

Spiritual Abuse Let's End It Now!

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“Spiritual abuse can be hard to identify but it is no less difficult to endure than any other kind of abuse.”

National Domestic Violence Hotline
1-800-779-SAFE



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Spiritual Abuse: The Definition

- Spiritual abuse, intended or unintended, occurs when a person in a position of power uses that power to manipulate or control the thoughts and/or actions of those under their leadership.
- This is often done by creating a toxic culture within the church or group by shaming or controlling members using the power of their position and neutralizing or eliminating dissent.



Spiritual Abuse: The Perpetrators

- Potential Spiritual Abusers can include:
 - Church Officials at all Levels of Leadership
 - Pastors
 - Elders
 - Deacons and Deaconesses
 - Sabbath School Teachers
 - Church Members who see it as their duty to make everyone live up to the Standards of the Church
 - Parents or other Caregivers



Spiritual Abuse: The Perpetrators

- The profile of Spiritual Abusers often includes:
 - Personal Insecurity
 - A Tendency toward Perfectionism
 - Performance Orientation
 - A Need for Power and Control
 - A Need to Look Good or Competent in the Eyes of Others
 - A Life Dominated by Fear rather than by Love



Spiritual Abuse: The Vulnerable

- Children Who:
 - Have parents who control their every thought and action.
 - Have not been taught to think for themselves, but who parrot their parents' words, thoughts and actions.
 - Have been raised with an unhealthy fear of an angry, vindictive, or arbitrary God
 - Children who have received confusing messages about God through conflicting words and actions from their parents or church leaders

Psycho-spiritual abuse of children

- Religiously-based psychological abuse of children can involve using teachings to subjugate children through fear, or indoctrinating the child in the beliefs of their particular religion whilst suppressing other perspectives. Psychologist Jill Mytton describes this as crushing the child's chance to form a personal morality and belief system; it makes them utterly reliant on their religion and/or parents, and they never learn to think critically on spiritual concepts they receive. Similarly, the use of fear and a judgmental environment to control the child can be traumatic. For example, frightening the child with hell or stoning for misbehavior creates trauma in the child.

Inspired Thoughts on Child Training

The education of children, at home or at school, should not be like the training of dumb animals; for children have an intelligent will, which should be directed to control all their powers. A child may be so trained as to have, like the beast, no will of his own. Even his individuality may be merged in the one who superintends his training; his will, to all intents and purposes, is subject to the will of the teacher.

Children who are thus educated will ever be deficient in moral energy and individual responsibility. They have not been taught to move from reason and principle. ... 3T, 132.



Spiritual Abuse: The Vulnerable

- Adults Who:
 - Have never fully differentiated from their parents (put away childish things) 1 Corinthians 13:11
 - Do not have a solid sense of themselves but are overly dependent on the thoughts and approval of others
 - Live by fear and shame
 - Have not experienced the love of God for themselves (Ephesians 3:16-19)
 - Have difficulty trusting enough or too much



Spiritual Abuse: Other Examples

- Slave Masters misused the Scripture “Bondservants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh with fear and trembling as to Christ” Ephesians 6:5 and thus misrepresented God.
- Abusive husbands use “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord” to control their spouses.
- Cult Leaders such as David Koresh manipulated his followers to the point of death convincing them that they are following God.



SDA University Research

- A study was completed of Oakwood, Andrews and Southern Adventist University Students between 2009 and 2012. The following are the results of the frequencies of spiritual abuse reported by students:

	Total	Males	Females
Spiritual Abuse	28.2% (132)	27.5% (36)	28.5% (96)



Spiritual Abuse Questions

- The Bible or other religious writings were used to make me conform.
- When you've been hurt, has religion been used to discount your reality (e.g. you're just not being submissive enough, you just need to pray more or have more faith)?
- As a child, were you shamed or condemned when you asked questions of your parents or spiritual leaders related to spiritual beliefs?
- Have your spiritual leaders ever told you that they are the only ones that can correctly interpret spiritual writings?
- My family would behave one way at church, synagogue, or temple and then behave differently at home. (Alpha = .900)

Spiritual Abuse and Intersectionality

- When one type of abuse occurs, others are likely to be present.
- Our research showed mild to moderate correlations between spiritual abuse and physical abuse (.351), emotional abuse (.474) and sexual abuse (.258).
- Spiritual abuse was also correlated with the following dependent variables: challenges in the areas of spiritual life (.362), relationships (.458), self-indulgence (.261), addiction (.297), emotional volatility (.375) and decreased academic performance (.219).



Other Examples of Intersectionality

- When a pastor sexually abuses a child or a woman in the congregation, not only is there sexual abuse, but also spiritual abuse.
- When a child is physically abused by a parent who represents God, the child's capacity to trust God is diminished.
- When non-Christians experience Christians as unloving, judgmental, rejecting or “better than”, they are being spiritually abused.



Signs of spiritual abuse between intimate partners include when an abusive partner:

- ridicules or insults the other person's religious or spiritual beliefs
- prevents the other partner from practicing their religious or spiritual beliefs
- uses their partner's religious or spiritual beliefs to manipulate or shame them
- forces the children to be raised in a faith that the other partner has not agreed to
- uses religious texts or beliefs to minimize or rationalize abusive behaviors (such as physical, financial, emotional or sexual abuse/marital rape)



Discounting a Victim's Experience

- In addition to whatever other intimate partner violence that has occurred, victims experience additional spiritual abuse when:
 - It is not safe for them to speak to church leadership due to patriarchal norms.
 - The victim's experience is discounted when they share it by statements such as “He is not that kind of person” or “I could never imagine him doing such a thing. He’s such a nice man.”
 - The victim is marginalized or removed from office.
 - The victim is disfellowshipped for being “a liar.”



Inspired Thoughts

- In matters of conscience the soul must be left untrammeled. No one is to control another's mind, to judge for another, or to prescribe his duty. God gives to every soul freedom to think, and to follow his own convictions. "Every one of us shall give account of himself to God." No one has a right to merge his own individuality in that of another. In all matters where principle is involved, "let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind." Romans 14:12, 5. In Christ's kingdom there is no lordly oppression, no compulsion of manner. The angels of heaven do not come to the earth to rule, and to exact homage, but as messengers of mercy, to co-operate with men in uplifting humanity. – {DA 550.6}



Inspired Thoughts

- Any man, be he minister or layman, who seeks to compel or control the reason of another man, becomes an agent of Satan, to do his work, and in the sight of the heavenly universe he bears the mark of Cain (Manuscript 29, 1911). – {1BC 1087.3}



In Summary

- Spiritual abuse can subtly but powerfully be one of the most harmful forms of abuse because it impacts many other areas of life.
- It has been found to be correlated with negative outcomes in several areas of students' lives.
- It is found largely in religiously conservative communities that have a high value on “being right” or “having the truth.”
- It can have lasting negative effects on a person’s ability to have a trusting, intimate relationship with God and with other human beings.

