

Help for Families and Individuals Dealing with Sexual Assault and Rape

BARBARA MORRELL

Barbara Morrell is an assistant clinical faculty member in the BYU Counseling and Career Center. This address was given at the 2002 BYU Families Under Fire Conference.

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For further information write:

BYU Families Under Fire,
136 Harman Continuing Education Building,
Provo, Utah 84602.
(801) 422-3559
E-mail: conferences@byu.edu
Home page: <http://ce.byu.edu/cw/fuf>

As I have pondered what I could say to be helpful to those of you who have been sexually assaulted or raped as children, adolescents, or adults and your families and church leaders, I felt it might be most important to tell you the things I try to communicate to every young woman or young man who comes to my office in the BYU Counseling Center, who has been violated in this way. In focusing my remarks to those who have been assaulted, I hope to give insight to friends and family members about how your loved one might be feeling, and the messages they need to hear from you, to help them recover emotionally and spiritually from this violation.

If you are like 85–90 percent of individuals who reported sexual assault in Utah County for the year 2000, the person who assaulted, raped, or abused you is someone you know. It might be a boyfriend, date, acquaintance, friend, neighbor, family friend, or even a husband, father, mother, brother, sister, or other relative. It is very painful and confusing when someone you love and should be able to trust, treats you in such a way. It is especially confusing if this person claims to love you. Here are some important things to know

1. No matter what your relationship with this person is, or how old you were when it happened, sexual abuse or assault is a crime and a serious sin. President Gordon B. Hinckley has said the following about abuse in the family, and it applies to abuse and assault outside of the family as well:

We condemn most strongly abusive behavior in any form. We denounce the physical, sexual, verbal, or emotional abuse of one's spouse or children. . . . No

man who abuses his wife or children is worthy to hold the priesthood of God. No man who abuses his wife or children is worthy to be in good standing in this Church. The abuse of one's spouse and children is a most serious offense before God, and any who indulge in it may expect to be disciplined by the Church.

President Gordon B. Hinckley, "What are People Asking About Us?"
Ensign, November 1998.

2. There is no excuse for anyone forcing or manipulating you into sexual contact, or talking to you in a sexually inappropriate way. What happened to you is wrong, no matter what justification the person who abused you may have given for his or her actions. Sexual perpetrators often tell lies or manipulations to keep the one victimized quiet, or to make him or her feel responsible for what is happening.

Although the desire for sexual intimacy is a natural and God-given desire, no one needs or deserves sexual relations. Marriage does not entitle anyone to such relations, but is a sacred covenant within which such intimacy is appropriate when both husband and wife willingly participate. President Howard W. Hunter said to the husbands of the Church:

"Tenderness and respect—never selfishness—must be the guiding principles in the intimate relationship between husband and wife. Each partner must be considerate and sensitive to the other's needs and desires. Any domineering, indecent, or uncontrolled behavior in the intimate relationship between husband and wife is condemned by the Lord."

President Howard W. Hunter, "Being a Righteous Husband and Father,"
Ensign, November, 1994.

3. Nothing about the sexual violation is your fault. If you were a child when it happened, even if you did not say no or tell anyone, or if you participated willingly, or even if some of it felt good, it could not have been your fault. You did not have the maturity to consent to sexual behavior with someone older or stronger. The guilt and shame rests with the person who abused or assaulted you, even if you had already been baptized into the Church. No matter how strong that guilt and shame feel now, over time and with help and support you can hand the guilt and shame back to that person.

Even if you were somewhere your parents told you not to be or doing something against Church standards, such as not dressing modestly or even violating the word of wisdom, it is not your fault if someone sexually assaulted you. If you said no, or resisted, or were drugged, and someone forced you, it is still rape, no matter what the circumstances were. You may have made some errors in judgment that made you more vulnerable to assault, and may even need to clear up some things in your own behavior to be in good standing in the Church, but the sexual assault is still not your fault. No matter the circumstances, no one deserves to be raped or assaulted.

If you were assaulted by a boyfriend or date, even if you participated in kissing, it is not your fault. Even if you had been sexual with this person before, the time he forced it was an assault. If the person who raped you said that he knew you really wanted it, even though you said no or resisted, or that he couldn't stop, that is a lie and manipulation. Think of what would have

happened if someone else had come into the room. Do you think he would have stopped then? Rapists and child molesters often use that kind of language to force or intimidate their victims, or to keep them quiet afterwards.

Often when a child or man or woman is assaulted, they feel frozen and cannot say “no” or fight back. They might be with someone who is a friend or family member whom they trust, or even a stranger, and the shock of being assaulted is so great that they feel immobilized and can’t fight back. It is easy to say “I didn’t fight back, so it is my fault,” but anytime someone touches you sexually without your consent, it is still an assault. If you are confused by what happened to you, you may need help from a bishop, family member, friend, or counselor to understand what happened and help you stop blaming yourself.

4. Sexual abuse or assault cannot make you bad or unworthy in any way. Your body may have been invaded in a very personal way, but someone else’s actions cannot take away the purity and chastity of your body and spirit. You might feel dirty or bad, because what happened to you was very bad, but the badness is not in any way about you or your body. The “For the Strength of the Youth” pamphlet says, “Victims of rape, incest or other sexual abuse are not guilty of sin. If you have been a victim of any of these crimes, know that you are innocent and that God loves you.”

No matter how your body or the body of the perpetrator responded during the assault, none of it is your fault. Our bodies cannot help the way they respond to touch. It isn’t fair to blame yourself or your body for what someone else does to you. You may feel like you are damaged or that something is wrong with you. These are common feelings associated with sexual abuse and assault but are not true. Someone else’s actions can hurt you, but not damage you or make you less. You may feel unlovable or unworthy of the love of God or good people, but it is not true.

5. You were not abused or assaulted because you are bad. You and others treated this way were hurt because of others’ unrighteousness. You were just there. Nothing about you caused this person to hurt you. You were totally innocent.

6. Even if no one recognizes your abuse or assault, God knows that it happened. Many times the person who has abused or assaulted you denies it, and other people may believe him or her over you. The fear of this might keep you from talking about what happened. But if the abuse or assault happened, God knows about it, and the person who hurt you will not get away with it forever. In “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve Apostles said, “We warn that individuals who violate covenants of chastity, who abuse spouse or offspring . . . will one day stand accountable before God.”

7. If you are a boy or man and have been sexually assaulted, you do not have to feel ashamed about it. You might fear that it means you aren’t strong or masculine or that something is wrong with you, but that is not true. Sexual abuse and assault happen to both men and women, by men and women. It is more about power than about gender, although more men than women are perpetrators and more of those victimized are women. If you are a man and were assaulted by a man, it does not mean you are homosexual or that you are giving off any signals to the perpetrator. It only means that you were there and that your vulnerability was taken advantage of.

8. However you felt at the time the abuse or rape was happening and however you feel now about what happened to you is normal. In the near aftermath of an assault, or as it is remembered later, you may feel numb, fearful, anxious, sad, angry, irritable, depressed, or any number of other emotions. Anger is a normal reaction to being violated and is not a sin. Overcoming anger and other negative emotions is a process over time and will happen, not for the sake of the abuser, but because you are tired of being angry. You may feel like you are on an emotional roller coaster. You may have flashbacks of the events and feel waves of overwhelming emotion that do not relate to what is currently happening. You may be excessively fearful of people and situations that are not dangerous. All of this is normal. Delayed reaction to abuse or assault is what often motivates the students I work with to talk to their bishops and come into counseling. It may be difficult to trust God and other people because of the abuse you have suffered. Do not feel guilty for whatever feelings you have. It can be very difficult to regain trust in God and others.

Now I want to talk to you about how you can recover and heal from the trauma of sexual abuse and assault.

1. Talk about what happened to a counselor, bishop, family member and/or friend. This will help you to realize that the abuse or assault is not your fault and to give the shame and guilt back to the person or persons who hurt you. I often work alongside campus bishops with students who have been abused or assaulted. It is wonderful for these young people to hear that they share no blame for what happened. Bishops can help with spiritual healing that is not the stewardship of even LDS counselors. Counselors are trained to help in ways bishops are not.

Talking about your abuse or assault may feel more painful at first, instead of a relief. You may have been pushing your feelings about it down for a long time, and talking about it opens up the wound again. If you don't talk about it though, it may continue to affect you in negative ways, especially in how you view yourself and in relationships. It will probably be worth it to you to go through some immediate pain to recover from the abuse.

An important reason for talking about your experience of abuse or assault is to understand the wrong ideas or beliefs you may have gained about what happened, so that you can get them out in the open and refute them. Sometimes children, and even adults, feel worthless after being abused or assaulted and assume it is true because that's how they feel. It sometimes takes time and a lot of work to see and understand your own innocence and purity if you have been abused or assaulted. Most children blame themselves for any maltreatment they receive, even if the perpetrator did not tell them it was their fault. It seems easier to blame themselves than to see the adults around them as unrighteous or unreliable .

2. Don't let anyone else tell you how your experience has affected you. Not everyone who has been abused reacts the same way, and many of the problems associated with sexual abuse and assault can also come from other painful life experiences. Only you can assess the effect of these experiences, but it is easier to realize the effects if you talk about it with others. Be careful not to minimize the problems you may have as a result of the abuse or at the other extreme to blame all of your problems on the abuse. Problems are a part of life, and many of your struggles would be

there without any abuse.

3. Be Patient. It takes many people a long time to be willing to talk about these issues. Do not expect yourself to recover all at once. Sexual abuse and assault are serious violations that can take years to overcome. Elder Richard G. Scott said:

I solemnly testify that when another's acts of violence, perversion, or incest hurt you terribly, against your will, you are not responsible and you must not feel guilty. You may be left scarred by abuse, but those scars need not be permanent. In the eternal plan, in the Lord's timetable, those injuries can be made right as you do your part.

Elder Richard G. Scott, "Healing the Tragic Scars of Abuse," *Ensign*, May, 1992.

4. Learn to believe in your worth. If you have been sexually abused or assaulted, you may feel that God does not love you or that you are not important to him. This is not true. Do not take your abuse or assault as being related to your worth. In our mortal probation, the need for all of our Heavenly Father's children to choose between good and evil is so important that God does not interfere with agency, even when his children are terribly hurt by others' choices. Apparently, having unfettered agency is the only way any of us can gain eternal life. I say this, not as the answer for why God allows the evils of sexual abuse and assault and other atrocities to happen, but as a general gospel principle. I believe the answer to the question of why terrible things happen to innocent and good people is something we all have to wrestle with as individuals. The answers that will come to each of us will be personal and spiritual in nature, as our mortal minds are probably incapable of understanding why there is so much suffering in the world. This issue becomes especially poignant when we or someone we love is suffering from another's sin.

5. Do not feel guilty or worry if you are struggling with forgiveness. It is easy to take scriptures about forgiveness out of context and assume we must be immediately ready to forgive even serious harm from others. For example, an often-quoted scripture about forgiveness in D&C 64:10 reads: "I, the Lord will forgive whom I will forgive, but of you it is required to forgive all men."

The context of this scripture is Christ commanding members of the Church to forgive each other their trespasses, and He gave the example of his disciples of old having contention among themselves and not forgiving each other. Adults insulting and arguing with each other is greatly different from an older or more powerful person taking sexual advantage of you.

On the other hand, Christ's teaching about harming children and perhaps other innocent people, is clear and unambiguous: In Luke 17:1-2 he teaches: "It is impossible but that offences will come: but woe *unto him*, through whom they come. It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones."

Forgiveness may be a long time coming, and you may not be able to do it by yourself in the case of serious sin against you by another. But forgiveness will eventually come as a spiritual gift from our Father in Heaven through the atoning power of our Savior Jesus Christ as you seek it. The purpose of forgiveness is to relieve your pain and suffering and allow you to be happy, not to take the person who violated you off the hook. Your forgiveness can in no way spare your perpetrator the justice of God. Another important thing to understand is that forgiveness is not reconciliation. You may forgive others without choosing to reestablish a relationship with them. We have no obligation to be around someone who continues to harm or belittle us. Sister Aileen Clyde of the past general Relief Society presidency said:

It is not charity or kindness to endure any type of abuse or unrighteousness that may be inflicted on us by others. God's commandment that as we love him, we must respect ourselves, suggests we must not accept disrespect from others. It is not charity to let another repeatedly deny our divine nature and agency. It is not charity to bow down in despair and helplessness. That kind of suffering should be ended, and that is very difficult to do alone. There are priesthood leaders and other loving servants who will give aid and strength when they *know* of the need. We must be willing to let others help us.

Aileen H. Clyde "Charity Suffereth Long," *Ensign*, November 1991.

6. And most important, rely upon the healing power of Christ as you are able to do so. If you feel unable to move beyond your abuse, realize that you cannot recover all on your own. Ultimate healing comes through the Atonement of our Savior, Jesus Christ, and may not be fully accomplished in this life.

In 2 Nephi 9:21 Jacob prophesies of Christ's Atonement saying: "And he cometh into the world that he may save all men if they will hearken unto his voice; for behold, he suffereth the pains of all men, yea, the pains of every living creature, both men, women, and children, who belong to the family of Adam.

Alma, in Alma 7:11 also teaches that Christ "shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pains and sicknesses of his people. . . .that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities."

This seems to promise healing in this life, and indeed Christ has already suffered for both our sins and the pain and suffering caused by the sins of others. It is almost unimaginable that in Gethsemane our Savior suffered the pain of your abuse or assault and for the sin of the person who abused you during the same process of time, as well as for all of the pains and sins of all of Heavenly Father's children.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell paraphrased President Brigham Young, saying that "during the axis of agony which was Gethsemane and Calvary, the Father at some point withdrew both His presence and His Spirit from Jesus. (see *Journal of Discourses* 3:205–6). Thereby Jesus' personal triumph was complete and His empathy perfected. Having 'descended below all things,' He comprehends, perfectly and personally, the full range of human suffering!"

Elder Neal A. Maxwell, “Apply the Atoning Blood of Christ,” *Ensign*, November 1997.

Dr. Stephen E. Robinson of the BYU religion faculty wrote:

[Christ] knows the anguish of parents whose children go wrong. He knows the private hell of the abused child or spouse. He knows all these things personally and intimately because he lived them in the Gethsemane experience. Having personally lived a perfect life, he then chose to experience our imperfect lives. In that infinite Gethsemane experience, the meridian of time, the center of eternity, he lived a billion billion lifetimes of sin, pain, disease, and sorrow. Thus we owe him not only for our spiritual cleansing from sin, but for our physical, mental and emotional healings as well, for he has born these infirmities for us also. All that the Fall put wrong, the Savior in his Atonement puts right.

Let me say that last phrase again: “All that the Fall put wrong, the Savior in his Atonement puts right.” The plan of salvation is not to go through life unscathed, but to be healed from our sorrows through his atoning power.

Even if the person who abused or assaulted you is fully repentant for what he or she did, and does whatever is possible for restitution, that person cannot heal the wounds caused to your spirit and emotional self. Only Christ can heal us from the consequences of the serious sins of others. How we access this gift of the Atonement is an individual process. We need the help of Church leaders, support of family and friends, and mighty prayer to help us. In my experience it is not an easy one for anyone. But Christ finished his Atonement over 2000 years ago. It is up to us to develop faith in his Atonement and to access his healing power. If the person who wounded you is not repentant, or has died, that will not prevent you from healing as you develop faith in Jesus Christ.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that all of us have the responsibility to support and help those around us suffering from the unrighteousness of others. Experiencing sexual violence or seeing loved ones suffer from it is one of the most painful of life’s experiences. It can be difficult to face and accept that a spouse, relative, or friend might have hurt someone we love, but the Lord told Joseph Smith while in Liberty Jail as recorded in Doctrine and Covenants 121: 39, “We have learned by sad experience that it is the nature and disposition of almost all men [and I’m sure women] as soon as they get a little authority they will immediately begin to exercise unrighteous dominion.”

Sexual violence is one of the worst forms of unrighteous dominion that afflicts our community of Saints. It is one of Satan’s greatest tools for evil in the world. Sexual abuse and assault is diametrically opposed to the sanctity of our divine power of procreation. It destroys the bond of trust required for the true emotional and spiritual intimacy the Lord would have us develop in all of our relationships.

The Lord again told Joseph Smith in Doctrine and Covenants 121 how to develop these bonds of love, “by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned.”

(v. 41). Instead of unrighteous dominion we will have “an everlasting dominion, and without compulsory means it shall flow unto [us] forever and ever” (v. 46).

Over many years as a counselor and member of the Church, I have witnessed much spiritual and emotional healing from the pain and suffering of sexual abuse and assault. Through these experiences, I have come to have great confidence in the human spirit to overcome even the greatest suffering through Divine help. Healing does happen and brings great joy and peace into the lives of those who have suffered from the serious sins of others. To those of you suffering right now, I want to encourage you again to be patient and loving with yourself, and to reach out for support and help from your family, friends, priesthood leaders, counselors, and especially your Savior, Jesus Christ.