

# Supporting Adult Survivors of Child or Adult Sexual Abuse in the Fellowship

Jul 20

## Survivor Support Policy

Many survivors have an inner core of strength that has helped them endure a deeply damaging, sometimes ongoing, experience. This warrants acknowledgement and affirmation during the support process. This strength does not preclude ongoing symptoms, challenges and need for support.

Due to the abuse they have endured, survivors may experience:

- Re-living event(s) through flashbacks/dreams/memories, memory loss, intrusive thoughts, emotional numbness, fear, post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD), dissociation, depersonalization;
- Overwhelming worry, restlessness, nervousness and hypervigilance;
- Cognitive challenges such as problems focusing, memory retention, difficulty making decisions, challenges completing tasks and assignments in school or at work;
- Mood challenges such as overwhelming sadness, loneliness, anxiety, irritability, appetite/weight changes (clinical depression), intense feelings such as anger;
- Self-esteem challenges such as shame, embarrassment, guilt, social isolation, difficulty making friends, feelings of worthlessness or emptiness;
- Substance abuse, eating disorders, self-harming behaviors and suicidality;
- Difficulty with relationships (fear of intimacy, inability to trust, sexual dysfunction, problems with spouse/family dynamics), difficulty with interpersonal communication, attachment disorders;

- Inappropriate boundaries, risky sexual behavior and risk of revictimization;
- Higher rates of chronic disease such as heart disease, diabetes, obesity, autoimmune diseases;
- Being perceived as angry or aggressive while self-advocating to be heard.

### **Why should the fellowship provide support to survivors?**

Survivors are often misunderstood and have been overlooked and shunned in the fellowship, while perpetrators have been protected, excused, and elevated to positions of trust. This bias must be recognized. One step in addressing this is to actively support survivors.

Guidelines for support will help provide consistency across regions and time.

In consideration of the above, and for the purposes of support, it is immaterial whether the survivor was abused by an individual inside or outside of this fellowship. Similarly, the level of the survivor's participation in the fellowship should not affect support (such as currently professing or not). Christlike compassion should underpin the approach.

### **Recommended support for survivors**

- Acknowledge the abuse and affirm the survivor by providing opportunity for the survivor to be heard by others including those in authority, in a manner that facilitates accountability;
- Support survivors in counselling. This includes both acknowledging that mental health and other services may be needed, and contributing funds for counselling to help the survivor establish a functional day to day life and emotional well-being. Some survivors may have health plans that cover part of this, while others may not;
- Support survivors in social connections. This may include supporting involvement of a social worker and connecting with other survivors;
- Support family members or others close to the survivor who may also need help to navigate survivor behaviors that can affect crucial relationships (such as parent/sibling/spouse);

- Support during subsequent hardship. Survivors may be asked to testify in court. Legal advice and accompaniment (victim's advocate) should be supported if this situation occurs;
- Ensure survivors' safety and prevent re-traumatization by removing perpetrators from contact with the survivor in meeting, public gatherings, or communication. Take care to avoid inadvertently pressuring survivors to make contact. In some healing processes, survivors may choose to make contact; in these cases interaction should be on the survivor's terms;
- Extra consideration may be needed for survivors who are non-English speaking, elderly, disabled or with other demographic vulnerabilities.

### **Considerations for worker survivors:**

In most cases, when workers enter the ministry they forgo many natural securities, including money, assets such as home/vehicle/investments, and the opportunity to pursue further education or a career. This unique reality should guide the support provided to those who leave the work temporarily or permanently.

- Open discussion to ascertain immediate needs to establish themselves first temporarily and then permanently. This may include funds for a vehicle, rent, furnishings, as well with help with finding a job;
- Support to approach change in role in the church (communication of new role to members of fellowship, elders, local workers);
- Follow-up needs assessment 3-6 months after initial transition. Some former workers have mentioned that after the receipt of basic needs funds, they were left adrift and felt isolated. This may be addressed by having a designated person check in periodically.

### **Support for survivors in other countries**

We encourage extending support to survivors of abuse, no matter their country of residence. This is of a special concern given cases of abusers traveling to, or being sent to, other areas without full disclosure of their history. Language barriers and differences in cultural context may provide further opportunity for abuse to occur.

Individuals who have a history of abuse must not be moved without full disclosure.

Support for survivors in other countries should include open acknowledgement of survivors' experience, sharing policies and lessons learned, and providing financial support for medical and counselling needs.

Anticipated challenges include varying degrees of trust in police and state authorities, and cultural differences in sexual norms and discussing the same. Individuals familiar with these complex dynamics, such as those local to a specific region, may be best equipped to navigate these challenges with full support from others.

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