

The Mindset of an Abuse Victim

by Diane Stelling

At one time or another, most of us have either read or watched a murder mystery on TV and are familiar with the plot line of someone who is framed for a murder they did not commit. The characteristics of this type of situation provide a great illustration for understanding abuse victims. So, for the sake of enlightenment, let us examine what would happen if you found yourself in this unfortunate predicament.

Imagine the following scenario. You witness a murder, and the person who is murdered was a police officer. The murderer is none other than the Chief of Police, but there are no witnesses to the crime except for you. The manner of death is irrelevant to this story. The investigation begins and the police cordon off the crime scene and interview witnesses. You tell them your story and they start collecting evidence.

Then strange things begin to happen. The only fingerprints discovered at the crime scene belong to you, your DNA is present, and your fingerprints are on the murder weapon. The victim's blood and DNA are found in your car, and you realize that evidence has been planted to implicate you in the crime. You are arrested as a suspect and charged with the murder; you then seek out a lawyer to represent and defend you. Since it was the murder of a police officer, you are not allowed out on bail, but are remanded to prison to await your trial.

The nightmare continues, and as you sit in your jail cell, the visitors come. The first one to arrive is your lawyer. You look into his eyes and realize that he doesn't believe you as you proclaim your innocence. He has checked out all of the evidence, and no matter what you say, you can see the disbelief and skepticism in his eyes. He takes notes and you sense that he is just going through the motions of mounting a defense for you. It is an airtight, open and shut case.

The next people to visit are your family and friends from church. You look into their eyes and see the shame and disappointment. It is almost unbearable for you to be viewed in this manner by the people you love the most. They hang their heads, but try to offer you encouragement by telling you that Jesus will forgive you. You want to scream, because you know you haven't done anything wrong. But you also realize that the more fervently you try to convince people that you are innocent, the less they seem to listen or believe. They just nod their heads to pacify you, unconvinced, and their looks tell you that they are horrified that someone they know could commit a crime such as this.

Finally, the Chief of Police arrives. He sits down across the table from you, very cocky and with a big smirk on his face. He looks you squarely in the eye and says, "Don't even try. *No one* will believe you." Then he winks, laughs, and gets up and leaves your cell.

What feelings and emotions would be coursing through your body at this point? In all probability, you would be harboring a tremendous amount of anger and frustration because you know you are innocent, you know who is guilty, and yet the truth will not prevail. In your righteous anger, all you would want is for the correct person to acknowledge his crime and be held accountable for the murder. You would not want revenge, but for justice to be served and the appropriate person to pay the consequences for his crime.

Next on the list would be a considerable amount of fear. Because a police officer was killed, you are facing either the death penalty or life in prison. And since no one believes you, there is no point in telling anyone else. Your innocence falls on deaf ears. Life as you know it is over and you are now in a living hell with no way out. Your fondest wish would be for this to all go away and for you be able to return to your life as it was, in peace.

You would also begin to feel great isolation. There you are all alone in jail, cut off completely from the outside world, with no one believing you, no advocate for your side of the story, and everyone believing that you are a terrible person. There is no one to help extricate you from this awful situation, not even family or friends; no one to protect you from the consequences you might have to endure. The feelings of rejection and abandonment would be overwhelming.

And finally, a sense of hopelessness and despair would set in. People lose hope when they feel that they have no options. It is when people feel hopeless that they give up, on themselves and on their situation.

Could the previous scenario ever happen to you or me? It is a possibility, but I pray that it would never happen to anyone. The reality is, however, that all of the feelings and emotions described above are what abuse victims feel every single day of their lives.

Victims are innocent of the abuse perpetrated against them, they have no culpability in the acts, yet it as if they are being framed for a murder they did not commit. But unlike the previous example, where you know without a doubt you are innocent of the murder, victims lose the sense of their innocence and become brainwashed. They are told over and over again by their abusers that they cause the abuse and after awhile they begin to believe it and feel that they are responsible for this crime.

Abuse victims have a great deal of anger and frustration, not only for their abuser, but about their circumstances. They want acknowledgement of the abuse, validation that it is wrong, and they want the abuser to be held accountable for the abuse and its consequences. It is not about revenge, it is about justice. Victims want the abuse to stop and to be able to live their lives in peace.

They also live in fear. Victims are terrified to tell anyone about their abuse, for fear of the consequences. Generally, like the Police Chief in the above example, abusers repeatedly warn their victims that no one will believe them and they threaten them with harm if they tell. When victims are children, it is especially hard for them to stand up

to an adult authority figure who has a good reputation. Abusers brainwash child victims to believe that no one will believe a child, and that the child will be perceived as a liar. By and large, society follows true to form on this and has a difficult time believing a victim, child or adult. Abusers often have good standing within a community and it is difficult for people to believe that someone they know and love would be capable of such reprehensible behavior. Society prefers to maintain the status quo and would rather malign and discredit a victim than have to face the evil brought on by a sinful, but well-respected abuser.

Victims are afraid, rightfully so, that if their abuser finds out that they told about the abuse, they will suffer greater abuse, either directly or through harm to other loved ones. That is why when abuse is revealed, safety for the victim is paramount. The fear of not being believed, of being thought of as a “bad” person, and the fear of retribution are why victims have almost an insurmountable anxiety about speaking up about their abuse.

Isolation of the victim is also one of the major characteristics of abusive situations. Abusers systematically physically and emotionally separate victims from family and friends and control their whereabouts. Victims come to believe, due to brainwashing by their abusers, that no one cares about them, no one will believe them, and no one will help them. Abuse victims feel as if they are all alone, that no one else is in the same situation, and that no one else could possibly understand.

After prolonged abuse, victims give up hope. They no longer care about themselves because they do not believe they are worthy of being saved. They see no options for themselves, no light at the end of the tunnel, just a life sentence with no hope of parole.

So how can we help? What Christians can offer abuse victims is hope. When abuse is revealed, the most important thing someone can say to a victim is “I believe you.” Three little words, but they have tremendous power. And follow that by saying “I’m so sorry this happened to you.” Just think, in the previous example, when you were sitting in your jail cell, how you would feel if even one person came to visit you and told you they believed you. Although they could not get you out of prison, the mere fact that someone else knew the truth would give you a sense of relief and hope. It is the same thing for abuse victims. Even if you cannot remove someone from an abusive situation, you can be a lifeline for that person by validating them, recognizing the truth, and acknowledging that the abuse is wrong. By just saying these simple phrases you can start an abuse victim on the road towards healing.

It is also important to explain to an abuse victim that they are innocent in God’s eyes regarding the abuse done to them. Most victims feel responsible for the abuse and are ashamed and full of guilt. If you tell them they are forgiven, like in the example described above when friends and family came to your jail cell and offered you forgiveness, victims feel more confused and angry because in their hearts they know that they did not do anything wrong. Offering forgiveness to a person implies that the person committed a sin. We can help free victims of the spiritual burdens of shame and guilt by acknowledging their innocence and placing the burden of the sin where it belongs, on the shoulders of the abuser.

Abuse situations are very complex and it is important for clergy and congregations to realize their roles. Once abuse is revealed, they need to work with victims and perpetrators and refer them for proper counseling and legal assistance from secular organizations that are trained to handle these situations. By understanding the mindset of victims, however, we can learn how to reach out in a positive and compassionate manner and build the trust necessary for victims to reveal their pain and take the first steps towards receiving help. We can and should stand by them with support for their spiritual needs throughout this process. So, the next time someone asks you in response to an abusive situation, “Why did she stay, why didn’t she just leave?” or “Why did he wait decades to tell someone about his sexual abuse as a child?” or “What did she do to cause this?” remember what it would feel like if you were being framed for a murder you did not commit.