

The Isaiah Journey

seeking truth | bringing hope | finding healing



A Guide to listening to those among us impacted by abuse in the Church

To listen with real empathy is to have **an open heart**, *'removing our sandals before the sacred ground of the other'*

Pope Francis, The Joy of the Gospel, *Evangelii Gaudium* 169)



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*Who among you will give ear to this,
will attend and listen for the time to come?*

Isaiah 42:23

Who is this Guide for?

This guide is written for clergy, religious, and lay people within our communities, with experience of living faith, resourceful, gifted, and in relationship with one another on the ground. It seeks to support an active listening to the truth of the wound of abuse, the devastating effects on individuals, families, communities, and humbly to be part of the journey towards healing. **This guide offers support in the space of pastoral care**, theologically rooted in the Gospel imperative that we, as baptized persons, are called to live together as members of Christ's Body.

Why this Guide?

To allow survivors of abuse in the Church to speak and be heard, in steps on their journey towards healing. The guide aims to help deepen awareness of the survivors among us and on the edge, part of us and our family, God's family. How we might honestly and humbly listen, really hear their pain, respect their expertise, and be guided by them as to how best we can accompany them. When they are so hurting, and some of our most trusted members have inflicted these life-scarring wounds, we as the Body of Christ are *all* affected, and *all* responsible for healing. **This guide supports both the preparation, and the journey itself.**

Isaiah Journey is a small working group of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England & Wales. It has grown out of the need for a pastoral-spiritual response to the suffering of victims and survivors of abuse in the Catholic Church. Its membership is mixed, including survivors, lay, religious and clergy, with expertise by experience in spirituality, liturgy, pastoral care and safeguarding. [The Isaiah Journey - Catholic Bishops' Conference \(cbcew.org.uk\)](https://www.cbcew.org.uk) Only in listening to survivors, families and communities, can we together begin the work of 'preparing a way' for God's healing and renewal. This Listening Guide is one of a number of resources offered to accompany the journey of lament, healing and hope.

INTRODUCTION

“Looking back to the past, no effort to beg pardon and to seek to repair the harm done will ever be sufficient. Looking ahead to the future, no effort must be spared to create a culture able to prevent such situations from happening, but also to prevent the possibility of their being covered up and perpetuated. The pain of the victims and their families is also our pain ...

Today we are challenged as People of God to take on the pain of our brothers and sisters wounded in their flesh and their spirit...we want solidarity to become our way of forging present and future history ...” Pope Francis ¹

Something so devastating has happened among us in the Church - the abuse of children and vulnerable adults, by those held in honoured positions of authority, trust and sacred calling. How can we face and somehow share this pain held in the bodies and spirits of those deeply impacted by their wounds? How can we open ourselves in real solidarity with victims and survivors, families and communities, and allow the mystery of our faith to change us and forge a way through healing and restoration?

In this context, the journey from the past, into the present and towards the future will be **unique** for every person, depending on their experience, and how the abuse has impacted them. The landscapes and routes are **different**, with different starting points. Every journey takes courage, and needs compassionate companions— peer support, trusted family and friends, caring community members, clergy and lay. It is daunting, and yet compelling, for ‘no effort must be spared’ to accompany the pain of those impacted by abuse.

¹ Pope Francis, Letter to the People of God, Aug 2018 Quoting from Pope Benedict in his 2010 Christmas address

Listening and ‘the Art of Accompaniment’ — our pastoral priority

Pope Francis in *The Joy of the Gospel* encourages us to learn the art of accompaniment, which is more than simply hearing. To listen with real empathy is to have **an open heart**, ‘*removing our sandals before the sacred ground of the other*’ (EG 169)²

For some, active listening will come naturally. For others, this may be something new. For *any* real listening, it is important to prepare prayerfully and take time to consider what helps when listening, especially when listening to someone who has been wounded by their experience of abuse, and here, with particular reference to abuse in a church-related setting. The principle is ‘do no harm’.

The experience of abuse among us, historic or recent, by someone who stands for God and the church, has devastating consequences and can utterly distort a survivor’s image of God, and their capacity to see themselves as a person with dignity and value. We must not fail the survivor in any spiritual turmoil, especially in terms of their relationship with God and with us, by completely outsourcing our listening to ‘professionals’ and being ‘clinically distanced’. A spiritual wound – in a relationship with God and the people of God – needs a spiritual response, and open-hearted, compassionate listening is a *first step*, in really hearing the suffering, holding it, facing the truth of where it hurts, at the very heart of identity.

For too long, we have avoided victims and survivors of abuse in the Church, at best fearing that any response we offer will be totally inadequate. It may feel inadequate, but that must not stop us. We know that as members of the Body of Christ, the Church, we are joined in responsibility both for having inflicted these devastating wounds, and in being impacted by those wounds. We must step forward without fear, and respond humbly and reverently, pastorally and spiritually. We are not here to excavate wounds, but to hold that person in deep respect and love, because that is the way Christ shows us, making the mysterious journey through suffering, sin and death, to new life together.

“To really understand the depth of the trauma caused, you have to sit down and hear the person find the strength to speak. Without that, the wounds remain abstract forever.”³

² https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html

³ Fr Claude Philippe SJ, Director Maison Magis, Paris. Quoted in International La Croix, Feb 10th, 2021

The knowledge that the Holy Spirit has been there before us encourages us in our listening, and we trust in that continuing presence, accompanying both speaker and listener. We cannot know the mystery of God's presence in the life of another person, but we can listen with humility, compassion and reverent attention to what God is doing. And we are open to the spiritual gifts given, in prayer and liturgy, for sorrow and lament, repentance, reflection and action, to make this journey together.

This Guide to listening is not supporting a superficial '*exercise in listening*'. That would be abhorrent. It is worth saying again – the guide is written as a tool to support *your best-possible open-hearted, compassionate pastoral instincts*, in humbly, gently, inviting victims and survivors, and others impacted by abuse in the Church, to come and be heard and believed as they tell of their traumatic experience. And to stay with them! The Guide is founded on the Gospel mandate for all Christ's followers – *to do the things he did* (John 14:12⁴) – and not only '*to make present the fragrance of Christ's closeness and his personal gaze*' (EG 169) but in the person we are privileged to listen to, to see the face of Christ, to give witness to their experience of suffering and the challenges of living with the effects of trauma, and to stay with them and be guided by them in the steps forward together.

⁴ John 14:12 "Truly, truly I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that do" ESV-CE 2021 Crossway

How you might use this guide – individual and group contexts

You might use the Guide to prepare for listening to individuals at any time, or in preparation for a parish event for prayer and reflection on the abuse crisis, where you will need to have listeners available.

- The Guide offers guidelines for both **one-to-one listening at any time**, arranged or spontaneous, between someone **directly or indirectly** impacted by abuse (as survivor, family member, community member, parishioner) and their chosen trusted person (friend, companion, pastor) and offering **one-to-one listener support at any time when asked, or when present in a parish or community setting**, for a liturgy or prayer or other event for survivors, family members, parishioners, community members (7).
- There are important considerations for **safe listening in the context of abuse in the Church**, as a friend or companion, or in a pastoral setting in parish or community or place of retreat. Whilst recognising we are not ‘experts’, and that there will be signposting to organisations that others have found helpful, the guide offers general pointers for active listening and a sensitive trauma-informed approach when reaching out to anyone impacted by abuse.
- **Learning what can be helpful, and what is not helpful** when listening to a survivor of abuse, or someone impacted by abuse indirectly. Approaching you as a trusted friend, companion or pastor, that survivor has asked you to listen, and in the first instance, you can listen well. This guide will hopefully help you to do that initial listening, supported by some basic knowledge and skills on the principle of ‘*do no harm*’, helping the survivor or one impacted to feel safe, and as trusting and confident as possible in your company. **This includes listening in a faith-based context.**
- Preparing to listen through prayerful reflection on Scripture (Section 8)
- Safeguarding and Signposting to organisations others have found helpful (Section 10)
- Learning from experience of those at the interface of psychology and spirituality (Section 12)

Listening Support in a parish or community setting

Time to listen within a Liturgical or Prayer event

The later **Guidelines on developing active listening skills will apply**, but clearly in a prayer or liturgical event, you will have little time to facilitate and hear deeply a full story. You offer a sensitive listening ear, a sacred space in which to be heard, for however long is available, and you can then make it clear that further listening and support is available, and signpost to contact details. Be sensitive and try to ensure a good ending to your listening time, however short. In the context of a Liturgy, there may be a communal ending in prayer.

Listening it is real engagement as a ministry of loving service – not a ‘role’ you play. For the purpose of these guidelines, the term ‘Listener’ is used, but in a sacred rather than perfunctory sense.

Availability of compassionate, sensitive listeners

A parish event or liturgy focused on prayer for victims and survivors of abuse **will touch on powerful emotions, and therefore there is a vital need for listeners** (a choice of both women and men, from outside and within the community) to offer a compassionate ear to anyone present who wants to be heard.

- For some who come, it may be about their own personal story, as victim, survivor, family member, friend
- For others, as a member of the community of a victim, or former or present parishioner of the alleged perpetrator, it may be a one-step removed impact, with bewilderment and confusion and a range of emotions
- For others still, it may be a more general hurt about the church.

Useful groundwork

In preparing to have an event to talk and pray about abuse in the Church and to find ways to express our sorrows and hopes, everyone is invited to come and take part, whoever they are, whatever their experience, direct or indirect.

As a group organising or leading this event, you may like to have some time to prepare **together**. Here are some ideas you might use in reflection, growing as a listening community:

Stop and think

- What do you like most about being a member of the Church/parish/community/group?
- Who in your faith life has sustained you in a time of darkness – about whom you might say, ‘*I felt deeply valued, accepted, significant, safe and able to speak?*’
- How has the crisis of abuse in the Church impacted you?

- What do you hope people might take away from our Liturgy or prayer event?
- What gives YOU hope in the family of God, the church today?

Seeking Listeners within the community

The community leader or pastor of the parish will most likely be engaged in guiding the event and the liturgy. Who within and outside the community can provide a ministry of listening in this one-to-one way?

- Parishes and communities will know the wise and compassionate people among them who are gifted in listening. Discern. Seek them out.
- One or two community or parish pastoral team members may be gifted, including the Safeguarding Representative. Seek them out.
- There are often trained and experienced listeners in dioceses and retreat centres, including trained prayer guides and counsellors and safeguarding co-ordinators. *(See diocesan or national websites for spirituality or pastoral teams, retreat centres and counselling services)* Seek them out. Invite them to come.
- **Gather your team**, including pastor or community leadership. Everyone will appreciate having time together **to prepare for the event and this ministry within it**. All the listening skills in this guide have a rich and positive application when ‘listening with the heart’ in a faith-based context and are useful for team formation. You may wish to use one or two scripture reflections offered in the Guide for this time of preparation.

For an event, practical things to consider

Listeners need to be visible and easily accessible at the event. Some local and diocesan listeners need to be visible as ‘listeners’ via notice boards, websites, and ministry teams.

For an event Listeners may be **co-ordinated by a member of a diocesan spirituality or pastoral team**, in collaboration with a member of the diocesan safeguarding team. Each person could be given a copy of the listening guide. Together, the co-ordinating team are part of any formation or briefing for listeners before the event. Things to consider:

- **Do listeners need a DBS check?** This ministry is in public, so may not require one.
- **Listeners do need to be clearly identifiable** – how are you going to do this e.g. a badge, lanyard, scarf, sash?
- **Listeners’ positions in the space** – listeners need to be visible, around the church or hall or space, but out of earshot of others. It may be helpful to have some background music quietly playing at appropriate times in the service/event to aid privacy.

- **Can be useful to have one or two roving** experienced people gently keeping an eye (in the space, and at the door, even outside, before, during and after the event. Their task is to be aware of people (participants or listeners) who seem to be struggling, and trying to ensure that no-one leaves the church in distress or is outside in distress.
- **Provide a handout** of contact numbers of support services/organisations.

Immediate Preparation and Prayer for an event

- **Invite the whole community** to hold the event in prayer – especially those who are housebound, and contribute to the ministry of the parish through their prayer.
- **Invite listeners and leaders to short periods of prayer** and reflection together immediately prior to the event, and importantly at the end of the actual event – to share, as appropriate, how the event was experienced, and anything that needs to be off-loaded, concluding with a prayer of trust and hope for all participants, for new possibilities for peace, healing and blessing.
- **It would also be good to have a follow up** for the team to share learning and further ministry steps.

A prayer for an individual in preparation for a time of listening, one to one, or being available as part of an event

Holy Mystery of God who listens *to* me and *with* me, I come with an open heart and mind – totally open to those you have given me to listen to

Take a moment to think quietly on what is going on in your own life – and to gently let it go for this time, giving to God any thoughts, feelings, conflict or concern, any unfinished business.

Relax, take a few deep breaths, releasing tension with the exhale, and breathing in fresh new life, peace.

Come Holy Spirit, who precedes us, and accompanies each one.

You know those who are coming, and all their needs, and you will continue to be with them after us, to see their journey to completion.

Holy Spirit of God, in my listening today, I ask you to give me a generous loving heart, open to the power of your Spirit at work in me and in the one I hear, able to achieve so much more than I can ask or even imagine.

Through Christ our Lord. Amen

Developing Active Listening - Begin with yourself

Before we begin listening to others, it's good to take some time to think about who listens to you, and what for you would be a good listening experience. Think about these questions:

- ✚ Who listens to you? How do they listen?
- ✚ When have you felt really listened to?
 - When I am NOT listened to I feel (hurt, rejected, worthless ...)
 - When I AM listened to I feel(valued, human, cared about...)
- ✚ What made being listened to a good experience? What were **the qualities of the listener?**

When listening to others

When listening to others, we can consider what is helpful, and what is NOT helpful, and identify some characteristics of good listening. Again, begin with noticing your own natural habit of listening.

What kind of listener are you naturally?

On your own, or with a friend or group

- **Notice and talk about** the way you listen to others (get feedback, note your observations)
- **Observe and talk about** good and bad examples of listening on TV, films, social media
- **What** kind of listener do you think you are naturally?
- What would you say are the unhelpful things you need to keep a watch on and resist when listening to others? E.g.
 - Sometimes you want to interrupt? You want to have the answers?
 - You want to 'fix it' or 'sort it out' and make it better?
 - You find it hard to listen in some parts, easy in others?
 - Thoughts wander to your own experience – pushing you to advise, give an opinion, or tell your own story?
 - It's not naturally easy to listen to everybody in the same way

Read the following passage slowly. It's someone speaking about *NOT* being listened to.

“When I ask you to listen and you start giving me advice, you have not done what I asked. When I ask you to listen, and you begin to tell me why I shouldn't feel that way, you trample on my feelings. When I ask you to listen, and you feel you have to do

something to solve my problems, you have failed me – strange as that might seem. All I ask is that you LISTEN, not talk or do, just hear me. Advice is cheap. And when you do something for me that I can and need to do for myself, you contribute to my fear and inadequacy. But when you accept as a simple fact that I do feel what I feel, then I can stop trying to convince you, and get down to the business of understanding it. My feelings make sense when you understand what’s behind them. When that becomes clear for me, I don’t need advice. I will work things through for myself if you listen, but I need you to be with me too.”

Anonymous

What strikes you in particular? What do you take away from this section?

Listening as a person of faith to someone impacted by abuse in the Church

A word about cultural awareness within the Church

In arranging for any listening, it is important for us to be aware of the ‘culture’ or ‘the way we do things’ in the Catholic Church, and that this may well present issues for a victim or survivor or other impacted by abuse. For example, it is good to offer a choice of people ready to listen; a mix of men/women, lay, religious, and ordained. Giving a choice can help a survivor feel in control, and to know that there is no judgment or manipulation about their place on their journey.

Preparation

Listening to someone impacted by abuse in the Church is hard – rightly so. You will need all the gifts given by the Holy Spirit in baptism, including on your own faith-life wisdom and compassion. As part of your preparation, you may like to take some time thinking about your response to the following:

- **Be aware of your own reactions to abuse**, and the need to lay these aside before you listen. The person deserves your full attention to be really heard.
- **Be aware of your own emotions and your own story** – and again, lay these aside when listening. Do get help - support or supervision - for anything that comes up and troubles you before in your preparation, or anything that came up during the time when you were listening.
- **You have no ‘agenda’.** Your priority is care of the person you are listening to, and hold back your own thoughts and opinions. It is especially important to be sensitive to difficulties a person may find in either maintaining or seeking to belong and be comfortable in the Catholic Church, or to just ‘be’ or find some comfort. Some may be looking for acceptance or belonging. Others may not, or ‘not now’. Wherever they are

on their journey, your concern and care lies in supporting them through your listening, respecting and being with them just where they are.

- Allow space:
 - **Listen to God in your own prayer** – Isaiah 50:1 Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness, you who seek the Lord’ Isaiah 55:2 Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good .. incline your ear, and come to me; hear that you soul may live.’
 - **God listens to you** - Jeremiah 29:12-13 Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.
- **Believe in hopeful possibilities** for the person you are listening to, and have faith in the power of listening

You will find specific pointers for ‘Trauma-Informed Listening’ later in this guide

Letting the person experience being listened to through your body language

Have some awareness of your body language but don’t get overly bothered by it. It covers a **range of natural non-verbal signals that we use to communicate feelings, attitudes and intentions**. These include your posture, facial expressions, and gestures. Take care not to overcrowd the person you are listening to. Allow space, and pick up on their feelings. For example, you could gently mirror their gestures, or summarise something they’ve said, ‘*What I think I’m hearing is x ... is that right?*’ giving them an opportunity to stop, and clarify.

You are NOT ‘playing a role’ as listener. This is real! You are there as a compassionate fellow human being who cares about the person with you. They have a life – and the abuse is not the whole story of their life. They have come because they have chosen to come. They need to be free to only say what they want to, and to be believed, and cared about.

Aim for the following attitudes, many natural and obvious, others less so:

- ✚ Offer warm, calm, relaxed welcome, and gentle eye contact (but not awkwardly over-doing that. Suggest sitting at an angle, rather than face to face)
- ✚ Reassure this is a safe space⁵ You might choose to say:
 - You have chosen to come, and this is a safe space.

⁵ With normal safeguarding caveat – see ‘Safeguarding’ guidance

- Something may have triggered you to a past experience, upset you or made you really uncomfortable. I am here to listen and support you, whatever you choose to share in this time together.
 - Here are a number of safeguarding contacts, support and helplines if you feel you need them at this point or in the days and weeks ahead.
 - It may help you to know that should you make a disclosure of abuse to me, this is treated in the strictest confidence. Only information that is strictly necessary, proportionate and mandatory to share will be shared, and only to those who need to know for the purpose of safeguarding you and others (police and church authorities). This is done with absolute respect of your right to anonymity, and applies regardless of whether the abuse occurred recently or in the past, or the accused person is living or dead.
- ✚ Concentrate on the listening (e.g. the occasional gentle nod of the head, encouraging word, *'mmm, yes, take your time...'* and allowing pauses and silence – which gives space for the person to clarify their own thoughts)
 - ✚ Not getting distracted or fiddling with things. Obviously, phone off and out of sight.
 - ✚ Giving plenty of space, not crowding in, not interrupting, letting them go at their own pace, saying what they want to say, not more
 - ✚ Responding from the heart through active listening, not rushing in with comment or solving a problem, but rather, reflecting back, e.g. *'That must have been so hard for you to say' ... 'I am here for you' 'what happened to you was so wrong'..*
 - ✚ Show empathy and kindness - not showing embarrassment or shock
 - ✚ Not prompting or digging about with questions
 - ✚ Never any downplaying or minimising of what has been said
 - ✚ Perhaps as your time together is coming to a close, to help the speaker maintain control of the conversation, and clarify how they are, you might ask:
 - ✚ 'Is there anything else you'd like to say?'
 - ✚ We have spoken deeply, and you have shared from a deep place. I wonder what would be helpful to take this forward for you?
 - ✚ I wonder, of all you have shared, what is most important for you?
 - ✚ Is there anything you would like to do about this? (How can I help you?) How are you feeling now?
 - ✚ As appropriate, invite a moment of silence. Speak a word of gratitude for their courage in coming – and peace as they leave this space today.

Wisdom from the trauma-informed approach to care

You are not an expert in trauma. As background to your listening, it may be helpful to have some insight into what assumptions guide trained professionals in the trauma-informed approach to care. These assumptions are known as the ‘Four R’s’. Here is a brief definition⁶:

- **Realization** about trauma and how it can affect people and groups - impact of abuse
 - Trauma is not primarily an emotional response. It is ‘stored’ in our bodies. It is the body’s protective response to an event or series of events that the body sees as potentially dangerous.
- **Recognizing** the signs of trauma
 - An embedded trauma can show itself as a combination of ‘fight’ or ‘freeze’ or ‘flight’, or other reactive behaviours, sensations and experiences, e.g. constriction, pain, fear, anger, silence, numbness, shut down. This can get ‘stuck’ in a sort of vicious cycle – and stays ‘stuck’ until it is addressed. Your sensitive listening can be a first step for the victim/survivor – a great relief to be heard, and believed, and accepted.
- Having a system which can **Respond** to trauma
 - There are safeguarding systems, and signposting to skilled support (including spiritual support).
 - Listening in the church context is a pastoral priority. *Why would* a victim or survivor seek spiritual help from the church that has abused them? So when they DO tentatively approach, with all the courage and hope that takes, we must humbly and sensitively show our care and respect, and serve them and their needs through our listening, being with them, seeing them and knowing them as **part of us**. As Pope Francis and others have described it, *we are on holy ground*. We see the face of Christ in them, just as we see Christ in the Eucharist.
 - We hear Jesus, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me.’ (Mt 25:40)
- **Resisting** re-traumatization
 - Listening in a trauma-informed way, we are doing our utmost to avoid triggering the trauma of past or recent abuse (*see ‘Do no harm’ pointers below*) Stick to the gentle, compassionate active listening from one human heart to another.

⁶ Jim McManus, for further research: [resilience-trauma-pastoral-recovery.pdf \(cbcew.org.uk\)](https://www.cbcew.org.uk/resilience-trauma-pastoral-recovery.pdf)

Listening – in a trauma-informed way

What helps when listening to and caring for someone impacted by abuse – on the principle of ‘do no harm’

1. Those impacted by abuse, especially survivors, need to feel SAFE, physically, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually
2. They need to find that you are trustworthy and open
3. They may need to know that peer support is available (e.g. other victims and survivors in your ‘team’ or signposts to survivor networks) should they wish to make contact
4. Each according to their own circumstances, and all in good time, going at their pace, to be helped to feel a sense of love and acceptance, their equality and dignity as a person, part of the Church, at the heart, not a leper on the edge, part of God’s family, part of the whole.
5. To hear that we are profoundly sorry for all the ways they have been so terribly hurt – in the abuse itself, and then further, in cover up, denial, not being believed. We need to show that we care deeply, and want to walk together with our brothers and sisters who are survivors, responding to their needs now.
6. To empower them by hearing their voice and their choice of what to say and how to say it. That a survivor can feel comfortable in sharing what they wish to share, their thoughts and feelings, and a sense of taking back control.

WHEN LISTENING, TO DO NO HARM

The effects of childhood trauma, and trauma as a vulnerable adult, including sexual and other abuse, can last for a lifetime, with **impact on body, mind and spirit**. Taking on board the 4 R’s above, in addition to your good listening skills, you will need to know what NOT to do when providing supportive listening to survivors of abuse, or someone deeply impacted by abuse. At the risk of repetition, let’s hear it again:

- Do NOT ‘debrief’ or say ‘tell me all about it’. Do not pressurise to tell their story.
- Do NOT judge or be intrusive
- Do NOT minimise experiences and feelings
- Do NOT question on things that the person found traumatic
- Do NOT take over, give advice, or offer platitudes

What you CAN do to care for and support the person you are listening – with some example of what you might say

- **In preparation** develop your own knowledge and awareness of the impact of abuse on body, mind and spirit ([explore IJ modules/survivor voices, and other external links](#))

- **Provide a kind, supportive natural response** to what you are hearing from a fellow human being who is hurting.
 - 'I cannot imagine how devastating that must have been' 'It saddens me so much to hear that' ...
- **Offer a safe, welcoming space** and attentive listening heart. It may be common sense, but consider the physical – room for enough personal space, comfortable, adequate light and warm enough. *You may ask or say:*
 - I wonder what a safe or sacred space means to you?
 - I want you to feel safe and to know that I am totally here for you in this time together.
- **Be calm yourself.** Tune in, comfort them, and help them to feel calm.
- **Accept and believe** their experience from your heart
 - I can hear the pain of not being heard or believed then and even today, what you said and could not say, what you wish you could have said;
 - People have made your suffering so much worse by not believing you I am so sorry this happened to you. This should never have happened to you.' 'I can't imagine all the things you have gone through, being ignored and denied – the fear, the grief and loss' ... And now, you have spoken your truths, in spite of all these fears.
- **Respect their boundaries** – both physical (do not initiate a touch, but gesture empathy, e.g. hand on heart. Use your wisdom and experience) and emotional (do not either brush over or dig for feelings)
 - I absolutely understand you do not want to say anything more
 - I can hear how this has affected your life.
- Support them through empathic listening
 - That is such a courageous thing to say – things that we were told were meant to be kept very quiet, and you have broken these silences with your words.
 - I wonder, how are you feeling now?
- Be hopeful
 - I wonder who or what inspires you to survive?
 - I wonder, for you, what is a survivor?
 - I wonder, what are you grateful for?
- **As a non-expert in trauma response, know when and who to refer on to for information and further support** e.g. There are services others have found helpful ... for counselling, but also including spiritual support via experienced pastors, religious, spiritual directors/prayer guide, local retreat centres.

- It is worth repeating: Be wise and sensitive to difficulties of a survivor finding or maintaining, a place and comfort in the *Church*. Wherever they are on their journey and *relationship with the Holy Mystery we call God*, at this point with or without the Church, as a listener your paramount concern and care is in supporting them – the Holy Spirit has preceded you, and will continue to accompany that person on their journey to its completion. E.g. as and when appropriate:
 - ‘My priority is looking after you, and listening to you, and listening to the mystery bigger than ourselves, listening to where God is and how God is present to you.
 - I’m here to support your own journey and meeting with God’
 - ‘I wonder what it is you have always wanted to tell God? Or what it is you always wanted God to tell you?’

Stop and Think:

What catches your attention in the points above?

Self-Care as a Listener

Listening to someone’s story of their abuse can be very traumatic for the listener too, so you as a listener also need to have support in the form of an experienced trusted person to ‘debrief’ with in a confidential, safe place.

Be aware

- **Secondary traumatic stress** is the experience of trauma that stems from caring/listening to someone who has experienced a traumatic event. It can affect you!
- **Your own traumatic history** will impact on how you listen.

Get support in place for yourself

This may be in a group, with others in a diocesan, parish or group setting. Or it may be one-to-one support from a trusted wise friend, a trained safeguarding person or spiritual guide. *(See your local Diocesan lists/pastoral teams for experienced spiritual directors and prayer guides)*

Spiritual Preparation – Reflections for Listening

As Jesus shows us throughout his life, his deep awareness of people and his attentive listening and healing are rooted in his relationship with his Father. If we are to be Christ-like in our awareness and listening, we too must be people of prayer, in relationship with God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Prayer provides the foundation for a path to healing, and supports us as individuals and communities in our own growth and change and ‘turning to Christ’. For this vital ministry of listening to those wounded by the crime, the sin, of abuse, it is vital to pray, alone, and with others, to be inspired in your listening to hear what God is saying and how the Holy Spirit is guiding through the different voices, especially the survivor’s voice. For every person, life has deep spiritual significance, and there is a spiritual impact in the aftermath of abuse – there are spiritual needs to be met.

This ministry is fundamentally about seeing Christ in the face of those who have been abused, recognising the harrowing experience, often exacerbated by a confusing response from the church that may have left them feeling further silenced, betrayed, abandoned, distrusting the church and questioning God’s presence in their lives. As he ‘weeps over Jerusalem’ (Luke 19:41-44) Jesus shows us the over-riding urgency **to listen and to take this opportunity that God offers** to learn from and humbly walk with survivors for their peace and healing, and, mysteriously, for the peace and healing of the whole church. For survivors of abuse have gone through such a crucible of suffering, and are immediately joined to Christ in a way we haven’t yet understood. Open hearted listening to the voice of survivors brings the light into something very dark which has hung over us all, which we need to hold before God, repent and lament, for God’s healing.⁷

In the words of Erik Varden, Bishop of Trondheim:

‘Remedies cannot be confined to psychology and structural reforms. They are needful but not sufficient. Over and above them, we need contrition, the rekindling of faith, a new heart. We must relearn what it means to live and die in Christ’.⁸

⁷ Gratitude to Barbara Thorp, Boston, for all personal conversations and engagement over the years.

⁸ Erik Varden, Interview, Tablet 7 Jan 2022, *From grace to blasphemy*.

In this section, you will find four reflections using scripture text and images

You may find it helpful to use an ancient and simple way of praying with scripture, *lectio divina* – or ‘praying with God who sits with you’. St Gregory said of scripture ‘It is a magic pool where a lamb can paddle and an elephant swim’. It is full of treasure that can connect with our experience – sometimes buried beneath layers of traditional interpretation. We need to listen with head and heart – to come with a beginner’s mind to unearth this treasure, and be open to what God is saying now, in this moment, through his Divine Word, speaking into our lives.

A simple ‘How to’ for those not so used to praying with scripture, alone or in a group:

1. Settle quietly. God is with you/us. ‘Here I am Lord’ ‘I am here’
2. Open heart and mind – ready to hear the reading as if for the first time, even if you know it well and have heard it many times before. God will speak with a fresh voice into the circumstances of your life, in this moment, today.
3. Read the text out loud, slowly. Like a slow walk through a garden, noticing ... What word or phrase or image caught your attention? Repeat that word or phrase slowly over and over, or gaze at the image.
4. If in a group, after a moment or two’s silence, share just that word or image. No right or wrong answers, no comments or discussion.
5. Read the scripture out loud a second time. What caught your attention this time? Same or different? Repeat and savour it, ‘tasting it’.
6. In a group, after a silence, share again what struck you, and perhaps why. In the light of this sharing, move on with the reflection questions in the session.

Reflection One: The Parable of the Sower (Luke 8:5-15)

Take a moment to reflect on the Icon, Christ the Sower. Then, using a process of 'lectio divina' pray with the Parable text. (see previous page for a simple 'How to').



“A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell along the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it. And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it. And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundred fold. As he said these things, he called out, ‘He who has ears, let him hear.’”⁹

After your time of prayer with the Parable, move into reflection:

The Word of God is falling into our hearts, like seeds in the soil, falling on different kinds of soil: the path, the rocky ground, among thorns, or on good soil. The **quality of our listening** to others can be like this too -

- Surface listening
- Shallow listening
- In-depth listening
- Active listening


⁹ https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Representation_of_the_Sower%27s_parable.JPG

Time to think

Having reflected on the verses from the Gospel of St Luke, and the Icon telling this same story, consider **your own 'listening' ability. Where are you at the moment, as a listener?**

- Does it help to go back to the word or phrase that struck you in the parable?
- Or something that catches your attention in the Icon?

How are you listening to Christ in the Survivor?

- Imagine a survivor or another impacted by abuse is speaking to you as 'the sower' :
 'A survivor went to tell his or her story. As they spoke, some of their words fell along the path'
- What does the passage now say to you about the quality of listening required?

Self-Reflection

How do I listen to others? In what ways do the parable and the image challenge **me in receiving the seed of the sower?**

- **Am I like the path** – perhaps half listening, wanting to rush in at the first opportunity, to give my view?
- **Sometimes am I like the rocky ground?** Listening, but in a rather hard and detached way, unconcerned? Do I actually care about this person and what they are saying?
- **Am I sometimes like the thorny ground?** Preoccupied, distracted with other things, or myself and my story, rather than really listening?
- **Am I sometimes like the rich soil?** Able to really listen and really hear and accept the person I am listening to? Can I really give them space in which they can hear themselves, and feel heard, and have a sense that this is a positive step towards freedom and growth?

After your reflection, you may like to note down what you think really makes a difference to the speaker, the sower, when you are listening.

Closing Prayer

Holy Mystery of GOD, may I be open to hearing YOU in the many ways YOU speak – may I see YOUR face and hear YOUR voice in the person I am listening to

In the silence of the stars,
In the quiet of the hills, in the heaving of the sea,
Speak Lord.

In the stillness of this room,
In the calming of my mind,
In the longing of my heart,
Speak Lord.

In the voice of a friend,
In the chatter of a child,
In the words of a stranger,
Speak Lord

In the opening of a book,
In the looking at a film,
In the listening to music,
Speak Lord

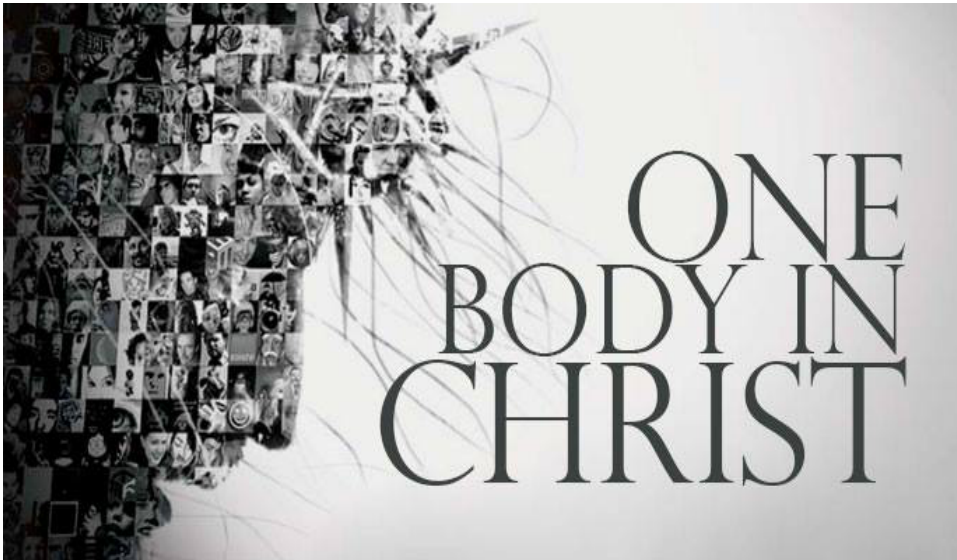
For your servant listens.¹⁰

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God,
We have betrayed those who should have been able to trust us.
We did not love or care for them in their innocence and vulnerability.
The pain has left them inconsolable, and they cry out, and we in our shame
and compassion cry out too.
Lord, we pray for all our brothers and sisters suffering in any way from the
impact of abuse.
May we deeply hear them.
We humbly ask you to breathe into them the continuing strength and
courage they need to embrace life
And to graciously help us as together we make a journey towards healing.
Through Christ our Lord and Saviour
Amen

¹⁰ : David Adam, in Tides and Seasons

Reflection Two: We are members of the Body of Christ

As you begin, take a moment to look at the image – what do you find?



11

Read out the following statements. In a moment of silence on your own, consider what strikes you here.

- We are members of a family – the family of God, and nothing we do as a family is just about ‘me’ or you’ - it is about ‘us’. In the family of God, what matters is who we are in Christ – brothers, sisters, friends.



- When those among us are wounded and hurting, and especially when some of our most trusted members have inflicted those life-scarring wounds, we are all affected and all share responsibility for healing (see 1 Corinthians 12.25-26).

If in a group, have a brief sharing of what caught your attention.

¹¹ Image on <https://chapelforeurope.eu/wp-event/gathering-as-the-body-of-christ-ecumenical-prayer-lunch/>

Take a moment to settle and prepare to let God's voice enter the sharing through praying with the following scripture verses:

“God has so composed the body, giving greater honour to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together. ... Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”

Within the prayer time, share what stays with you.

Self-reflection

Now, allow time for deeper personal reflection.

- What strikes you or takes you deeper from these quotes and the image? Take a moment to reflect yourself on who *you* are as a member of the Body of Christ, and your own awareness of victims and survivors among us, brothers and sisters, part of you, members of our family, God's family.

From your personal reflection, feel free to share in a group what you wish to share.

Closing Prayer

Slowly and thoughtfully, aware of the repetitions, you may like to pray the prayer attributed to St Teresa of Avila

Christ has no body but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours,
 Yours are the eyes with which He looks with compassion on this world,
 Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good,
 Yours are the hands, with which He blesses all the world.
 Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are His body.
 Christ has no body now but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours,
 Yours are the eyes with which he looks with compassion on this world.
 Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

Reflection Three: Lament

Take time to reflect on the image¹² For you, is this Pieta or Good Samaritan? A mother with the dead body of her tortured son? Or a victim of attack, carried in the arms of a compassionate passer-by to a place of healing? Something else perhaps? What scripture story does the image bring to your mind and heart? What thoughts and feelings does this image evoke in you? Following your reflection, make a note of your response, or if in a group, you may like to share together briefly.



Read the following paragraph slowly out loud:

Victims have suffered deeply as a result of our failures as the Body of Christ to believe and to protect them. Their families also feel deeply betrayed. Members of our communities have felt confused, angry, and betrayed. Some remain silent. Others have walked away feeling that to stay is to collude with the silence and cover up of abuse. Others wait in trepidation for something to happen. Others wish it would all just go away.

Allow silence. What echoes or stays with you? If in a group, you may like to share quietly together your own feelings and thoughts.

¹² Modern Pieta, Michal Kwarcia

Take time now to pray this lament for the harm inflicted by abuse¹³.

Our offences truly we know them, our sin is always before us.

Our sisters and brothers who are victims were not believed.

Against God we have sinned.

Lord, have mercy.

When apologies and care were desperately needed, 'scandals were managed'

Our hearts are stricken within us, trembling and fear fall upon us.

Lord, have mercy

We put the institution before our victims.

Lord have mercy

If this abuse had been done by an enemy, we could bear their taunts;

if a rival had risen against us, we could hide from him.

*But it is those among us - our own companions and friends - who have so betrayed
the trusting little ones.*

Our hearts are broken for our brothers and sisters, victims of abuse.

We feel the guilt and shame of the whole church.

Lord, have mercy

We will cry out to God for mercy, we will cry and lament.

Lord, have mercy

After the lament, and a time of silence, to conclude the time of reflection, you are invited to hear the voice of a survivor: "I needed ordinary, gentle, patient encouragement to come to know and to find that my negative and at times all-consuming traumatic experience was not 'the biggest thing about me.' That I could get out of this destructive loop. That I could find I was not alone. That I could be free, and just 'belong' to a parish and be me, because I have been shown kindness, and more positive possibilities. I do not underestimate the power of prayer, and I thank you for yours."¹⁴

Closing Prayer: Glory, honour, praise and thanksgiving be to God, whose power is at work, able to achieve so much more than we can ask or even imagine. Grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with us and remain with us. Amen.

¹³ Extract from Isaiah Journey resources for prayer (2022), with verses from psalms 50 and 54

¹⁴ Survivor, quoted in the Isaiah Journey Report (2020-2022) [The Isaiah Journey - Catholic Bishops' Conference \(cbcew.org.uk\)](https://www.cbcew.org.uk)

Reflection Four: The Paschal Mystery, a prayer of hope

To begin this time of reflection, read the following paragraph out loud.

At the heart of the Eucharist, the Mass, we remember the suffering and death of Jesus, and what his death was for – to prove that love is stronger than death, and deathly experiences like abuse. The mutilated body of Jesus hung on the cross. And then in resurrection, it is transfigured by love. The lighting of our Paschal Candle is at the heart of this mystery - through our faith in Christ, we know that suffering and death are not the end. Life is changed! *Together*, as victims and survivors, families, communities, we are caught up in the past, present and future of the mysterious journey of Jesus, through suffering and death to new life. We have a choice now – to stay in the pain and desolation of our experience, or open ourselves to the call that comes from the very heart of human life, to share in the pain of others, that is ‘compassion’, to ‘suffer with’. The meaning of every Christian life is to reach out and be there for someone else. It is so dark. There is no way forward. But there IS. Be there for others! Answer this call, perhaps receiving it for the first time, in the midst of horrible confusion and emptiness – it is a life-changing moment. It changes you and joins you in that great chain of compassion. Christ went down into the darkest place, to be there when others arrived, and we must be there too. Choose the way of loving compassion.¹⁵

What touches your heart and mind, or echoes with your own experience? Share together.

Using the lectio divina process, now pray with the following passage from the Gospel of St John

Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord”. But he said, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe”. Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve but believe.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed”. (John 20:24-29)¹⁶

¹⁵ Inspired by and with gratitude to the late Rev Dominic Milroy OSB, who learnt and shared from his own journey

¹⁶ Catholic Bible, English Standard Version, Catholic Edition, SPCK (2021)



Having reflected on the scripture text, take a moment to look at the painting.¹⁷

- What do you notice?
- How does the image speak to you or touch you?
- Why do you think showing the scars on the body of the Risen Christ is necessary or important?
- ✚ After personal reflection, if in a group, share your thoughts and feelings.

Stop and think

- ✚ Allow a time of deeper reflection, to return to what touched you; to **face** the impact of this great wound of abuse *yourself*, **stay** with it, and **hold it** before God.
- ✚ Can you trust that in a mystery of grace, echoing the final doxology of the Eucharistic Prayer in the Mass, *'Through Christ, with Christ, in Christ'* that God is drawing us to a new way of seeing things, out of darkness into light? *'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed'*.

¹⁷¹⁷ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Incredulity_of_Saint_Thomas_\(Caravaggio\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Incredulity_of_Saint_Thomas_(Caravaggio))

Closing Prayer

✚ You may like to respond with your own prayer, or pray the prayer of trust and hope offered below.

God our Strength, it is to you we turn, for you are our stronghold. *(Pause)*

For you show us how to love, and that love will overcome.

Jesus, from the cross you cried out, 'My God my God why have you forsaken me?' and again the last, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit'¹⁸

We have heard of victims' feelings of abandonment.

By the transforming power of your cross and resurrection, may they be set free from the darkness of the cross and the tomb, and come to experience the new life you promise all who come to you.

On their healing path, may they come to know they are loved and cared for by you, and by us, their sisters and brothers.

For every person, child or adult, who has suffered the impact of abuse, may they receive the gift of your peace.

As members of your Body, the Church we will trust in you, for you are with us as you promised.

Bless us on this healing path; let your face shed its light upon us.

With grateful hearts, we give you thanks and praise for your Holy Spirit at work in each person, child or adult, able to achieve so much more than we can ask or possibly imagine.

Through Christ Our Lord.

Amen

¹⁸ Matthew 27:46 and Luke 23:46

Signposting to continuing spiritual accompaniment and support

A person who has come to be listened to may wish to have continuing spiritual opportunities. **There are many retreat centres which offer peace and space and a listening ear.** There are websites offering daily reflection, and/or information and how to find a prayer guide or 'spiritual director.' The word 'Direction' here simply means the direction of travel or path taken on life's journey. Their role is to accompany and help a 'seeker' tune in to the presence of God's love within their life. The guide or 'director' will gently witness to the person's unique journey with God, and provide support and encouragement towards their experience of wholeness and inner peace. It may be a space where things emerge, and the person wishes to name the impact of the abuse on their faith, their sense of their own goodness, their relationship with God, self, others, and perhaps the Church; and discover their spiritual needs, hopes and possibilities for healing.

Here are some suggestions that may be helpful for survivors, family members, and anyone impacted by the crisis of abuse in the Church:

- **Isaiah Journey** will be offering an on-line '**Week of Guided Prayer**' in May 2023, bookings and information from January. See [The Isaiah Journey - Catholic Bishops' Conference \(cbcew.org.uk\)](https://www.cbcew.org.uk) website in January 2023 for application details)
- There are many retreat centres across England & Wales – perhaps there is one in your diocese? Try a web search, including your local diocesan website, and the websites below for other geographical locations.

To find out more about individual continuing spiritual support and spiritual direction, and finding a retreat, or a guide /director, e.g.

- [London Centre for Spiritual Direction \(lcsd.org.uk\)](https://www.lcsd.org.uk)
- [Spiritual direction | Jesuits in Britain](https://www.jesuits.org.uk)
- [Pray As You Go | Jesuits in Britain](https://www.jesuits.org.uk)
- [What's On | St Bede's Pastoral Centre \(stbedes.org.uk\)](https://www.stbedes.org.uk)

Signposting to services that others have found helpful, and Safeguarding information

As a **trusted person, friend or companion listening**, you are there to provide a kind and supportive response to a fellow human being who is hurting. However, you are *not* an 'expert' and will need to sense when, how and who, to refer on to for **further services that others have found helpful**.

Safeguarding information for listeners

We are praying and reflecting and listening to/with survivors or others impacted directly or indirectly by abuse. Survivors are part of us, our families and communities, and may be unidentified, with us in the open event, liturgy, or another context, session. Others as 'secondary victims' family or community members, or others impacted by abuse, confused, concerned and anxious

Listening at an event or service of prayer

- Being in a situation where abuse is being addressed or talked about or listened to could be a 'trigger' for a victim or survivor or family member or other person impacted by abuse taking part in the session.
- If face-to-face, in a parish or other event setting, choose a space where listening can take place in **privacy**. Consider the layout of the room, allowing enough personal space, adequate lighting, and clear access to the doorway.

We need to ensure

- **That a support team member or experienced pastoral worker** is observing the session, face to face or on zoom, and is available during or after the session for anyone present, providing listening and a 'safe place' if they have been 'triggered' to a past experience, or are upset or uncomfortable for any reason.
- **Visibility of safeguarding contact numbers** (local diocesan representative and diocesan co-ordinator) in the setting - parish, hall, community centre, and in any handouts used for the service.
- **Signposting to continuing spiritual support** – with contact details for local diocesan pastoral and retreat centres, spiritual directors, and counselling
- The Catholic Church and parish or community safeguarding policies are clearly visible, in place.

It is the policy of the Catholic Church in England & Wales to report all allegations of abuse to statutory authorities, regardless of whether the abuse occurred recently or in the past, or whether the accused person is living or deceased. Where mandatory reporting is required, this

can be done with respect for the right to anonymity for the victim/survivor/witness. As Leader of an event, you may refer any concerns or allegations directly to the Safeguarding Officer for your diocese or religious congregation/order.

- In an emergency – ring the police on 999
- If you are holding this session on line, be aware of the safeguarding policies, and the need to signpost to support on screen, and in any participant handout.

A clear notice should be available for participants in an event, e.g.

If you, or someone you know, would like support

- Parish safeguarding representative (phone)
- Parish Priest (phone)
- Diocesan Safeguarding Coordinator (phone)

All contact will be treated in the strictest confidence, and only information that is strictly necessary, proportionate and mandatory to share, will be shared, and only to those who need to know for the purposes of carrying out effective safeguarding duties. Where mandatory reporting is required, this can be done with respect for the right to anonymity for the victim, survivor, or witness.

Alternatively, you will find a list of contacts and resources on the handout or parish/community noticeboard or website.

National Organisations offering support and helplines

- <https://www.safespacesenglandandwales.org.uk/> supporting victims and survivors of church-related abuse
- <https://www.macsas.org.uk/> MACSAS supports women and men who have been sexually abused, as children or adults, by ministers, clergy or others in a church-related setting
- <http://www.christiansurvivors.com/wordpress/> support for any survivors and others impacted by abuse
- <https://napac.org.uk/> supporting recovery from childhood abuse, with helplines.
- <https://www.mysupportspace.org.uk/interactive-guides> for victims of any form of abuse
- NSPCC <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/our-services/nspcc-helpline/>
- Childline <https://www.childline.org.uk>
- National Domestic Violence helpline <https://www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk/>
- Samaritans Helpline <https://www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/contact-samaritan/>
- Action on Elder Abuse helpline <https://www.thenationalcareline.org/AccessingHelp/ActionOnElderAbuse>

Good News from Post-Traumatic Growth Research, spirituality and psychology:

We need to make opportunities for listening

It is good to hear about secular academic research for insights into how we can grow, even after traumatic experiences. This research has echoes in our Catholic Christian theology of the Paschal Mystery – that in our lives we are joined in Christ, who enters our suffering, and draws us through ‘the death’ that comes with this trauma, into the new life of possibility, for freedom, healing and peace.

Here the research demonstrates, among other positives, **the power of listening**

Positive insights and HOPE emerging from Post-Traumatic Growth research to give you an extra sense of blessing, thoughtfulness and care in listening

1. **Survivors and others impacted by abuse are ‘experts by experience’** and have been engaged in a number of areas of research. They have expressed how they have changed and see their lives and relationships differently.¹⁹
2. **They perceive that they have become more ‘spiritual’**, not necessarily in a religious sense, but feeling more alive, having survived, and wanting to be a force for good in the world. They are making their lives their own, growing and flourishing, like a new tree in a landscape, or a rainbow image.
3. **Yes, trauma for a victim can feel so alone**, a negative and all consuming, a lonely road - made all the more so because others around them don’t know their story, and they, the survivor don’t know how to talk about it either. **BUT stories about positivity and growth do shine a light**, coming from adversity through to healing, for the survivors and others impacted by the trauma of abuse, but also for anyone caring for them.
4. **Researchers are keen to shine a light on more positive possibilities** – and help inform and improve the experience of survivors coming into health and other systems, and in our case, how we as church can best accompany.
 - **In the secular research, and in our Christian theology**, we come to know that it is possible not only to emerge from trauma, but also to have a ‘transformational’ experience of growth and change.
 - **Something positive has come out of the ability to stay with, negotiate, wrestle with that trauma.** In theological terms, the ability to face the truth of the wound, hold it before God within the mystery of Christ’s suffering and death,

¹⁹ ¹⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qUoHgPmxLD4>

and with Christ, finding oneself being brought through the adversity of the abuse to ‘the other side’, new life, as a process of ‘metanoia’ or ‘conversion’. Conversion in our Christian story means a ‘dialogue’ with God, with ‘the light of Christ’, with a dawning awareness and child-like ability to see the grace and goodness around, and to be set free from anything that has wounded us, or tries to hold us in darkness.

5. **There is hope for the one who is caught in the ‘landscape of trauma’** – one in which they have, been ignored, silenced, not believed, sent ‘outside’ for ‘treatment’, offered money in place of pastoral concern and care.

Post-traumatic growth says the real landscape is one of possibility. A landscape where, if you are given the right help and the right environment, then who knows what is possible for you!²⁰

6. Survivors are among us everywhere – their hidden distress is all around. To enable post-traumatic growth, we need to understand and make possible opportunities for listening, so everyone can speak about their lives, that they are alive and have survived, and are role-models who acknowledge their own experience of trauma, and give other people permission to grow because they have seen other people grow. They can then see possibilities for themselves, windows of possibility not just ‘tolerance’, windows of opportunity, shattering old stories that blame, or say ‘*they should*’, or ‘*they ought to*’. They can tell new stories of HOPE.
7. **Further research** [resilience-trauma-pastoral-recovery.pdf \(cbcew.org.uk\)](https://www.cbcew.org.uk/resilience-trauma-pastoral-recovery.pdf)

Stop and Think

- What strikes you in what you have read or heard about this research?
- What has been your experience or that of someone you know – given the right help and environment, to have discovered a new landscape, a new way of seeing the world?

Insights from the Interface of spirituality and psychology

What we can learn at the interface of spirituality and psychology: insights about the power of listening, ritual and religious memory in responding to the impact of abuse and healing

Here we consider the impact of ritual and religious memory – specifically in the work of Dr Lisa Miller, related to people who have been traumatised by life experiences, and have found no place to go, and end up in a psychiatric inpatient unit. As a clinical psychologist Dr Miller takes a

²⁰ See Maslow, *Hierarchy of Needs*, when the basic needs are met, the person can make progress towards self-realisation.

very different approach to any standard psycho-therapeutic treatment. This account is not specifically about victims or survivors of *abuse*, but nonetheless, we can observe and gain insights from her practice and her findings. They seem to underline what we know and trust about ourselves as Body of Christ - that we as 'church' have something to offer, from deep in the heart of our faith and spirituality, and that is our experience of the power of ritual and liturgy beyond the words on the page. Within the space, the people gathered, the actions and gestures, the Word proclaimed, the priest, the silence and the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit, God is present, and speaks and acts and heals and gives peace beyond understanding.

The Awakened Brain

The author, Dr. Lisa Miller, a clinical psychologist and lead on the benefits of spirituality, describes her work in [The Awakened Brain](#)²¹ (2021). In 1994 as a post-doctoral student, she took on a clinical internship at a psychiatric inpatient unit. In another disheartening group therapy session one day, there came an unusual demand from a 'patient' in a group therapy session: 'What are you doing about Yom Kippur' (the Jewish feast of Atonement). Dr Miller knew religion was 'off limits' in her profession. However, a week later, with her grandmother's Hebrew prayer book to hand, Dr Miller led a group of patients and supportive attendants together through the Yom Kippur service. After the service, held in the back kitchen, she writes:

'The room felt cleansed and fresh, those of us around the table more connected to one another, and to something much bigger'.

'The service had loosened the hold of a prison. It wasn't just that they appeared uplifted by the ceremony – it was that each person was more connected and restored in exactly the place where they were habitually cut off.'

- The ceremony seemed with laser precision to have brought light into each person's darkest corner ...
- (patients were) expressing feelings of self-worth, deep connection and caring for others;
- They were seeming more steady and integrated; articulating gratitude and appreciation for life.
- But something had happened in the back kitchen that wasn't happening through the primary interventions of medication and psychotherapy – and the healing, however temporary it might turn out to be, was specific to each patient's greatest need.'

'As a clinician I wanted to know what had really happened at our Yom Kippur service. Were patients uplifted by the familiar sense memories, by feeling at home culturally, practicing rituals

²¹ See *The Awakened Brain: The Psychology of Spirituality*, Lisa Miller (2021) Penguin Books, Random House.

they'd grown up with? Or was it the dignity of coming together, not as people with pathologies and treatment files, but as fellow observers, that had brightened them ... did the blast of illumination each patient had received offer anything of substance to practitioners working to support their long-term healing?'

Dr Miller's mentor, Dr Martin Seligman, **father of positive psychology**, was one of the first people in the field **to show we have a CHOICE in how we build our inner lives**, and how much this choice matters to our well-being. He found that:

- Much of our suffering is caused by habits of thought, and that we are most despairing when we perceive that we have no control over the outcome of a situation – when we think we can't control the link between our actions and the results. We might develop pessimistic explanatory style, a negative and ultimately damaging way of telling our own story, **carving a path to depression**
- In reality we have more control than we believe we do, and that there is another way. This is in *unlearning* our false, negative beliefs about ourselves and the world, and choosing to see things differently. This can result in feeling buoyant, open, peaceful (like when out running, or being in nature)- moving towards more empowered thinking, harnessing power, and using reason to move away from despair to a pathway to resilience, but still 'in control', having mastery, self-control, moving the pieces around.

Lisa Miller goes further, a third way, which she calls 'the Olympian way'

- Like the experience a person can have miles into a long run, a state of being when things are suddenly clear and unified;
- Or like being on a mountaintop, with new height and perspective ('on Olympus') offering a wide, unfettered view of the world rolling out in all directions.
- The value of this 'way' is less about feeling in control, and more about **glimpsing the world and life and purpose** from this broader, more holistic view, when meaning and the proportion of things become clear.
- In this process, the usual stories of losses, what I have or don't have, fall away. **A new narrative emerges. I feel inherently worthy and open to possibility and adventure**, trusting that the world will reveal what I need to know.

And Dr. Miller wonders: Was it possible that the patients at the Yom Kippur service had reached something like 'Mt Olympus' – in feeling a sense of wholeness, innocence, bridging isolation, causing shifts in each of them that hadn't come from drug or talk therapy, **but from what we had shared at the kitchen table?**

Stop and Think

- What catches your attention in this relationship between psychology and spirituality as described by Dr. Miller?
 - Does anything in it ring true for you in your experience? In your personal life in nature or in relationships?
 - What about in liturgy or prayer ritual – any connections for you?
- Can you think of an experience when you felt ‘close to God’, in nature or another place or time?
- Think back to a liturgy or any form of prayer you participated
 - E.g. in a family prayer time, a liturgy of the Word or a Eucharist, Wedding, Funeral, Baptism, or within the context of a quiet or away-day or retreat experience
- **What in particular touched you and stays with you from these moments?** Is there a moment you remember and can go back to? Can you describe the experience and the effects? You might like to spend a time in prayer and in thanksgiving for any connections in your experiences, and the ways in which God has been and is present to you.

At the end of this Guide to encourage compassionate listening and accompaniment, we commit ourselves to following Christ: to seeing his face in each person we encounter, removing our shoes before the sacred ground of the other, as together with them, we respond to the grace of God empowering us to live in newness of life (Rom.6:4) ²²“Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.” Isaiah 43:19

²² All quotations from Sacred Scripture used in this Listening Guide are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, Catholic Edition SPCK 2021 © The Guide is written by C Dollard, Isaiah Journey ©