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# Can Spirituality Help People Recover After Trauma?

## Spirituality as distinct from religion

Spirituality can be understood as the search for meaning, purpose and connection with self, others and the universe (Cadell et al., 2003). While spirituality is closely intertwined with religion, it may also be conceptualized as a distinct framework that exists without religion. Spirituality involves a person's sense of meaning, morality and their relationship to the world around them (Van Hook, 2016). It is also perceived as a uniquely subjective experience of God or a higher power (Farley, 2007). Spirituality can best be understood as the sacred experience of the *individual*. In comparison, religion is an external process that encompasses a community of believers with a shared set of doctrines, beliefs and ritual activities. Religion can also provide an *avenue* for spiritual experience (Fallot, 2007). In other words, religion is not necessary for one's spirituality or spiritual experience.

## Research on spirituality and trauma recovery

Survivors of trauma frequently report feeling alone, disconnected from reality and left without a sense of purpose (Park & Ali, 2006; Vis & Boynton, 2008). From a trauma perspective, spirituality can be viewed as a protection and resilience mechanism. It may enable the trauma survivor to seek a community of support, to find solace in their experience, to alter their perspective on what happened and why, and ultimately to help re-establish a sense of safety after trauma (Meichenbaum, 2008). Extensive research shows that spirituality can play a powerful role in assisting with the recovery from both daily challenges as well as extraordinary hardships (Cadell et al., 2003; Farley, 2007; Kushner, 2007; Van Hook, 2016). Several studies show a positive association between spiritual coping and improved physical and mental health outcomes in both the medically ill and survivors of trauma (Peres et al., 2007). In the face of adversity, engagement in spiritual practice can reduce feelings of helplessness as well as strengthen one's sense of purpose and meaning. Spiritual engagement can play a role in one's construction of *positive meaning* during the early stages of bereavement (Cadell et al., 2003). Actively connecting to and communicating with a "higher power" has been shown to cultivate traits of resilience by providing a path for individuals to move towards self-growth and healing, a phenomenon called "post traumatic growth" (Fallot, 2007).

## Trusted Advisor Abuse: When spiritual advisors abuse and institutions fail

On the other hand, many survivor groups feel betrayed by personnel and institutions of faith and may have strongly negative reactions toward spirituality, faith and similar points of view. Nearly every religion, from well-established and well-known ones to very small and recently founded ones, has been tainted by the bad acts of some of its practitioners, even at the highest levels. People who pretend to be trustworthy have instrumentalized spirituality and faith harmfully. When persons inside a spiritual or religious organization use aspects of that faith to gain access to vulnerable congregants, to excuse their unsafe behavior and/or to hide their crimes, they are engaging in **trusted advisor abuse**.

Trusted advisor abuse occurs when any person in a position of trust uses that position to abuse and control another person. The abuse is usually relational, whereby the person abused feels a special bond or connection to the trusted advisor. The person abused may not see the abuse until long after it has started. Or the victim may immediately know something is wrong but cannot tell anyone, due to social and cultural messages about "trust" or "authority" or "compliance." Trusted advisor abuse reveals one of the great unspoken truths: **No one should be trusted blindly**.

The victim often feels responsible for the abuse, experiencing emotions like guilt or embarrassment. Some unethical professionals cut off their patients' connections to family and friends. Others have groomed their patients into becoming compliant or dependent on them. Others have physically threatened or blackmailed their patients into obedience. Of course, these approaches evolve over time and anyone may be at risk!

In all situations of trusted advisor abuse, there is a lack of accountability, whether on the part of the perpetrator(s) or the oversight system(s), or both. Becoming aware of your rights and the remedies available can stop trusted advisor abuse. Knowledge and resources will allow you to take action!

To find out more about trusted advisor abuse, go to <http://www.complaintweb.trauma-informed-california.org>



## Exploring Your Spirituality

As humans, we are naturally inclined to seek out meaning and purpose in our existence and the world. Spirituality is powerful in that it transcends the material world around us. Our core beliefs and values provide us with vital energy, meaningful purpose and the stability to balance highly complex, modern lives (Van Hook, 2016). Depending on the person, spirituality can manifest itself in several ways including a greater sense of self, taking risks, finding intimacy with others (and feeling safe doing so) and a strong sense of wellbeing (Farley, 2007; Van Hook, 2016 ).

Depending on the individual, avenues for spirituality could include prayer, meditation, engaging in religious or spiritual rituals, reading scripture, and practicing mindfulness, yoga, music or art (Mattis, 2002; Kushner, 2007). Whatever the preference, those who invite spiritual growth into their lives can create more space for post-traumatic growth. We encourage you to explore the remainder of this handout, delve into your spirituality with a brief self questionnaire and learn more about the topic of trusted advisor abuse as it pertains to professionals in spiritual and religious organizations.

## Spirituality Self Questionnaire

### Is a spiritual path a part of my own personal trauma recovery?

Certain words may be a source of light in your life, while others may elicit painful or unpleasant feelings. Which words resonate positively with you? Are there words that trigger negative responses? Consider categorizing each word into positive, negative or neutral. After creating your lists, think about how each category relates to your recovery, your safety, and your spiritual self.

Abundance	Conscious
Acceptance	Corrupt
Affirmations	Curse
Agape	Divine
Agnostic	Empathy
Approach to life	Energy
Atheist	Eternal
Attunement	Ethics
Awareness	Faith
Awe	Fear
Beliefs	Flow
Belonging	Forgiveness
Blessing	God
Body	Grace
Bounty	Greed
Care	Grounding
Clarity of purpose	Growth
Collective	Grudge
Comforting	Guilt
Community	Healing
Compassion	Heaven

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Higher Power	Reflection
Holy	Sacred
Hope	Secrets
Humanism	Secular
Infinite	Sense of awe
Interconnectedness	Shaman
Intuition	Shame
Judgment	Sin
Karma	Soul
Kindness	Source of values, morals
Life force	Spirit
Light	Totem
Lost	Toxic
Love	Transcendent / Transcendence
Loving kindness	Transformation / Transformative
Mantra	Trust
Meaning	Truth
Meditation	Tuning in
Morals	Unconditional love
Mystery	Understanding
Oneness	Unity
Peace	Unknown
Perceptions	Unworthiness
Prayer	Value system
Principles	Wellbeing
Protection	Wisdom
Punished	Wonder
Purpose	Zealot

