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

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How does this relate to child protection?

• A girl with a question
• Faith based working group
• Keeping the Faith book chapter
• Augsburg study
• Spiritual injury articles
• Chaplains for Children

The agenda

• What is “spirituality?”
• The impact of abuse on spirituality
• Spirituality-based blocks to disclosure
• Role of spirituality in coping with abuse
• Addressing the spiritual needs of
  Survivors
  Offenders
• The faith community and prevention
  Policies & managing sex offenders
  Meeting the needs of maltreated children
Religion and U.S. culture

- More than 90% believe in God (Gallup 2011)
- 55% say religion is “very important” in their life (Gallup 2011)
- “Church membership today is far higher than it was in colonial times, and...the membership rate has been rising for more than 200 years.” Finke & Stark, *The Churching of America 1176-2005* (Rutgers University Press)
- 40% attend church weekly, 85% attend at least once a year (Gallup 2011)
- Sociologists predict a rise in religious involvement (aging population, rise of minorities, migration to more religious regions of the U.S.) Newport, *God is Alive and Well* (2012)

U.S. religious demographics

- 53.9% Protestant/Other Christian
- 23.9% Catholic
- 1.7% Mormon
- 1.7% Jewish
- 0.5% Muslim
- 2.4% Other/non-Christian religion
- 15.8% None/Atheist/Agnostic/DK
- 80% Christian, 95% of those who identify a religion describe themselves as Christian (Gallup 2009-2010)

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)
How do adult survivors define spirituality?

- 59% of adult survivors defined spirituality as being connected or in a relationship with God/Higher power
- 22% defined spirituality as being in touch with one’s true self or “feeling health in their soul”
  
  Joanette Robertson, unpublished study

The role of spiritual care

The impact of abuse on spirituality

- Subjects of most studies, victims or perpetrators have Judeo-Christian background
- 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.”
  
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 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?
  - Church provides “cheap Grace”, gullible religious people, and easy access to children

Perpetrators invoking God

- “Mr. Geier, now 59, said that between the ages of 14 and 15, starting around 1965, Father Murphy molested him four times in a closet at the school. The priest, a hearing man fluent in sign language, said that God wanted him to teach the boy about sex but that he had to keep it quiet because it was under the sacrament of confession. Mr. Geier said he felt sick.”
  - Laurie Goodstein, New York Times, March 26, 2010
- “Pedophiles need to become more positive and make the claim that pedophilia is an acceptable expression of God’s will for love and unity among human beings.”
How is religion used in the abuse of a child?

Jack Schaap, Indiana Pastor, Claimed Jesus Wanted Him To Have Sex With Teenage Girl

Pastor Schaap

- Schaap’s teenage victim “particularly susceptible to this offense due to her mental state.” [*Probation pre-sentence report*]
- Schaap sees an e-mail the teenager in his church is “frightened, confused, and emotionally traumatized” and was engaging in “self-destructive behaviors.”
- The e-mail notes the child has “a tender heart and…is still very teachable and moldable.”

Pastor Schaap

- One week later, Schaap begins to “counsel” victim
- Among the victim’s troubles, she discloses an emotional breakup with boyfriend
- Schaap transitions from pastor to friend to child molester—sexually assaulting the teenager in 3 states
Schaap’s letter to victim

“You opened your heart wide to me—you made me more than a Pastor/Rescuer—you made me your friend, your confidant, your beloved....In our ‘fantasy talk’ you have affectionately spoken of being ‘my wife.’ That is exactly what Christ desires for us. He wants to marry us & become eternal lovers! I tried to craftily catch your heart...Thank you for the privilege of helping a struggling teenager...You have such a wonderful life ahead of you. I must be careful not to spoil that with my selfish fantasy desires...When we get scared, Jesus sends his spirit to live within us...I must follow the example of Christ. I have espoused you to Him as a chaste virgin...”

Victim’s letter to Schaap

“I was in love with you and I would not admit that I was a victim...I also felt so guilty and partially responsible, like maybe it was my fault....Then I became really angry towards God. For a second I did not believe in God. I thought there can’t be a God because he would not let this happen and if there is a God, I hate him because he let this happen because you told me that he was OK with this...”

Victim’s letter to judge

“My entire life the Church has been my universe. Growing up, I watched (Schaap) in Church, listening to his sermons three times a week. I was raised by my parents and teachers to trust and obey my pastor. He was a celebrity to me, a father figure, and a man of God...I felt most safe when I was in Church. I first met (Schaap) when I was in kindergarten, and still had my baby teeth...”
Victim’s letter to judge

“As my pastor, I sought guidance and counseling when I was in need of help. He told me to confide in him...He told me I was special, that he loved me, and that he wanted to marry me. He told me that I was his precious gift from God...he made me believe what we were doing was okay and right in the eyes of God. I felt so special when he texted me from the holy alter during his sermons...”

Spirituality-Based Blocks to Disclosing Child Abuse

Vieth, When Faith Hurts: Overcoming Spirituality Based Blocks & Problems Before, During and After the Forensic Interview (Revised & Expanded), 2(10) CenterPiece (2011)

Perpetrator Induced

- Perpetrator manipulates child’s faith to convince the child that he/she is sinful (i.e. child’s biological reaction means child enjoyed contact as much as perpetrator)
- The victim who initiated sexual contact as means of “getting it over with.”
- Shattered Faith: “20/20” documentary
Shattered Faith

Child induced
- Even if perpetrator does not manipulate child’s faith, the victim’s own analysis of religious doctrine may cause a block
- Example: my conversation with a 13 year old
- Seven year old: “Am I still a virgin in God’s eyes?”

Doctrinal induced
- A child may correctly understand a religious doctrine—and may be tormented by its application
- The police officer in the back of the room
**Institution induced**

- Many faith institutions are more interested in addressing the spiritual needs of perpetrators than victims.
- Many members of a congregation will rally around the perpetrator.
- Even if a perpetrator confesses, many church leaders urge reconciliation (the Winona Sunday School teacher).
- The case of the crowded courtroom.

**Religious leader induced**

- Numerous studies document that when the perpetrator is a faith leader, the damage to the child’s psyche is particularly pronounced.
- One victim’s comments about the Eucharist.

**Recognizing spiritual blocks before the interview**
Look for clues

- Prior to conducting the interview, look at the intake form 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? (small towns have an advantage here; Missouri case)

Select an appropriate setting for interview

- CAC or child friendly room for interviews
- If an emergency interview is needed, be cognizant that a spirituality based block may be harder to overcome if the interview is in a church affiliated school or even a home filled with religious symbols Christa Brown, This Little Light (2009); DVD All God’s Children
- Example: “When daddy does sex to me I feel sad…My Mister Jesus he just watched and he didn’t make it stop.”
- Another example “just focus on the cross.”

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.”)
Addressing blocks in the interview

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 that someone will help him/her address spiritual questions

- Child: Am I still a virgin in God’s eyes?
- Interview asks the question back (“How come you ask that?”)
- 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
- Have one or more faith members as part of team
- Consider the value of spirituality in helping the child cope (i.e victim witness forms) (works at Mayo)
- Consider a clergy person as a support person
- The value of prayer before trial

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.”
- “Comforted by Velvet Paws”

More research

- Religious and spiritual forms of coping “contribute to decreased symptoms, greater self esteem, and overall greater life satisfaction.”
  — Bryant-Davis 2012
- Religiousness 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

Spirituality and ACEs
Religion and health

American Psychological Association publications note the importance of “story” to survivors

Collaboration with mental health (Bilich 2000)

- Clergy as consultant
- Therapist as consultant
- Referrals
- Limited collaboration
- Full collaboration
  - Therapy and spiritual guidance offered as integrated whole
The importance of sacred texts (Walker 2014)

- Many maltreated children abused or neglected by an offender who used a sacred text
- This damage can be “powerfully undone when challenged using other passages from clients’ religious and spiritual tradition.”
- The case of the minister 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

Diane Langberg (2017)

- “One of the other vital functions of the church, and one that I think we’ve forgotten, is the art of lamenting. People who have suffered severe trauma, such as sexual abuse, need to lament. Often, I will send them to the Psalms or to the Prophets, but I help them find words from Scripture to express their pain, their fear, their doubts, and sometimes even their anger at God. We see often in Scripture where the psalmist or the prophets call out to God, ‘Where are you?’ or ‘Why don’t you hear me?’”
Sometimes God doesn’t answer the "why" questions (Pargament 2005)

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

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 (church should help access mental health and medical services)
6. Listen and act (the hymn that hurt)
Meeting the needs of offenders


Offenders often assume gullibility

- “I consider 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.”
  - Salter (2003)
Understand that clergy abusers are just as dangerous as non-clergy offenders

- Share characteristics of other offenders
- More skilled/better educated
- Careful selection of victims
- More likely to use force
- Treatment the same
  

The John Jay Study

- Clergy engaged in religious/cognitive distortions including:
  - Victims “colluded” in their abuse
  - Victims “initiated” their abuse
  - Abuse was a “relationship”
  - Abuse was “good” for victims (e.g. Murphy)

Pastoral care for offenders

- Coordinate with sex offender treatment provider or develop “treatment network”
  - Mutter (2011)
- 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”
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.
• 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?
Policies for sex offenders seeking to join a church or attend services

- Compliance with the law. Speak to the offender’s probation officer and/or the local prosecutor.
- Consultation with the sex offender’s treatment provider. This will determine potential dangers and help the church in meeting the offender’s needs.
- Review court and investigative records. What charges were dismissed? What did the offender confess to?
- Determine level of supervision necessary. Low risk may require a shadow, high risk separate services.

Policies for sex offenders seeking to join a church or attend services

- Sex offender should not be allowed to attend services with victim. This is true even if low risk.
- If SO goes to different congregation—let them know of risks.
- Be sensitive to the fears of parents and the emotions of all survivors.
- Have a public congregational meeting.

Clergy need to improve their ability to respond to trauma

- Clergy more likely to have congregent 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

Military chaplains

Hospital chaplains
Fire department chaplains

Law enforcement chaplains

Corporate chaplains
Why not chaplains specially trained to address spiritual injuries?

Chaplains for Children/Keeping Faith

Chaplains’ training Mississippi
Chaplains’ training Nebraska

South Carolina CAC adds chaplain

Julie Valentine Center Chaplain
Resources

FaithTrust Institute

www.jewishsacredspaces.org

GRACE (www.netgrace.org)
OVC toolkit

Community education
Follow the CDC standards
• Screening/selection of employees & volunteers
• Guidelines on interactions
• Monitoring behavior
• Ensuring safe environments
• Responding to inappropriate behavior
• Training of employees, caregivers, youth

A great resource

• Companion guide for Synagogues to be published in 2018

The future
Why I went to seminary

Law & Gospel in cases of maltreatment

Ministering to sex offenders
Theological Article

Currents in Mission & Theology (2018)

- Articles on:
  - Coordinating spiritual & mental health care
  - Coordinating spiritual and medical care
  - Responding to problematic sexual behaviors in youth
  - Prevention

AVA & APSAC publications
Engaging theologically

“Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever receives one of these little children in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.’”

--Jesus (Mark 9:36-37)

Another resource

• Addresses sacred texts pertaining to children from six of the worlds largest religious traditions.

The importance of engaging theologically

• “Victor Vieth has challenged the church to not do anything new but rather something very old...to return to the message of Jesus and center our response on the words and actions of Christ.”

– P. 22
Early research is promising

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

“Till the night be passed”

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