

Assistance For the Victim

By Susan Gammage ¹

Whose Job is it, to assist the victims of trauma?

It can be difficult to know how to help a loved one who's suffered a traumatic or distressing experience, but your support can be a crucial factor in their recovery.

The 3 Protagonists (the individual, community and institutions) all have a role to play.

The Individual:

The mental health system has been radically degraded in the past decade as a result of changes in the health care environment. Mental health services have been far more negatively impacted than general health care. According to the Hay Group Report, between 1988 and 1997, mental health benefits were slashed 670% more than health care benefits. With the current economic climate, it's unlikely that there will be enough qualified individual therapists to help all the individual trauma survivors, which is why it's so important for individuals to step in. Love often has a more powerful effect than skill!

Everyone can become a "willing channel" for the health-giving power of the Holy Spirit:

The work of healing the sick, however, is a matter that concerns not the patient and the practitioner only, but everyone. All must help, by sympathy and service, by right living and right thinking, and especially by prayer, for of all remedies prayer is the most potent. "Supplication and prayer on behalf of others," says 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "will surely be effective." The friends of the patient have a special responsibility, for their influence, either for good or ill, is most direct and powerful. In how many cases of sickness the issue depends mainly on the ministrations of parents, friends or neighbors of the helpless sufferer!

Even the members of the community at large have an influence in every case of sickness. In individual cases that influence may not appear great, yet in the mass the effect is potent. Everyone is affected by the social "atmosphere" in which he lives, by the general prevalence of faith or materialism, of virtue or vice, of cheerfulness or depression; and each individual has his share in determining the state of that social "atmosphere." It may not be possible for everyone, in the present state of the world, to attain to perfect health, but it is possible for everyone to become a "willing channel" for the health-giving power of the Holy Spirit and thus to exert a healing, helpful influence both on his own body and on all with whom he comes in contact. (Dr. J.E. Esslemont, Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era, p. 113)

¹ Prepared by David Bowie (2023) for posting, with permission of author, at https://bahai-library.com/gammage_various_essays

From this we learn:

- healing the sick is a matter that concerns everyone
- all must help, by sympathy and service, by right living and right thinking
- supplication and prayer on behalf of others will be effective
- the influence of friends, either for good or ill, is most direct and powerful
- even the members of the community at large have an influence – it may not appear great, yet in the mass the effect is potent
- it is possible for everyone to become a "willing channel" for the health-giving power of the Holy Spirit

'Abdu'l-Bahá gives us lots of advice:

But some souls are weak; we must endeavor to strengthen them. Some are ignorant, uninformed of the bounties of God; we must strive to make them knowing. Some are ailing; we must seek to restore them to health. Some are immature as children; they must be trained and assisted to attain maturity. We nurse the sick in tenderness and the kindly spirit of love; we do not despise them because they are ill. Therefore, we must exercise extreme patience, sympathy and love toward all mankind, considering no soul as rejected. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 286)

Here we see we are to:

- strengthen the weak ones
- Inform the ignorant of the bounties of God
- strive to make them knowing
- restore the ailing to health
- trained and assist the immature ones to attain maturity
- nurse the sick in tenderness and love
- exercise extreme patience, sympathy and love
- consider no soul as rejected

Individuals can turn to the Local Spiritual Assembly for advice and guidance:

When a Bahá'í wife finds herself in such a situation [of domestic violence] and feels it cannot be resolved through consultation with her husband, she could well turn to the Local Spiritual Assembly for advice and guidance. (Universal House of Justice, The Compilation of Compilations, vol. II, p. 459, #2347)

An Assembly is not necessarily always right, but acceptance of their decisions brings blessings:

...the personal imperfection of the nine members of an Assembly, or their lack of knowledge about any subject, does not mean that their judgment is defective and that the believers can or should, therefore, avoid going to the Assembly or heeding

its advice. It is, of course, true that Bahá'í institutions are evolving, and they may make mistakes or may not be able to solve all the problems brought before them. But this does not mean that the friends should avoid turning to them when they encounter difficulties in their lives. In the words of the Universal House of Justice...an Assembly is not necessarily always right, but acceptance of its decision is a spiritual obligation which brings its own blessings to those affected. (National Spiritual Assembly of the United States to a local Spiritual Assembly, October 18, 1990)

The Community:

It is the job of their social group to get them out of the trap. And every trauma survivors requires a different way out. This is why therapists often appear to have such unique skills – we tend to think outside the box on how to help people change. But anyone can do it if you and your colleagues are able to think creatively and gain an understanding of how people heal from traumatic events.

So, we need to think together “outside the box” about how to create cultures that are fundamentally healing, responsive to individual needs while maintaining a vision of health, success, productivity and prosperity.

Family members can educate themselves and get help for themselves

Assemblies may wish to encourage family members of a person with a mental disorder, if they haven't done so already, to find out as much as they can about the disorder as well as medical conditions that may be associated with it, and get help for themselves, even if the person with the disorder doesn't seek treatment. Family members can encourage the person with the disorder to inquire about education and counseling, but pressuring or trying to force the person to get help may be counter-productive. (USA- NSA, Guidelines for Local Spiritual Assemblies, Chapter 14, p. 13)

The Institutions

Assemblies should deepen more fully on the principles of consultation and the nature of Baha'í law:

It is apparent that some assistance is needed for Assemblies in Canada, and the Counselling Committees working under their direction, to have further guidance in the means by which their investigative functions can best be performed. The House of Justice believes this is best accomplished through their deepening more fully in the principles of consultation described by the Master and elaborated further in the writings of the Guardian, and also in the nature of Bahá'í law. (Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada, 15 January, 1992)

Through this deepening they will be enabled to determine what is the best approach to be followed in each particular situation with which they are confronted. They will also be able to preserve that flexibility which is so very important at this early stage in the development of the Administrative Order. (Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada, 15 January, 1992.

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Appoint a liaison with a capacity to listen:

If individuals with mental disorders are repeatedly writing letters or making phone calls to the Assembly, it may wish to appoint a liaison with a capacity to listen to interact with the individual. It may be helpful to assist people to clarify and focus their thinking by asking, "Why are you telling me that?" It is also possible to politely interrupt a flow of monologue that is unproductive. (USA- NSA, Guidelines for Local Spiritual Assemblies, Chapter 14, p. 11)

Appoint a task force:

If the family wishes, the Assembly may wish to provide a mentor to assist it with consultation. In addition, a task force could serve as a liaison with the Assembly and direct the individuals concerned to proper human resources and professionals for assistance. They may also provide guidance based on the Writings, depending on the case. (USA- NSA, Guidelines for Local Spiritual Assemblies, Chapter 14, p. 13)

Provide a support system:

It is the function of Assemblies to help believers resolve the problem of domestic violence and to provide a support system to believers who are victims as well as those who are attempting to overcome this violent behaviour. (National Spiritual Assembly of Australia's "Policy Regarding Domestic Violence", Australian Bahá'í Bulletin, July, 1990)

Understand that one party may truly need the Assembly's help in dealing with the other:

Assemblies should also keep in mind that although both parties in a dispute may be at fault, they are often not equally so and that one party may truly need the Assembly's help in dealing with the other. (USA- NSA, Guidelines for Local Spiritual Assemblies, Chapter 14, p. 21)

Provide advice and guidance:

When a Bahá'í wife finds herself in such a situation [of domestic violence] and feels it cannot be resolved through consultation with her husband, she could well turn to

the Local Spiritual Assembly for advice and guidance... (Universal House of Justice, The Compilation of Compilations, vol. II, p. 459, #2347)

Train family members to provide support and encouragement:

[W]e would ... emphasize the ideal of rehabilitation within the family as well as in the community. Family members should be trained, where possible, to help provide the support and encouragement that the disabled person requires to surmount his impairment. (Statement by the Bahá'í International Community, dated August 1988, "Human Rights and Disability: Statement to the 40th United Nations Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities")

Counsel the individual about the Bahá'í laws

While the medical aspect of the recovery process is left to the expertise of competent medical and mental health professionals, the Bahá'í institutions do have a responsibility to counsel the individual about the Bahá'í laws and to protect the good name of the faith. This sometimes requires that an individual suffering from alcoholism or abuse of other substances will be deprived of his or her administrative rights. (National Spiritual Assembly of the United States to a local Spiritual Assembly, October 18, 1990)

Provide an independent forum for couples to try to resolve their differences:

At present the prevailing method, within the Australian community, of treating domestic violence, is to advise the couple to separate and to seek treatment from professional counselling services. It is suggested that Assemblies follow this method of treating domestic violence also. If, alternatively, the couple is counselled to remain together to try and reconcile their differences, there can be no guarantee that the violence will not recur, in which case the Assembly could appear, inadvertently, to be condoning it. If the couple separate, however, the role of the Assembly can then become that of providing an independent forum within which the couple can come together and try to resolve their differences. (National Spiritual Assembly of Australia's "Policy Regarding Domestic Violence", Australian Bahá'í Bulletin, July, 1990)

Teach them how to consult

The relationship between husband and wife must be viewed in the context of the Bahá'í ideal of family life. Bahá'u'lláh came to bring unity to the world, and a fundamental unity is that of the family. Therefore, one must believe that the Faith is intended to strengthen the family, not weaken it, and one of the keys to the strengthening of unity is loving consultation... The atmosphere within a Bahá'í family as within the community as a whole should express 'the keynote of the Cause of God' which, the beloved Guardian has stated, 'is not dictatorial authority

but humble fellowship, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving consultation'. (Universal House of Justice, Lights of Guidance, p.220, #734)

Assist people to consider moderate views based on facts rather than suppositions, speculation or fears:

In attempting to aid parties in resolving disputes not involving allegations of abuse or suspected abuse, Assemblies may find it helpful to suggest that the parties examine separately their own roles and assumptions in the dispute, as well as the accuracy of the views of the other parties. The Assembly may also find it helpful to steer thinking away from extreme outcomes, worst-case scenarios or unrealistically optimistic scenarios, as those kinds of thinking tend to escalate apprehension between both parties, exacerbate the current situation, or set them up for future disappointments if they are unrealistically optimistic. It should assist the parties involved to consider moderate views based on facts rather than suppositions, speculation or fears. It may find that either or both parties need assistance in clarifying and separating facts from assumptions and/or opinions. (USA- NSA, Guidelines for Local Spiritual Assemblies, Chapter 14, p. 21)

Civil proceedings or advice from the National Spiritual Assembly may be necessary:

The Assembly may wish to appoint a representative or representatives to mediate until the dispute is resolved or it becomes clear that resolution will not be forthcoming through consultation. If, after reasonable efforts to assist the parties, the dispute remains unsettled, the Assembly may withdraw in favor of civil proceedings or seek advice from the National Spiritual Assembly about how to proceed. In any case, it should guard against allowing wrangling between parties to take up an inordinate amount of its time. (USA- NSA, Guidelines for Local Spiritual Assemblies, Chapter 14, p. 21)

For more information please see:

The 3 Protagonists in the Divine Plan <https://www.bahaiblog.net/articles/bahai-life/the-three-protagonists-of-social-change-the-individual-institutions-and-the-community/>