

Providing Care After Spiritual Abuse

Spiritual abuse is using the Bible, other sacred texts, creeds, doctrine, spiritual practices, power, position, and authority to manipulate and control individuals or communities. It may also be a means through which other forms of abuse are justified such as physical, sexual, or financial abuse. The people we care for may come to us for support in recovering from spiritual abuse. Although we may associate spiritual wounding with a particular church, community, or leader, it can also occur within a family, between friends, or within small groups.

Because of the trauma experienced, victims' brains and bodies come to associate good things—such as prayer, scripture, and worship services—with harm. This is especially true with spiritual abuse. Since the very people who are to represent God misrepresented who God is and twisted his truth to control and justify wrongdoing, victims may even associate God with the characteristics of their abusers. Therefore, ministering to those who have encountered spiritual abuse poses a unique set of challenges and requires great wisdom. You do not, however, face this tough situation alone.

Because the effects of trauma can be debilitating, when someone tells you about past or current spiritual abuse, you will want to connect them with a professional counselor. As a ministry leader and caregiver, you can also provide an additional layer of care for people to begin to heal. Remember to rely on the Holy Spirit and attend to your personal care as you provide support. Jesus, the Ultimate Healer, has the power to heal the wounds of the abused and oppressed. Here are some tips to walk alongside those who have been victims of spiritual abuse.

1. Collaborate to foster felt safety

A survivor may already be physically safe and no longer directly experiencing spiritual abuse. However, the traumatic effects of abuse are lasting. This means that someone who has survived spiritual trauma may still feel unsafe internally. When people disclose that they have experienced spiritual abuse, we can support them by increasing their sense of felt-safety.

One way to do this is to ask where they would feel most comfortable meeting. For example, some individuals may not feel comfortable meeting at a church. Because they have been hurt in churches or other faith-based organizations, it is a courageous act for them to ask for help from you, a spiritual person. Affirm their courage. Your support will help survivors recognize their own resilience in asking for help. By being gracious and getting their input on what feels safe to them, you show them that you stand in contrast to what they have experienced and that you may be a person they can confide in.

2. Be quick to listen

Listen without judgment, minimization, redirection, or dismissal. Your demeanor will help the person experience God's acceptance through you. Although you can never fully make up for the harm caused by spiritual abuse, you can continue to be present and represent God's compassionate love. As they begin to heal and are ready, their stories of trauma need to be told and witnessed.

3. Be slow to incorporate spiritual practices


Remember that for victims, good things, such as prayer and scripture, were paired with their most traumatic experiences. This is why initially praying aloud or quoting a verse may trigger a threat response in their body and retraumatize them. Instead of immediately praying or illustrating points with scripture, you could sit in silence with them in a setting where they feel calm. As you sit silently together, you could internally pray for them to experience God's love and peace. Over time, with the support of professional counseling, they may begin to feel safe enough to engage in spiritual practices such as prayer, scripture reading, and attending services.

4. Do not defend God

When you talk with those who have experienced spiritual abuse and are questioning their faith, you may be tempted to defend faith, the Church, and even God. This can cause them harm. Instead, give them space to wrestle with God and ask hard questions. You may not have answers, but let them be honest without needing to correct what they say. Validate their pain and grieve with them. Over time, as they have space to grieve, they can begin to connect with God in a new way.

5. Give them time to build trust

Trusting God and others may take a significant amount of time. This is especially true while they are disentangling God, faith, and other people from the associated harm. While victims of spiritual wounding recover, they may not even trust their own ability to discern safe people or situations because they were harmed by someone they trusted. Help them regain trust in their ability to discern by believing them and affirming that what they experienced at the hands of their abusers was wrong. Do not be surprised when you encounter distrust and do not force trust. Instead, focus on being a trustworthy person. This can provide a corrective relational experience because their spiritual abusers were untrustworthy.



When someone has been hurt in a religious setting, establishing trust in another spiritual community may not be as easy as helping them find a new, good church. They may need time before they feel ready to get involved in a church or a small group. Instead of assuming you know what will be most helpful, you can ask how they feel about attending a worship service or group meeting. If they do attend one, debrief what it felt like for them to go and continue to provide support.

6. Help them experience God's compassion and justice

As spiritual trauma survivors progress toward healing, you can begin to make the Gospel more explicit. They may identify with Jesus because he also suffered at the hands of those in spiritual leadership. Jesus empathizes with and defends those who have been spiritually wounded. Several places in scripture show us God's justice toward those who misuse power, authority, and position in His name. Matthew 23 shows Christ's anger toward harmful spiritual leadership. God is compassionate toward victims of spiritual abuse and declares "woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep" (Jeremiah 23). He will "hold accountable" shepherds who misuse their authority and bring about justice for the spiritually abused (Ezekiel 34). As caregivers and ministry leaders, we can represent the compassion of Christ by walking with the spiritually wounded and prayerfully seeking justice.