pathway in their mind that they will struggle with for the rest of their life.

It's kind of like alcoholism. In kindness, if we knew our friend was an alcoholic, we wouldn't have bottles of booze in front of them and we wouldn't take them to bars. We'd be careful for their sake, too. I don't believe in hating people or condemning their souls, but I do believe these abuses are things we must protect the most vulnerable from.

Responding to Adults Disclosing Childhood Sexual Abuse

https://docs.google.com/document/d/18N3Jaa2yzOxv_BSJmesav1Ht08cCbE1O4geO6uSFtn8/

Confronting a Person About Abusive Behavior

https://docs.google.com/document/d/18KrSjvpDH7wqVrRv7yIFLplbxg9O_xY/