

“What Victims Want to Say to Clergy”

The following is a compilation of comments made by victims following crises. Think about what expectations you may have of caregivers assisting you as a victim following a crisis, and how similar your reactions would be to these.

1. Don't explain

As deeply as I cry out, “Why?” I know there is no rational explanation. My “Why” is more a longing for God to hold me in His arms and give me some comfort that it is a question I want answered. I don't want you to try to give me answers. What has happened is absurd. It surely is not as God intended life to be. It doesn't make sense. God didn't cause it. The devil didn't cause it. It could not have been God's will. Therefore, let us together try to explain the cause of the tragedy as factually and honestly as possible. I want God and you, as my pastor, as companions who will stand with me in my longings not as sources of explanation.

2. Don't take away my reality

My pain seems unbearable to me and yet, in light of what has happened, it feels right that I should be in pain. I know it is uncomfortable for you. I know you want to take it away. But you can't so please don't try. The pain is a sign to me of how much I have loved and how much I have lost. If I have doubts, if I am angry, understand that these are normal reactions to a very abnormal situation. I will not always be this, but I am now. These are my feelings. Please respect them.

3. Help me deal with forgiveness and integrity

Understand that if my faith is important to me, I will struggle with the issue of forgiveness. I will remember all the times I've been told that I must forgive. And yet, something deep within me resists forgiving someone who has not even said, “I'm sorry.” I wonder if I am the appropriate one to forgive the person who harmed or injured someone I love. I don't feel obligated to forgive; I don't even feel that I have the right to forgive in these circumstances. But yet I feel uncomfortable in my resistance to forgive. I am also troubled by the difference between forgiving and forgetting. I desperately want my loved one who has been killed or injured, to be remembered. I resist anything that threatens the memory of one who has died. Therefore, even if I do decide at some point that I can honestly and with integrity offer forgiveness, please don't ask me to forget what happened. It is impossible to forget and to me, it is very undesirable as well. Even Jesus said, “Remember me,” when He was dying on the cross. Understand that forgiveness is far more than just saying three words, “I forgive you.” If I say the words, they must be true. I must speak them from the depths of my very soul with absolute integrity. Don't push me to say the words just to satisfy you. I can only say them if I come to really mean them.

4. Stay close.

Just as a one-year old child learns to walk with someone close by to steady him when he stumbles, stay close enough so I can reach out and steady myself on you when I need to. Understand my need to grieve, my need to withdraw, my need to agonize, but remind me that you're there to lean on when I want to share my pain.

5. Remember me for a long time.

This loss will always be part of me. I'll need to talk about it for years to come. Most people will be tired of hearing about it after a period of time. Be the person who will invite me to share my feelings about this after others have moved on to other concerns. If my loved one has died, mention his or her name from time to time and let us remember together.

6. Don't be frightened by my anger.

Anger isn't nice to be around. But it's part of what I'm feeling now, and I need to be honest about it. I won't hurt myself or anybody else. I know my anger doesn't threaten God. People got angry in the Bible. Even God got angry at certain things. The one to worry about is the one who has experienced violence but hasn't become angry.

7. Listen to my doubt.

You stand for faith, and I want you to, but listen to my doubt so you can hear the pain it is expressing. Like anger, doubt is not pleasant to be around, so people will want to talk me out of it. But for right now, let me express the questions, which are measured by the depth of the loss I feel. If I cannot doubt, my faith will have no meaning. It is only as I move through doubt that a more meaningful faith will develop.

8. Be patient

My progress will not be steady. I'll slip back just when everyone thinks I'm doing so well. Be one to whom, on occasion, I can reveal my weakness and regression. Let me be weak around you and not always strong. I'll make it, but it will take much longer than most people think. I'll need your patience.

9. Remind me this isn't all there is to life.

My pain and my questions consume me. I can think and feel nothing else. Remind me there is more to life than my understanding and my feelings. Speak the word "God" not to dull my pain but to affirm life. I don't want God as an aspirin but as a companion who shares my journey. Stay beside me and remind me of that Eternal Presence which can penetrate my grief.

Footnote: What Victims Say to Clergy, A Collections of Feelings Expressed by Victims, author unknown.
"How Faith Communities Can Respond in Crisis and Disasters," Carol L. Hacker, PhD, CTS