

SCIENCE

# Time Doesn’t Heal Sexual Assault If Victims Are Silenced

How churches can help victims decades after assault.

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Christine Blasey Ford’s recent testimony added fuel to an already heated discussion on how we should respond to abuse allegations. Regardless of politics, pastor and author Ed Stetzer [called for caution](#) in how we speak about abuse so that we don’t harm victims within our own communities. Research confirms that victims stay silent because of a negative community culture toward abuse and often don’t receive emotional support. According to therapist Connie Baker, herself a sexual abuse survivor, our response as a church community can make tragic situations worse or they can help with the healing process.

Rachael Denhollander, the attorney who spearheaded the fight to take down Larry Nassar for sexually abusing hundreds of young female gymnasts, experienced both damaging and healing responses from her church communities. Before she came forward, she recalled the kind of church culture that had previously silenced her.

During a youth group discussion, Denhollander remembers a student asking whether they could consider King David’s misuse of power toward Bathsheba as sexual assault, and their teacher said no, opening the floor for others to give their opinions. (You can read why it is assault from a [theological viewpoint here](#).) A friend of Denhollander’s raised his hand to share: “I think it had to have been her fault, because she could have chosen to die rather than have sex with him.”

“This immediately told me I would be better off dead than a rape victim. And if I didn’t fight to my death, it’s my fault,” Denhollander recalled.

## The Impact of Silencing

Research indicates that when abuse victims feel like they can’t or shouldn’t talk about their experiences, their trauma can worsen.

“It does appear that withholding disclosure, or not telling about abuse or assault when one wants to tell is related to worse psychological symptoms, as is delayed disclosure,” according to University of Chicago criminology professor Sarah E. Ullman, in her book, [Talking about Sexual Assault: Society’s Response to Survivors](#).

Indeed, many victims suffer in silence, since “studies indicate that only one half to two-thirds of adult women disclose their sexual assault experience to someone at some point in their lives.”

Baker, who has worked with sexual and spiritual abuse victims for many years [in her private practice](#), told me that when victims are silenced, “The horrible impact cannot be overstated. [The silencing] is the majority of the [long-term] trauma most of the time.”

Baker underwent her own healing journey years ago after her pastor abused her when she was a young adult and used threats of suicide to keep her silent. When the pastor finally confessed, Baker hoped other church leadership would give her protection and support. Instead, she learned, “I was to be the brunt and focal point of their anger, their hurt, their outrage. I was it.” She was forced to confess her “sin” to her church and leave the area so that the church could eventually restore her abuser to ministry.

“Part of why silence is so bad for us is because we’re not made to do trauma in isolation.” Those in pain should be surrounded with support by their communities, the way they do when death or other tragedies strike.

This community support, she said, “is good for our brain and neurology. It’s how we cope.” Unfortunately, most victims don’t get support, and that “isolation brings continued shame and confusion.”

## When We Blame the Victim

Ullman’s research also shows that 80 percent of victims report some form of blaming.

Baker pointed out, along with problematic views about women and a history of blaming women in general, the power structure of many communities makes it risky for congregations to side with victims. Frankly, she said, “It’s easier to dismiss or blame the person with less power.”

“It’s essential to view this problem as a systemic problem. A leader or congregation that blames a victim does not happen in a vacuum.” When the abuser is a respected person in the community, such as a pastor, the community’s knee-jerk response can be, “Is she lying? Please tell me she is lying,” because the stakes are so high for the community if it were true.

This can lead to interrogating the victim with questions that imply guilt or cast suspicion onto the victim. She gave examples of minimizing comments often made to victims, such as the victim “took it wrong,” was “too sensitive,” they are “reading into things,” or “they are exaggerating.” Other blaming responses can include comments such as “they don’t dress modestly enough,” “they tend to flirt,” or “it takes two to tango.”

Both Christians and non-Christians questioned Denhollander: “Why didn’t you fight back?” and “How could you not know?”

## Beyond Blaming: Harmful (Sometimes Well-Meaning) Reactions

In her research, Ullman explored common social reactions to a victim disclosing sexual abuse, finding several negative reactions besides blaming the victim, including taking control of the victim’s decisions, treating the victim differently, distraction from the abuse, or an egocentric response (such as concentrating on their own anger over the abuse, instead of the victim’s pain).

The line between positive and negative responses is, at times, thin. For example, many victims appreciated empathy but found pity unhelpful as it made them feel stigmatized or weak. “Distraction from the abuse” included encouraging survivors not to talk about the abuse anymore or to move on before they were ready, implying that they were overreacting or not healing quickly enough. Baker’s story of church leadership taking over her decisions is a glaring example of a controlling response.

Survivors in Ullman’s research listed clergy as some of the least supportive and helpful, and other research on clergy responses to sexual abuse is mixed as sample sizes have been small. An early study in 2002 concluded that [many pastors blame victims and believe rape myths](#) that deny and justify male sexual aggression, especially those who ranked higher on a five-point fundamentalist scale (whether they agreed to a literal interpretation of the Bible). However, a [2016 study](#) sought to replicate those findings, with some adjustments, and found no link between fundamentalism and negative attitudes toward victims among pastors. The authors also pointed to other research where victims found faith communities to be healing post-assault.

When victims aren’t supported in their church, it can deepen their trauma, according to Baker, who said in her case, the sexual abuse was 25 percent of her trauma, while the spiritual abuse she experienced was 75 percent.

Denhollander linked improper theology to why churches mishandle abuse, blame victims, don’t report abuse, or re-victimize through counseling. She continued, “The church does a lot of other damage to victims in the way they handle grace, repentance, forgiveness, and minimizing of abuse. I have certainly seen that as well as sin leveling [i.e., making all sins equal].”

The impact on victims’ faith can be catastrophic because wrong theology “uses the only place that should be safe,” she said. “It uses your faith; it uses your Savior; it uses everything you rely on like a weapon. And when it uses that, you have nothing left.”

Denhollander also said that when conservative churches get their theology wrong about abuse, they interpret criticism as “being persecuted for following Scripture. So what happens is that they actually tighten down more. They become more protectionist.” This is problematic because it then becomes almost impossible to dialogue with them on the topic. As an evangelical Christian, Denhollander wants people to understand the Bible better, not give up on it.

## When the Church Gets it Right

Ullman’s research didn’t only look at negative social reactions but positive ones as well, including tangible aid or actions, emotional support, such as expressions of love and caring, information support, and validation of abuse or believing the victim. Research found that these responses can buffer trauma in female victims.

Denhollander shared that in her life, her mom and dad were some of her earliest supporters. She credits their compassion and love, as well as their modeling a healthy marriage, with being a vital part of her healing process and giving her a healthy view of marriage and intimacy. She also told me that having a “husband that listens, who is compassionate, who reminds me of the truth and is able to deal with the impact of the effects of abuse in a way that is loving and grace-based is an incredible gift.”

While Denhollander experienced many of the negative silencing effects in earlier church experiences (read some of her other experiences [here](#) and [here](#)), her current church actively supported her during the court case against Nassar. They did a “phenomenal job supporting us in very tangible ways. Praying with us, grieving with us, keeping up to date on the case, supporting us very practically.” She gave examples such as helping care for her kids and bringing them meals and groceries when they were having to travel during the trial. “We were just cared for incredibly compassionately in very practical, meaningful ways, and that was amazingly healing for all of us.”

Denhollander cautions that you usually only get one chance to be a safe place for a victim, so both she and Baker emphasized the need for pastors to become educated on abuse. One resource Denhollander recommended was a [conference on sexual abuse](#) led by Brad Hambrick, a pastor of counseling at The Summit Church.

Baker pointed out that it is critical to recognize that trauma can cause memory gaps and a shifting story, not because victims are lying, but because of the effects of trauma. No one should force a victim to further explain, justify, or defend their abuse story. She also recommended pastors give power back to victims as much as possible, as abuse can make survivors feel powerless.

“In a nutshell, you model Jesus, you show them Jesus, which means you weep with those who weep, and you love justice, and you love holiness. You recognize that what was done to that woman or to that victim deserves justice and is an affront to God’s holiness, and you treat it like that,” said Denhollander.

To survivors who currently feel silenced, Denhollander encourages them to find one safe person to whom they can disclose—someone who can help them reclaim their voice, “who can grieve with you, and who can affirm the truth to you when it’s too difficult to hold on to it yourself.” Yet both underscored that victims should know that no one is entitled to their story and not everyone is worthy of trust. The choice to disclose and when is theirs alone.

Finally, Denhollander noted the importance of recognizing the pain of sexual abuse and grieving freely, even when others insensitively lecture, “You put a smile on your face. God is going to bring good out of it.” She cautions, “Scripture doesn’t shy away from how broken the broken things are, and we shouldn’t either because when we diminish the brokenness, when we diminish the darkness, we diminish the contrast of God’s light and God’s beauty.”

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