

Researchers tell faith communities to let trauma survivors forgive in their own time by [David Briggs](#) in the [September 17, 2014](#) issue

The women came seeking healing. Many of these survivors of the Rwandan genocide had lost family members, and some had been raped and infected with HIV. More than a few were struggling just to make it to another day before they found Solace Ministries.

Sometimes it took a month or a full year before they spoke about their experiences with other survivors. When they did, even if it was only to say a few words before they broke down in tears, other survivors gathered around, embracing one another.

A passage from the book of Isaiah—“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God”—was the mantra for this ministry, which nurtured hope and reinforced belief in a God who had not abandoned them.

Yet one sermon topic required special discretion.

“They never, ever, ever preached forgiveness” until a survivor was able to go through a healing process, said Donald Miller, professor of religion and sociology at the University of Southern California. He has visited Rwanda 16 times and conducted more than 260 interviews with widows and orphans of the 1994 genocide.

Research has shown people who score high on forgiveness scales have significantly lower levels of blood pressure, anxiety, and depression and relatively high self-esteem and life satisfaction.

But forgiveness is also a deeply personal act, one that can harm trauma victims if it is coerced or demanded before they are able to come to terms with their pain and suffering, experts say.

One should not say the “f-word” to someone who has recently been traumatized, said Kenneth Pargament, a psychology professor at Bowling Green State University who is a leading scholar in the field of religion and health.

Many people who have survived trauma such as rape or domestic violence have feelings of self-contempt or self-loathing, as if they were somehow responsible for

the crimes committed against them.

Asking them to forgive before they are ready can traumatize survivors again and leave them feeling disconnected and alienated from communities such as churches that can be vital to helping them heal, Pargament said.

In the case, say, of a battered woman continually returning to her spouse or an abusive cleric who is transferred from congregation to congregation, forgiveness given inappropriately also can endanger the survivors and others.

Recently in the news was the decision by NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell to give Baltimore Ravens star Ray Rice a two-game suspension after he was accused of assaulting his then fiancée, now wife.

Goodell elicited testimony from the woman in front of Rice and his attorney. He said he took into account Rice's contrition in making the decision.

To advocates for abused women, Goodell's words evoke a time when clergy would routinely intervene on behalf of abusive husbands, urging the wife to take her spouse back for the sake of the marriage.

So how can faith communities help trauma survivors on their journey to healing that may one day enable them to reap the benefits of true forgiveness?

Here are three suggestions from researchers and those experienced in working with survivors:

1. Support: "The first thing is to surround the people with care and compassion," said Pargament, editor of the American Psychological Association's *APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion and Spirituality*. "Just to listen, that's a huge gift."

The need for support became clear to Miller in his research with genocide survivors in Rwanda.

"You have to care. You have to support, and you have to allow survivors to go through a process," said Miller, author of the upcoming book *Healing, Forgiveness and Reconciliation in Post-Genocide Rwanda*. "Forgiveness occurs over a long period of time, years, and even then there is a sense that it's never completed."

2. Educate: A critical step that churches can take to promote a healthy path to forgiveness is education, said Robert Enright, a professor at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and cofounder of the International Forgiveness Institute.

Such work includes helping people understand that forgiveness is a free gift for the person who was wronged. Forgiveness is not so much for the perpetrator as it is a way for the victim to gain release from the trauma, Miller said.

In a journal article, Enright and Chad Magnuson of Liberty University advocated a comprehensive program that includes forgiveness training for church leaders.

3. Challenge: One study of 1,200 abusive men in the Northwest found that faith communities can be crucial in providing the practical and spiritual support to begin to move violent men to a sense of empathy and accountability.

Faith-based intervention also can discredit dangerous theological ideas that the abused must be submissive and provide resources to allow the abusers to envision a different future.

Forgiveness is not about condoning or forgetting the transgression and may or may not involve some form of reconciliation, Enright said.

Nor may forgiveness be possible until well down the road for people who have experienced severe trauma. A young woman in Rwanda who was beaten and sexually assaulted while her other family members were killed may never be able to forgive.

And only those who were abused can decide whether to grant forgiveness, Enright said.

“It’s their call when they’re ready.” —[theARDA.com](http://theARDA.com)

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