



When Faith Hurts: Recognizing & Responding to the Spiritual Impact of Trauma

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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 maltreated children**

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.”**
 - The Oxford American Dictionary (2001)
- **Spirituality has been defined as a “search or quest for the Sacred” or as a “private, personal, affective experience with ‘the Divine.’”**
 - Walker (2009)

The role of spiritual care

Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy
2009, Vol. 1, No. 2, 130–145

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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.”**
 - Lawson, R., Drebing, C., Berg, G., Vincelle, A., & Penk, W. (1998). The long term impact of child abuse on religious behavior and spirituality in men. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 22(5),

Spiritual impact of abuse by clergy

- 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 attendance of these survivors decreases, less likely to trust God, and their relationship with God “ceases to grow.”
 - Barbara R. McLaughlin, *Devastated Spirituality: The Impact of Clergy Sexual Abuse on the Survivor’s Relationship with God*, 1 *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity* 145-158 (1994)

How often do offenders use religious cover?

- **93% of sex offenders describe themselves as “religious” (Abel study of 3,952 male offenders)**
 - Gene Abel & N. Harlow, *The Stop Child Molestation Book* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris Publishing 2001)
- **Hard core offenders maintaining significant involvement with religious institutions “had more sexual offense convictions, more victims, and younger victims.”**
 - E. Eshuys & S. Smallbone, *Religious Affiliations Among Adult Sexual Offenders* 18 *Sexual Abuse: Journal of Research & Treatment* 279-288 (2006)
- **Why?**
- **Faith community may provide “cheap Grace” and easy access to children**
 - T.P. Cross, V. Vieth, A. Russell, C.J. Jensen, *Adult Sex Offenders against Children: Etiology, Typologies, Investigation, Treatment, Monitoring and Recidivism* (co authored with Theodore P. Cross, Amy Russell, Cory Jewell Jensen), *HANDBOOK OF INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE ACROSS THE LIFESPAN* (SPRINGER 2021)

What can medical professionals do?



- **Be aware of potential spiritual injuries that may impair disclosure of abuse**

- Victor Vieth & Pete Singer, *Wounded Souls: The Need for Child Protection Professionals and Faith Leaders to Recognize & Respond to the Spiritual Impact of Child Abuse*, 45 Mitchell-Hamline L. Rev. 1213 (2018)

Look for clues

- **Prior to speaking with child, look at the intake form or other records for clues about spiritual blocks**
- **Example: “I think God is mad at me.”**
- **Also look at the setting of abuse (clergy perpetrator, abuse in a religious setting, etc)**
- **Do we know anything about the child’s belief system?**

Be alert for signs of spiritual block

- **Sometimes the child may boldly do or say something suggesting a block or problem (i.e. “Am I still a virgin in God’s eyes?”)**
- **The dynamics of abuse may suggest a block (i.e. girl molested after being compelled to say bedtime prayers and father says “You see, God is OK with what are doing—or he would have stopped this.”)**

Offer reassurance

- **“You’re not in trouble with *me.*”**
- **“*This* is a safe place.”**
- **“You know, I talk to lots of boys (or girls). No matter what happened, it’s not your fault.”**

Assure the child someone will help w/ spiritual questions

- **Child: Am I still a virgin in God's eyes?**
- **Medical professional asks the question back (“How come you ask that?”) and gets additional information**
- **What if the child insists on an answer?**

Addressing spiritual injuries



Bring Spirituality questions, blocks/problems to the team

- **Develop a plan to address the spiritual injuries in the same way we would address physical/emotional damage**
- **Select a therapist skilled at addressing child abuse and who shares the child's faith or is well-versed in the child's faith tradition and is sensitive to the child's spiritual needs**
 - **Gonsiorek, et al 2009**
- **Utilize hospital or other board certified chaplains skilled in responding to trauma**

Some CACs have resources Tishelman & Fontes (2017)

Child Abuse & Neglect 63 (2017) 120–130

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Child Abuse & Neglect

ELSEVIER

Religion in child sexual abuse forensic interviews^{a,*}

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ABSTRACT

Religion is an under-studied factor affecting children's sexual victimization and their willingness to discuss such experiences. In this qualitative study, 39 child forensic interviewers and child advocacy center (CAC) directors in the United States discussed religious influences on children's sexual abuse experiences, their relationships to CACs, and their disclosures in the forensic setting. Participants reported both harmonious and dissonant interactions between religiously observant children and families on one hand and child advocacy centers on the other. Themes emerged related to abuse in religious contexts and religious justifications for abuse; clergy and religious supports for disclosures as well as suppression of disclosures; and the ways CACS accommodate religious diversity and forge collaborations with clergy. Participants discussed a wide range of religions. Recommendations for practice and research are included.

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- **Recommendations:**
 - Foster respectful understanding between CAC team (including medical providers) and faith communities
 - Provide education to faith leaders
 - Train staff on religious issues
 - Discuss religious issues in case reviews

Julie Valentine Center Chaplain



The potential benefit of spiritual care



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.”**
 - Terry Lynn Gall, *Spirituality and Coping with Life Stress Among Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse*, 30 Child Abuse & Neglect 829-44 (2006)

More research

- **Religious and spiritual forms of coping “contribute to decreased symptoms, greater self esteem, and overall greater life satisfaction.”**
 - Bryant-Davis, T., & Wong, E. C. (2013). Faith to move mountains: Religious coping, spirituality, and interpersonal trauma recovery. *American Psychologist*, 68(8), 675–684.
- **Religiousness can moderate posttraumatic symptoms for child abuse survivors**
 - Donald F. Walker, et al, Changes in Personal Religion/Spirituality During and After Childhood Abuse: A Review and Synthesis, 1(2) *Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* 130-145 (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, D. M. (1994). The impact of Christian faith on the prevalence and sequelae of sexual abuse. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 9(1), 95–108

Spirituality and ACEs



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The Role of Religious Involvement in the Relationship Between Early Trauma and Health Outcomes Among Adult Survivors

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Spirituality & resilience



Psychology of Violence

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Divine Spiritual Struggles and Psychological Adjustment Among Adolescents Who Have Been Sexually Abused

Ernest N. Jouriles and Caitlin Rancher
Southern Methodist University

Annette Mahoney
Bowling Green State University

Colton Kurth and Katrina Cook
Dallas Children's Advocacy Center, Dallas, Texas

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Southern Methodist University

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Clergy Sexual Abuse Bibliography

by James S. Evinger, Rochester, New York
30th Revision (3/2017)

This extensive annotated bibliography on clergy sexual abuse provides resources on sexual boundary violations within the religious community. While the bibliography focuses on the position and role of clergy, the concept of sexual boundary violation by someone in a religious role is applied here to include other positions that also involve fiduciary trust and power (for example, a missionary or youth worker).

James S. Evinger has been involved with the prevention and intervention of sexual boundary violation cases in religious communities since 1995.



The bibliographv is divided into four parts: **Introduction. Part 1. Part 2. and Part 3.** Materials are arranged

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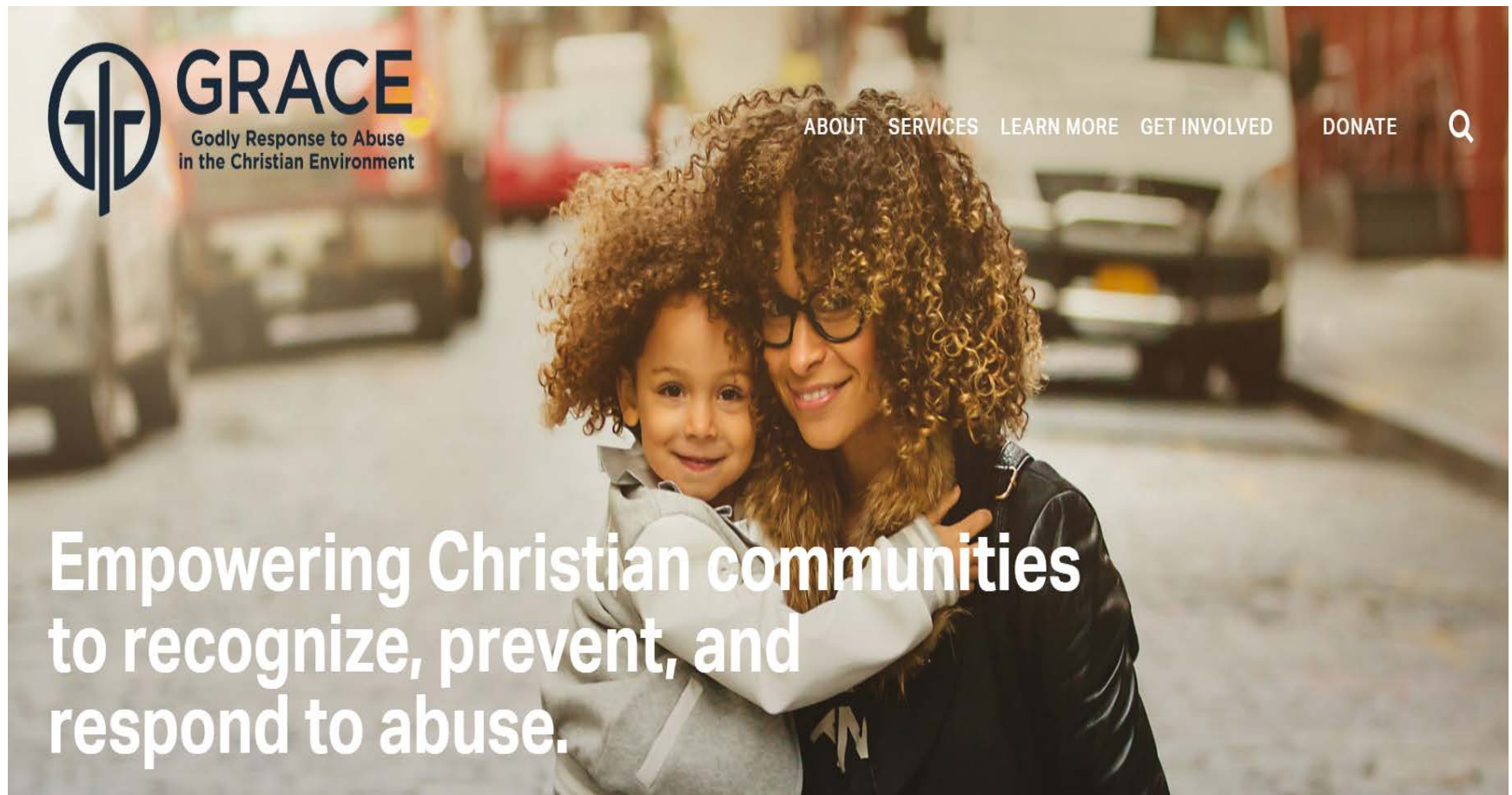
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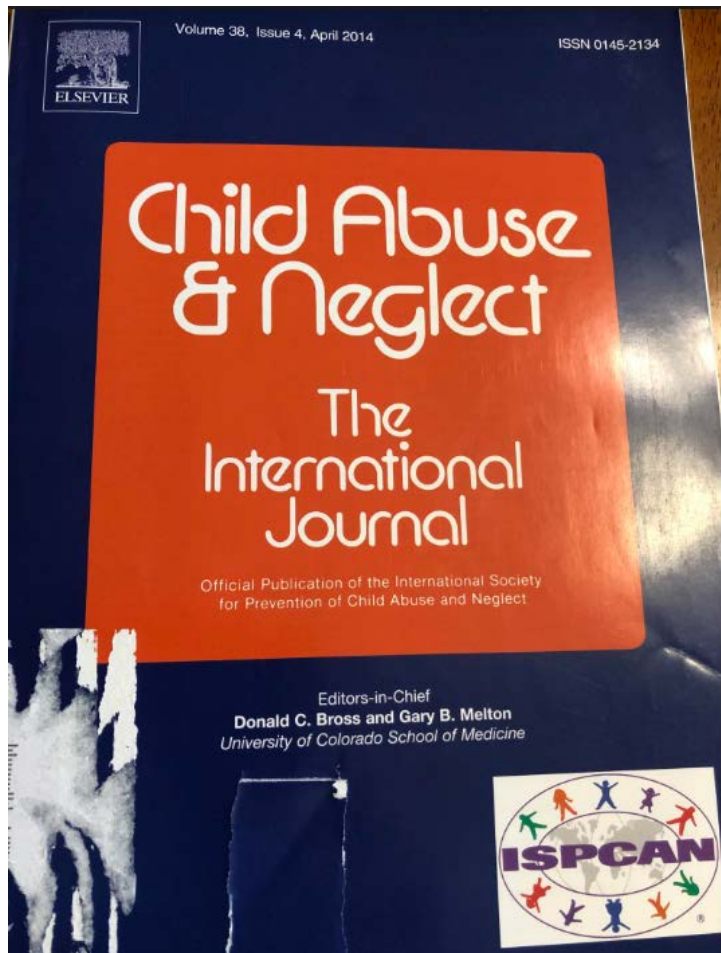
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“Till the night be passed”



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

— Dietrich Bonhoeffer