

### **When Faith Hurts: The Spiritual Damage Caused by Child Sexual Abuse (F8)**

Perpetrators, of child sexual abuse, often use religion to justify their abuse and most child molesters communicate toxic religious themes to the children they harm. As a result, many children suffer significant spiritual damage which impairs their ability to disclose abuse or to heal. In this workshop, attendees will learn of research documenting how offenders use religion in the abuse of children and the various blocks to disclosure it creates. The workshop also presents concrete reforms faith institutions need to implement to reduce, if not eliminate spiritual injuries that result from child sexual abuse.

## **When Faith Hurts: Overcoming Spirituality-Based Blocks and Problems Before, During, and After the Forensic Interview (Part 1 of 2)**

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*“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<sup>2</sup>*

A great deal has been written about the short and long term impact of child abuse on the victim’s mind and body.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, the impact of abuse on a child’s spirituality is a topic often avoided in professional literature or child abuse conferences. This silence inhibits our ability to interview and to otherwise work with children competently. This is because, for many children, the damage done to their spirituality is the overriding block that prevents them from disclosing or otherwise accessing needed services.

### *The impact of child abuse on spirituality*

There are a number of studies documenting the impact of abuse on spirituality. For example, a study of 527 victims of child abuse (physical, sexual or emotional) found a significant “spiritual injury” such as feelings of guilt, anger, grief, despair, doubt, fear of death, and belief that God is unfair.<sup>4</sup> The same study, though, found that survivors of childhood abuse report praying more frequently and having a “spiritual experience.”<sup>5</sup>

When the perpetrator is a member of the clergy, the impact on the victim’s spirituality may be even more pronounced. Clergy abusers often use their religion to justify or excuse their sexual abuse of children. According to one study, clergy in treatment for sexually abusing children believed that God would particularly look after the children they had victimized and otherwise keep them from harm.<sup>6</sup> Through their religious role, these offenders also engaged in “compensatory behavior” and believed that their good works in the community would result in God excusing their moral lapses with children.<sup>7</sup>

The religious cover used by clergy abusers is often communicated to the victims in a manner that irreparably damages their spirituality. Specifically, church attendance of these survivors decreases, they are less likely to trust God, and their relationship with God often ceases to grow.<sup>8</sup>

### *The role of spirituality in coping with abuse*

Some researchers have found that a victim's "spiritual coping behavior" may play either a positive or negative role in the survivor's ability to cope with the abuse and with life in general.<sup>9</sup> Victims of severe abuse may remain "stuck" in their spiritual development such as remaining angry with God. Children abused at younger ages are "less likely to turn to God and others for spiritual support."<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, even victims describing a difficult relationship with God "still rely on their spirituality for healing." Victims who experience "greater resolution" of their childhood abuse are able to "actively turn to their spirituality to cope...rather than attempt to cope on their own."<sup>11</sup>

### **Spirituality-Based Blocks**

The spiritual harm resulting from child abuse may pose several blocks inhibiting the child from disclosing the abuse during a forensic interview.

*Perpetrator induced.* The perpetrator may manipulate a child's faith in such as way as to convince the child that he or she is sinful. If a child has been taught that sexual conduct, even sexual thoughts are sinful,<sup>12</sup> the perpetrator may cite a child's biological reaction as proof the child is just as sinful, if not more so, than the perpetrator. A child growing up in a church teaching that homosexual conduct is sinful<sup>13</sup> may be told by the perpetrator "you see how your pee gets big when I touch it? You're gay. The pastor will condemn you if you ever talk about it."

A child's emotional reactions to maltreatment can also be manipulated. In one case, for example, a child recounted how she taught herself to initiate sexual contact with her father as a means of "getting it over with." Manipulated by her father, the child came to believe that her initiation of sexual conduct was sinful and that, even worse, she was *causing* her father to sin.<sup>14</sup>

*Child induced.* Even if a perpetrator does not manipulate a child's faith as a means of keeping the secret, the child's own analysis of church doctrine may result in a block preventing disclosure. I once worked with a 13 year old victim who was abused for several years by a man in the neighborhood. The child told me that the reason she didn't disclose the abuse for years is because, in her faith tradition, all sexual contact outside of marriage is sinful. Accordingly, she was convinced her parents and her church leaders would condemn her to the same extent as the perpetrator. In another case, a seven year old child asked the forensic interviewer "Am I still a virgin in God's eyes?"<sup>15</sup>

*Doctrinal induced.* In many instances a child may correctly understand a church doctrine and that doctrine makes it difficult to disclose. An adult survivor once told me he was sure he was doomed to hell because he could not forgive his father. The survivor cited scriptural references of the need to forgive even horrendous wrongs<sup>16</sup> and said that, try as he might, he simply could not forgive the torture he endured at the hands of his father.

*Institution induced.* Sadly, many institutions of faith are more interested in addressing the spiritual needs of perpetrators than they are victims of abuse. If a popular member of a congregation is accused of molesting a child, it is predictable that many members of the congregation will support the perpetrator.<sup>17</sup> Even if a perpetrator confesses to the crime, many faith leaders will urge reconciliation between the perpetrator and the child.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, many perpetrators count on the church's support. In the words of one child molester:

I considered church people easy to fool...they have a trust that comes from being Christians...They tend to be better folks all around. And they seem to want to believe in the good that exists in all people...I think they want to believe in people. And because of that, you can easily convince, with or without convincing words.<sup>19</sup>

The church's subtle, or not so subtle support of perpetrators may prevent children from disclosing or even cause children who have disclosed to recant. A child victim, noting that both of her pastors and all of the church elders were supporting the father she accused of molesting her, asked me boldly, "does this mean God is against me, too?"<sup>20</sup>

*Religious leader induced.* Numerous studies document that, when a faith leader is the perpetrator of abuse, the damage to the victim's psyche is particularly pronounced.<sup>21</sup>

*Interviewer induced.* Sometimes, the forensic interviewer's lack of comfort with a child's spirituality may cause a block. We once had a case called into our Center involving an 11 year old boy who was going to participate in a religious ceremony in which he drank poison and picked up venomous snakes. This family, including the child, took literally the verse from scripture that those with a strong faith can drink poison or be bitten by poisonous snakes without being harmed.<sup>22</sup> An interviewer offended by this practice who communicates this feeling to the child may unwittingly cause the child to shut down during the interview.

### *Conclusion*

Recognizing spirituality based blocks and problems in the forensic interview is the first step in empowering children to disclose their experiences. In the second part of this article, suggestions for actually overcoming these blocks will be offered.

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<sup>2</sup> DIANE LANGBERG, PH.D, ON THE THRESHOLD OF HOPE 131 (1999).

<sup>3</sup> See generally, ROBIN KARR-MORSE & MEREDITH S. WILEY, GHOSTS FROM THE NURSERY: TRACING THE ROOTS OF VIOLENCE (1997).

<sup>4</sup> Lawson, Drebing, Berg, Vincelle, & Penk, *The Long Term Impact of Child Abuse on Religious Behavior and Spirituality in Men*, 22(5) CHILD ABUSE & NEGLECT 369, 376-377 (1998).

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<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> Adam Saradjian & Dany Nobus, *Cognitive Distortions of Religious Professionals Who Sexually Abuse Children*, 18 J. OF INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE 905, 918 (2003).

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> Barbara R. McLaughlin, *Devastated Spirituality: The Impact of Clergy Sexual Abuse on the Survivor's Relationship with God*, 1(2) SEXUAL ADDICTION & COMPULSIVITY (1994).

<sup>9</sup> Terry Lynn Gall, *Spirituality and Coping with Life Stress Among Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse*, 30 CHILD ABUSE & NEGLECT 829 (2006).

<sup>10</sup> *Id.* at 838.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* at 839.

<sup>12</sup> Jesus told his followers: "But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Matthew 5:28 (NIV).

<sup>13</sup> *See generally*, Anonymous, *The Road to Healing*, CHRISTIANITY TODAY (April 2007) 56 (author is a married man who details his sexual attraction to men and the difficulties he has had in receiving counseling from conservative churches). There is research suggesting that, for male child sexual abuse survivors, "confusion about sexual orientation is a frequently reported and major negative consequence of their sexual history" and that "most men who have been sexually abused fear they are homosexual, and homosexual men wonder if the abuse made them gay." Maryam Kia-Keating, Frances K. Grossman, Lynn Sorsoli, *Containing and Resisting Masculinity: Narratives of Renegotiation Among Resilient Male Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse*, 6(3) PSYCHOLOGY OF MEN & MASCULINITY 169, 179 (2005).

<sup>14</sup> This is an account an adult survivor related to me.

<sup>15</sup> This example is drawn from a case called into the National Center for Prosecution of Child Abuse.

<sup>16</sup> Jesus warned his followers "if you do not forgive men their sins your father will not forgive your sins." Matthew 6:15 (NIV).

<sup>17</sup> Victor Vieth, *Keeping the Faith: A Call for Collaboration Between the Faith and Child Protection Communities*, 947, 949 in COOPER, ESTES, GIARDINO, KELLOGG, & VIETH, MEDICAL, LEGAL, & SOCIAL SCIENCE ASPECTS OF CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION (2005)

<sup>18</sup> *Id.* at 949-950.

<sup>19</sup> ANNA C. SALTER, PH.D, PREDATORS 29 (2003).

<sup>20</sup> This was a case I handled as a prosecutor.

<sup>21</sup> *See* notes 6-8, *supra* and accompanying text.

<sup>22</sup> Mark 16:17-18 (NIV): "In my name they will drive out demons, they will speak in new tongues, they will pick up snakes with their hands, and when they drink deadly poison it will not hurt them at all..."