

When Faith Hurts: Recognizing and Responding to the Spiritual Impact of Child Maltreatment

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The agenda

- What is “spirituality?”
- The impact of abuse on spirituality
- Role of spirituality in coping with abuse
- Addressing the spiritual needs of
 - Survivors
 - Offenders



What is spirituality?

- “Relating to religion or religious belief; relating to, or affecting the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things.”
 - Source: The Oxford American Dictionary (2001) p. 1644



The role of spiritual care

Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy © 2009 American Psychological Association
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Changes in Personal Religion/Spirituality During and After Childhood Abuse: A Review and Synthesis

Donald F. Walker, Henri Webb Reid, Tiffany O'Neill, and Lindsay Brown
Richmont Graduate University

Psychologists have begun to consider the potential role of traumatic experiences on the victim's spirituality and religiousness as well as the role personal religious and spiritual faith might have in recovery from abuse. In this review, the authors were particularly interested in these issues as they pertain to childhood abuse. The authors identified 34 studies of child abuse as they relate to spirituality and religiosity that included information on a total of 19,090 participants. The studies were classified according to both the form of abuse and the form of religiousness or spirituality that were examined. The majority of studies indicated either some decline in religiousness or spirituality ($N = 14$) or a combination of both growth and decline ($N = 12$). Seven studies gave preliminary indications that religiousness-spirituality can moderate the development of posttraumatic symptoms or symptoms associated with other Axis I disorders. The authors discuss implications for both therapy and future research.

Keywords: childhood abuse, religion and spirituality



The impact of abuse on spirituality

- A study of 527 child abuse victims (physical, sexual or emotional) found these victims had a "significant" spiritual injury
- The injuries included feelings of guilt, anger, grief, despair, doubt, fear of death and belief God is unfair.
- However, the victims reported praying more frequently & having a "spiritual experience."
– Source: Lawson, et al, Child Abuse & Neglect (1998)



When the perpetrator is clergy, the impact on spirituality is greater

- Clergy use "religious cover" to justify abuse (i.e. their "good works" overshadow the abuse; God gave this child to me)
- Clergy often communicate this cover to the victims
- When this happens, church/synagogue attendance of these survivors decreases, less likely to trust God, and their relationship with God "ceases to grow." McLaughlin, Devastated Spirituality: The Impact of Clergy Sexual Abuse on the Survivor's Relationship with God (1994).



How often do offenders use religious cover in sexually abusing children?

- 93% of sex offenders describe themselves as “religious” (Abel study of 3,952 male offenders)
- In a survey of 2,864 church leaders, 20% knew of a sex offender attending/member of their church (Christianity Today 2010)
- Hard core offenders maintaining significant involvement with religious institutions “had more sexual offense convictions, more victims, and younger victims.” Eshuys & Smallbone, *Religious Affiliations Among Adult Sexual Offenders (2006)*
- Why?
- Quick forgiveness, gullible religious people, and easy access to children



Addressing spiritual injuries



Meeting the needs of survivors



The role of spirituality in coping with abuse

- Researchers have found a victim’s “spiritual coping behavior” may play a positive or negative role in the ability to cope with the abuse
- Victims of severe abuse and very young victims are more likely to remain “stuck” in their spiritual development (i.e. remain angry with God)
- Nonetheless many victims reporting “greater resolution” of childhood abuse were able to “actively turn to their spirituality to cope...rather than attempt to cope on their own.” *Gall, Spirituality and Coping with Life Stress Among Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse, 30 Child Abuse & Neglect 829 (2006)*

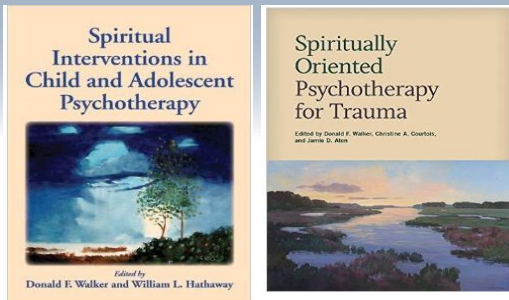


More research

- Religious and spiritual forms of coping “contribute to decreased symptoms, greater self esteem, and overall greater life satisfaction.” (Bryant-Davis 2012)
- Religiosity can moderate posttraumatic symptoms for child abuse survivors (Walker 2009)
- In a study of 2,964 female child sexual abuse survivors, researchers noted “significantly more posttraumatic symptoms” in survivors with no current religious practices. (Elliott 1994)



American Psychological Association publications



Collaboration with mental health

(Bilich et al, 2000)

- Rabbi as consultant
- Therapist as consultant
- Referrals
- Limited collaboration
- Full collaboration
 - Therapy and spiritual guidance offered as integrated whole



The importance of sacred texts (Walker, et al 2014)

- Many maltreated children abused or neglected by an offender who used a sacred text (Bottoms, et al 2003)
- This damage can be “powerfully undone when challenged using other passages from clients’ religious and spiritual tradition.” (Walker, et al, 2014)
- The case of the clergy using Genesis

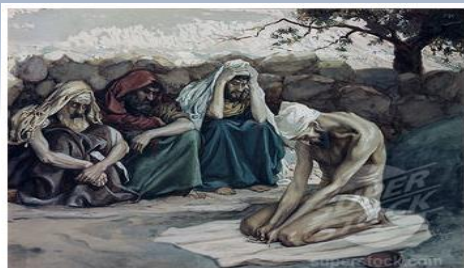


The theology of trauma (Monroe 2015)

- Anguish is the norm (40% of the Psalms are laments) and God suffers with us
- Peace happens in the context of chaos (Psalm 23, Jeremiah 29:11)
- God’s kingdom in this earth does not promise the protection of bodies
- God and God’s people are in the business of trauma prevention, justice & mercy
- Recovery does not eliminate the consequences of violence in this world



Sometimes God doesn't answer the "why" questions (Pargament 2005)



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Recommendations

- Avoid the temptation to focus on victim's "sins"
- Assist the victim in accessing medical and mental health care
- Stay within your field of expertise
- Refrain from platitudes
- Don't require forgiveness
- Cautiously respond when victim wants to confront perpetrator

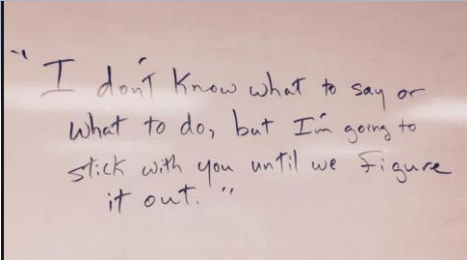
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What survivors want (Clark 2009)

1. Offer an "unequivocal apology"
2. Symbolic gestures (i.e. a memorial or rock garden)
3. Changes in policies (two deep leadership, proper screening, immediate reporting to the authorities—no exceptions)
4. Archive the past (victims want the assurance there will never be a revisionist history)
5. The practical (faith community should help access mental health and medical services)
6. Listen and act (the hymn that hurt)

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Nate Frambach



"I don't know what to say or what to do, but I'm going to stick with you until we figure it out."

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Meeting the needs of offenders



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Rabbinical care for offenders

- Coordinate with sex offender treatment provider
- Stay within your field of expertise
- Review original investigative records
- Confront cognitive distortions
 - “The child never said no”
- Don't allow offender to shift blame
 - “My wife withheld herself sexually”

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When an offender confesses

- Inform him that sexual abuse contributes to significant health risks and that he should fully disclose his conduct to a medical care provider to ensure the child’s physical well-being (Centers for Disease Control, ACE studies)
- Inform him that sexual abuse has a significant impact on a child’s mental health and therefore the victim should be referred to an appropriate mental health provider (CDC, ACE studies)



When an offender confesses

- Inform him that SA results in significant spiritual damage and, in consultation with a religious counselor and pastor, we will need to address this issue. Diane Langberg, *Counseling Survivors of Sexual Abuse* (2003)
- Inform him he has committed a serious crime and that he should turn himself in to the police and be assessed by and follow the recommendations of a sex offender treatment provider
 - (Vieth 2012)



Assessing a perpetrator’s “repentance” (Vieth 2012)

- Have you informed your spouse? If your spouse wants you to move out, are you willing to do so? If your child victim(s) want you to move out, are you willing to do so?
- Have you informed your child’s medical provider? Have you referred your child to a therapist?
- Do you hold yourself fully responsible—or do you believe your child in some way contributed to the abuse?
- Have you turned yourself into the police? Will you be confessing and pleading guilty or will you make the government “prove it”? Will you allow your attorney to grill your victim at trial?
- Are you willing to enroll in a sex offender treatment program?



Clergy need to improve their ability to respond to trauma

- Clergy more likely to have congregant seek help from them than clinician (Hohmann & Larson, 1993)
- Clergy not prepared to deal with serious abuse or mental illness (Vieth 2012)
- Clergy may fail to recognize suicide risk (Domino, 1985)



Religion and child abuse
Tishelman & Fontes (2017)



- Recommendations:
 - Foster respectful understanding between CACs and faith communities
 - Provide education to faith leaders
 - Train CAC staff on religious issues
 - Discuss religious issues in MDT case reviews



Chaplains for Children



www.jewishsacredspaces.org



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Closing thoughts

The bottom line dilemma: “You can make sense of sexual abuse and no God, or God and no sexual abuse. But how do you tolerate the two realities together?”

—Diane Langberg, PhD

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“Till the night be passed”



“Silence in the face of evil is itself evil. Not to act is to act.”

— Dietrich Bonhoeffer

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Thank you



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