



DOS AND DON'T'S

*For Accompanying Victim-Survivors
Through a Restorative Process*

INTRODUCTION

The Call to Victim-Centered Accompaniment

In the past 10 years, one in four people in the U.S. have been a victim of crime. Of these, half were victims of a violent crime and a disproportionate number are young people, people of color, and people living in low-income communities.

Crime, violence, and trauma impact every person differently. Likewise, the path toward healing looks different for each person. In seeking to accompany victim-survivors on their healing journeys, our approaches must reflect the uniqueness of their experiences. **Restorative justice principles, Catholic social teaching, and the Gospel all beckon us to victim-centered responses to harm and crime.**

Catholic social teaching calls us to prioritize the needs of people who are marginalized and vulnerable – including victims and survivors of crime. A restorative approach to justice calls us to the same end. With core principles and practices, restorative justice offers ways of charting pathways toward recovery led by victim-survivors, with the “ultimate goal being to repair the harm done while addressing the needs of the victim, offender, and community.”¹ As people of faith, our hope is for new life, healing, and flourishing for our brothers and sisters.

Whether in the immediate aftermath of a harm or decades in its wake, a victim-survivor may express many diverse needs, including recovery, safety, search for meaning, reintegration, or encounter. Restorative justice can help meet these needs through processes shaped by restorative questions. Such processes can include:

- Individual prayer, reflection, or letter-writing (even if the letter is never sent)
- Restoratively retelling the event (with a support person)
- Restorative inquiry with other victim-survivors (in pairs or support groups/circles)
- An indirect or surrogate encounter (with persons who caused similar harms)
- A direct facilitated encounter (with the person who caused the harm)

Any restorative justice process ought to uphold the human dignity of all involved by meeting the needs and obligations caused by the harm. It is important to remember that there is no “one size fits all” solution to any harm, and that any restorative dialogue ought to be victim-centered and voluntary for all who participate.

“Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

(Matthew 5:4)

The Unique Role of Faith Communities

When impacted by crime, a person's faith community is often one of the first places they turn to for support. Because of this, we can be instrumental in supporting victim-survivors through restorative processes designed to meet their unique needs for healing. Doing so requires not only an understanding of [restorative justice principles](#), but also self-awareness and a grasp of trauma-informed care.

In 13 years of relationships with victim-survivors and their family members, Catholic Mobilizing Network (CMN) has heard countless stories of victims and families being supportively embraced – or painfully ostracized – by their faith communities. Regardless of where your community might sit on this spectrum, there are always ways that we can better orient ourselves to meet victim-survivors' needs in the aftermath of crime.

ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

Created in consultation with victim-survivors, ministers, and advocates, this resource aims to illuminate key “dos and don'ts” for people of faith seeking to accompany victim-survivors through a restorative process. It is intended to be a starting point and a complement to other wellsprings of wisdom and lived experience. You are encouraged to also spend time with the many resources and organizations referenced throughout the document.

A note on terminology: Individuals have varied preferences about how they identify with terminology of impact. While some people are comfortable with the language of “victim” or “survivor,” others prefer “harmed party” or “co-victim,” or another term. We can best uphold the dignity of each person by honoring the language that they personally identify with.

Acknowledgment and Gratitude

Catholic Mobilizing Network wishes to acknowledge and thank the many victim-survivors, ministries, and agencies that contributed to the formation of this resource. May the lives, and dignity of all people impacted by crime and violence be honored in its sharing.

DOS AND DONT'S

For All Stages of Accompaniment

There are certain guidelines that are true for any phase of victim-survivor support, one of them being preparation. Consider how you or your parish/ministry can prepare spiritually and practically to accompany victim-survivors. It is important to be aware of the prevalence of crime locally (if you are not already) and what community supports and interventions already exist.

Here are some key “dos and don’ts” for all stages of victim-survivor accompaniment.

DO practice prayerful listening.

Accompaniment is a ministry of presence. Listening is a skill that allows us to be truly present with others, especially when it is built upon a foundation of compassion and empathy. Contemplative forms of prayer like [Lectio Divina and Centering Prayer](#) can help us build the skills of accompaniment and listening to understand. These spiritual practices can aid in centering the harmed person’s experience rather than our own discomfort — a challenging ask, but one at the heart of Christian witness.

DON'T rely on good intentions alone.

None of us have all the answers, and all of us have limitations. Our good intentions do not preclude us from making mistakes in our accompaniment of victim-survivors. Recognize that you may say the “wrong” thing from time to time. Be willing to acknowledge this and apologize. Navigating the criminal legal system and services can often be overwhelming, confusing, and re-traumatizing, and reactions may appear in unexpected ways.²

DO educate yourself on [trauma-informed practices](#).

The term “trauma” describes the range of possible and typical responses a person may have to an extreme and overwhelming event or set of circumstances. Understanding trauma reactions helps us recognize and respond to them when they arise in others *and* ourselves.

Accompanying persons who have been harmed is challenging work. Our worldviews, values, senses of right and wrong, and emotions will all be challenged. Our hearts are likely to break. Self-care is indispensable to being a healthy companion on the journey.

DON'T neglect community care.

Throughout this journey, a person's relationships within their immediate community may shift and change. A ministry leader can assist in building bridges with allied individuals or communities. A ministry support person can stay close and check in over time, particularly around significant anniversaries or days of remembrance. The accompanier also needs a community of support, because the needs are great and usually beyond the capacity of one person. There will almost certainly be ethical dilemmas that arise which call for group deliberation. We are not meant to do this alone.

DO be aware of your motivations, history, biases, and possible agenda as a support person to a victim of crime.

Every victim should be heard and valued for their unique needs, experiences, and interests. The needs, experiences, and interests of others' – including support persons – should not be imposed upon the victim. In order to take care of ourselves and to be helpful to the person we are accompanying, we need to be attuned to what is happening within us.

DON'T take away someone's reality.

As a proponent of restorative justice, it may be tempting to rush the process of healing, which can actually cause more injury. True healing requires moving through darkness and suffering, not avoiding or denying it. This process takes time and does not always follow a linear trajectory. Ignoring the situation, pretending it didn't happen, or telling someone to "get over it," is harmful, counterproductive, and invalidates their strife.

DO ask restorative questions.

The core questions of restorative justice can be instrumental in helping a victim-survivor name the extent of the harm, along with their needs for possible repair. These questions can be:

- What happened and how were you impacted?
- What was/is most difficult and what do you need?
- What might be needed to repair what was done and to go forward in a good way?

These questions can support a victim as they move through feelings of shock and lack of control towards agency. At any point along the way, a subsequent question for the accompanier becomes "And how can I support/help you right now?"

DON'T fix, solve, advise, or disappear.

For many victim-survivors, regaining power and control is essential to the healing process. When support persons impose solutions or expectations, it can be discouraging or demoralizing to the victim-survivor.

Notice if you feel tempted to begin sentences with "You should..." or "You need to..." Instead of these, lean into questions like, "Would it be helpful if...?" or "Have you considered...?" Additionally, as you make yourself available to someone, be sure to follow through on commitments.

"Let us hear the true stories of these victims of violence, look at reality through their eyes, and listen with an open heart to the stories they tell.

(Pope Francis, "Fratelli Tutti," 261)

DOS AND DONT'S

For the Immediate Aftermath of a Crime

Though a formal restorative encounter might only take place years after a crime happens, there are a multitude of informal ways to be a healing presence, uphold dignity, and create conditions for repair at the outset.

Here are some “dos and don’ts” for accompanying victim-survivors in the immediate aftermath of a crime.

DO assess for the threat of repeated/ongoing harm.

Basic safety is integral to human dignity and any healing process will be impaired if it is threatened. Listen for what safeguards might be needed to ensure that the harm is not continuing, nor that a threat of other harms exist in the victim-survivor’s environment. Likewise, listen for whether someone else’s safety may be in danger (e.g., a child who is not being adequately cared for), and evaluate the need for additional support.

DON'T neglect cultural, systemic, and historical factors.

Many factors will shape a person’s reaction to a crime, including their lived experiences and context. Racial identity, culture, and generational histories of marginalization may impact a victim-survivor’s experience of the crime itself, and to what extent they may be willing to engage with the legal system or with a restorative justice process. That said, “many justice-involved [and impacted] individuals... have histories of trauma and victimization that can be addressed and validated within a restorative justice framework.”¹

DO hold compassionate space for vulnerability and complicated grief.

The victim-survivor is already experiencing deep pain, separation, anger, confusion, among a multitude of changing emotions, also known as complicated grief. Simply offering a space to be heard can be deeply healing in itself. Asking non-leading, open-ended questions honors a person’s autonomy and agency. Allow victim-survivors time to tell their stories and describe how they are feeling in their own words.³ In doing so, refrain from judgment and adding your own opinions, which can cloud or impede their understanding of their many emotions. Losing their trust this way can cause re-traumatization or second injury.

DON'T say "you just need to forgive."

Forgiveness is a gift from God, and a creative act of invitation, possibility, and grace. It cannot be timed, imposed, or choreographed by anyone. Many victim-survivors (including ones who ultimately arrived at forgiveness over time) report feeling betrayed when a faith leader said "you just need to forgive," as though the depth and breadth of their feelings and needs did not matter. For some, this severed their relationship with the Church in their greatest time of need. By their very nature, restorative practices manifest God's vision for justice through a spirit of forgiveness, rather than revenge.

DO be a dialogue partner in the spiritual journey.

A victim-survivor may be teetering on the edge of their faith, angry with God, in denial, or feeling betrayed. Some may not be ready to talk to or about God. Others may be actively seeking out sacraments, rituals, and prayer that memorializes their loved one and facilitates spaces for grief.

Before making mention of God, religion, or spirituality, let the person offer insight into their spiritual and religious life first. At that point, you can respond as you hear desires or needs expressed. As support people, we can meet people where they are and invite consideration of prayer and ritual that may be conducive to acknowledgment and reconnection with self, community, and the Holy Spirit.

DON'T be too quick to talk about the needs of the person responsible for causing the harm.

Through the lens of faith and restorative justice, we recognize and honor that every person involved in an instance of harm has dignity and needs for healing. However, discussing this too early with a victim-survivor may signal that your allegiances lie with the person who created the harm, shutting down their receptivity to a process of restorative encounter. Options can be introduced over time according to the needs or desires expressed by the victim-survivor.

"All of us are called to stand with victims in their hurt and in their search for healing and genuine justice."

(U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice")

DOS AND DONT'S

For a Restorative Justice Encounter

The aim of a restorative justice encounter (which may be in the form of restorative conferencing, restorative circles, or victim-offender dialogue) is to involve victims, offenders, and community in the process of repairing the harm. These encounters are most effective when both the victim-survivor and the responsible person(s) are prepared and willing to engage with one another as part of their healing journey. Faith leaders are community stakeholders who can support and/or participate in these processes in a multitude of ways.

Here are some “dos and don’ts” for accompanying victim-survivors through a restorative justice encounter.

DON'T expect that the criminal legal system will meet the full spectrum of a person's needs.

Some core needs of victim-survivors that the legal process is not designed to meet include:

- The need for information from the responsible party
- The need to “feel heard” by the responsible party
- The need to play a role in determining what the responsible party needs to do to “right the wrong” to the greatest extent possible⁴

Hearing victim-survivors express such needs can be an entry point for considering a restorative justice dialogue.

DO assist in exploring the options and resources available.

[Offices for crime victim services](#) exist in every state, but the [laws and statutes](#) that support and protect access to restorative justice processes vary widely among them. Likewise, restorative justice [programs, organizations, and skilled facilitators](#) differ by location. A ministry support person can assist a victim-survivor interested in a restorative justice encounter by researching and compiling information about the local options available. In addition to internet searches, you are encouraged to talk with agencies and practitioners and ask what additional recommendations they may have.

DON'T assume that victim-offender encounter is the only option.

Depending on the circumstances, a dialogue with the responsible party may not be what is most appropriate, nor even feasible. In these cases, a support person can assist in exploring other ways to ensure that the victim-survivors' needs are met to the greatest extent possible. As a community, we have a responsibility to one another to create capacity for healing within all who have been impacted.

DO acknowledge forgiveness as part of a bigger story.

There are many [misunderstandings about forgiveness](#). Ultimately, forgiveness is the capacity to let go of anger and negativity — a process that can be liberating and transformative. Because forgiveness is not absolution, justice processes are still warranted to hold wrongdoers accountable and make reparation for the harms caused and their wider impacts. For example, a gift of forgiveness is that it can be given independent of apology, but a victim-survivor may still desire for their perpetrator to understand the full impacts of their actions or to answer questions about what happened.

In a restorative justice process, forgiving may happen at any point along the way, but ought not be held up as a singular goal or measure of success.

DON'T impose religious expectations on the dialogue itself.

For many, prayer and ritual is an important component for grieving and reconnection. That said, it is important that any spiritual or ceremonial components of an encounter be determined and agreed upon by those most immediately impacted by the harm.

DO be patient and anticipate potential barriers.

A restorative process takes time and can be complicated. Meanwhile, public awareness, accessibility, and support for restorative practices varies depending on where you are. Prosecutors generally have no obligation to inform courts that victims want a restorative option/alternative. Because restorative justice practices are still unfamiliar to many, even if a victim-survivor is willing to participate in a restorative process, their loved ones may be skeptical or resistant. As a support person, you may, at times, need to be a community educator as well.

DON'T conflate accountability with vengeance.

Every circumstance is different, and in some cases confinement might be needed for the safety of the victim, harm-doer, or wider community. However, it is important to consider the elements of accountability that incarceration itself does not achieve — in particular, a person taking responsibility for their actions, expressing remorse, and/or taking actions toward repair. These aims of accountability, which can be achievable through restorative justice processes, are distinct from vengeance, or arbitrarily returning harm for harm's sake.

DO serve as a support person in dialogues (if desired).

Typically, if someone does pursue a restorative justice dialogue, there is opportunity for a support person(s) to accompany or participate, as a representative of the impacted community. In preparing for such an opportunity, be aware of your own histories of trauma and what may be necessary for you to be fully present to the process. A skilled facilitator will assist in this preparation.

CONCLUSION

Accompanying victim-survivors involves working with complicated forms of trauma. Our role as support persons is to offer a safe place of hope and healing, and to remind those we serve that they are not alone.

Be gentle and walk with victim-survivors as Jesus would walk anyone who is suffering. Remember the story of the Good Samaritan, and try to model this example of care and attention for one's wounded neighbor by simply being present and tending to their needs.

The process of healing is long and does not have a specific endpoint, but the journey can offer strength for newness and life-giving hope. **May it be so!**

*“The Lord is near to the brokenhearted,
and saves the crushed in spirit.”*

(Psalm 34:18)

ENDNOTES

- 1 Pavelka, Sandra, and Anne Seymour. "Guiding Principles and Restorative Practices for Crime Victims and Survivors." *Corrections Today*, 2019, pp. 36–46. https://catholicismobilizing.org/files/Guiding_Principles_-_Pavelka_and_Seymour.pdf
- 2 Trujillo, Olga and Moen, Patricia. "Enhancing Victim Advocacy Through a Trauma- Informed Approach." The National Resource Center for Reaching Victims. <https://reachingvictims.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Enhancing-Victim-Advocacy-Tip-Sheet-.pdf>
- 3 Justice Solutions. "Communicating With Victims: 'The Do's and Don'ts.'" http://www.justicesolutions.org/art_pub_communicating_with_victims.htm
- 4 Branham, Lynn S. "The Overlooked Victim Right: According Victim-Survivors a Right of Access to Restorative Justice." *Denver Law Review Forum*. 2011. denverlawreview.org/dlr-online-article/the-overlooked-victim-right-according-victim-survivors-a-right-of-access-to-restorative-justice

REFERENCES AND CONTINUED LEARNING

Paths of Renewed Encounter: A Restorative Justice Engagement Guide for Catholic Communities (Catholic Mobilizing Network)
catholicismobilizing.org/paths

The Prison Within (Gravitas Ventures)
theprisonwithin.org/index.html

Crime Victim Services by State (Office for Victims of Crime)
ovc.ojp.gov/directory-crime-victim-services/search

Restorative Justice Program Directory (National Association of Community and Restorative Justice)
nacj.org/directories/rj-program-directory

From Healing to Action: A Toolkit for Gun Violence Survivors and Allies (Giffords)
giffords.org/toolkit/from-healing-to-action-a-toolkit-for-gun-violence-survivors-and-allies/

Parents of Murdered Children
pomc.org

Pastoral Support for Grieving a Violent Death (California Catholic Conference)
restorejustice.com/sites/restorejustice/files/2021-04/Pastoral%20Support%20for%20Traumatic%20Death%20Ministry%20Guide%20Final%20English%20DM.docx.pdf

Retelling Violent Death by Edward K Rynearson

Virtual Conversation About Crime Survivors and Restorative Justice Issues (The Sentencing Project)
[jstor.org/stable/resrep35146](https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep35146)

“The Overlooked Victim Right: According Victim-Survivors a Right of Access to Restorative Justice” by Lynn S. Branham (Denver Law Review Forum)
denverlawreview.org/dlr-online-article/the-overlooked-victim-right-according-victim-survivors-a-right-of-access-to-restorative-justice

“Communicating with Victims: ‘The Do’s and Don’ts’” (Justice Solutions)
tdcj.texas.gov/documents/cjad/skills_2017/VS_Justice_Solutions_Dos_and_Donts_Communicating_With_Victims.pdf

“Enhancing Victim Advocacy Through a Trauma-Informed Approach” by Olga Trujillo, JD and Patricia Moen
reachingvictims.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Enhancing-Victim-Advocacy-Tip-Sheet-.pdf

“Guiding principles and restorative practices for crime victims and survivors” by Sandra Pavelka and Anne Seymour (Corrections Today)
catholicismobilizing.org/files/Guiding_Principles_-_Pavelka_and_Seymour.pdf

“Crime Survivors Speak: The First-Ever National Survey of Victims’ Views on Safety and Justice” (Crime Survivors for Safety and Justice)
allianceforsafetyandjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Crime-Survivors-Speak-Report-1.pdf

NOVA (National Organization for Victim Assistance)
trynova.org/