

Spiritual Harm & Abuse Scale

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Spiritual Abuse Definition

“A form of emotional and psychological abuse perpetrated by a religious leader/group and/or with a religious or spiritual component, usually involving coercion or control.” (adapted from Oakley et al., 2018 and Swindle, 2017)

- Can be in addition to other abuses: sexual, domestic, child abuse, etc.
- Added the word “harm” in addition to “abuse” to reflect a continuum of impact
- No scholarly definitional consensus of spiritual abuse (some scholars use “religious abuse”)
- Distinguished from other types of abuse by a religious component of one sort or another

Effects of Spiritual Abuse

- Physical illness (Ward, 2011)
- Emotional trauma (Swindle, 2017)
- Religious figure sexual abuse causes roughly same distress as parental sexual abuse (Stevens et al., 2019)
- Secondary trauma for clinicians working with SA (Gubi & Jacobs, 2009)

Study Population (N = 3,222)

- 51% Cis Female, 41% Cis Male
- 82% Straight
- 87% White
- Median age 39.5
 - SD 12.7
- 87% Raised in Christian home
- 57% Protestant
 - 2% Catholic
 - 16% Nones
 - 14% Atheist/Agnostic
 - 6% Other Christian
- Slightly theologically liberal
 - (M = 4.5, range 1-7)

Six Factors / Subscales

- **Maintaining the System:** Both leadership and group members tend to act in ways that maintain the status quo. This can take many forms: victim-blaming, shunning, protecting leaders from consequences, social isolation, and more.
- **Embracing Violence:** These communities may see violence in many forms as a necessary part of God’s plan for the world. They may lack concern about what is appropriate for children in terms of fear, and they may often employ terror and horror to motivate religious commitment or moral behavior.
- **Controlling Leadership:** Pastors/leaders may be significantly exalted above parishioners and considered to have a “direct line” to God. They may have increased access and control over the daily lives and minutiae of group members.
- **Gender Discrimination:** Women (usually) can be denied service or involvement opportunities or be discriminated against more broadly. Other types of discrimination

were not common enough in this sample for statistical inclusion, but are listed in the “critical items.”

- **Internal Distress:** The most common responses to spiritually abusive experiences show up on this scale: depression, anxiety, self-image issues, social isolation, anger, lack of meaning, and more.
- **Harmful God-image:** In essentially all Christian understandings, God is seen as benevolent and loving (at least in theory). For clients scoring high on this scale, God has become the villain of their story in some meaningful way.

Prevalence of Spiritual Abuse Findings

- While not representative, significant convergence with Oakley & Kinmond (2014), who interviewed 500+ UK active churchgoers, for instance...
 - “Unable to express unhappiness in church” 59% at least sometimes, identical numbers
 - “Unable to raise questions or issues” 70% at least sometimes, identical numbers
- A full half of respondents were taught at least once or twice that they would be risking Hell if they left their particular church or group.
- Four in ten report being pressured to forgive an abuser while the abuse was ongoing at least once or twice.
- Fully half of LGBTQ respondents reported being made to feel shame specifically over their naturally occurring sexual desires, not actions, “all the time.” 91% report this happening at least once or twice.
- Seven in ten report developmentally inappropriate vivid depictions of Hell, Satan, or demons being taught to young children (71% at least once or twice), with one-third reporting this often or all the time (34%).
- Over half (56%) report seeing leadership or the group not only protecting but elevating abusive individuals at least once or twice.
- Over half (52%) report having been blamed for harm that they suffered, rather than seeing those who harmed them receive the blame at least once or twice.
- Only about a quarter (27%) said that critical thinking was never discouraged by their church or pastor. A third reported that it was discouraged often or all the time.
- A full two-thirds of women report being denied opportunities to serve because of their gender at some point in their church experience. Only 6% of men report the same. And 4 in 5 women report being treated as “less than” because of their gender at least once or twice (82%), with 43% experiencing this often or all the time.
- Being deterred from seeking mental health treatment, counseling, and/or medication -- 50% at least once or twice.
- One-third reported that mental or physical problems were interpreted as spiritual or moral weakness often or all the time. Only 24% say they have never experienced this.
- Almost two-thirds (65%) of respondents report “being made to feel shame over naturally occurring sexual desires (not actions)” at least sometimes, with 22% reporting this as happening all the time. Millennials reported the highest incidence of any generational groupings, including more than their younger Gen Z counterparts.

Limitations and Future Research

- Largely white Protestant and ex-Protestant sample -- possible that other types of spiritual abuse are more common elsewhere
- Validity needs to be established empirically (my next step)
- Prevalence data compared with Oakley & Kinmond’s survey
- Representative population prevalence data
- Relationships with other religions or trauma measures

Spiritual Harm & Abuse Scale - Clinical Screener (SHAS-CS)

Instructions: Below you will find a series of statements about potentially harmful experiences you may have had throughout your life in Christian churches or groups (missions organizations, Christian schools, parachurch organizations, etc). Please indicate the extent to which you experienced each across your lifelong church/group experience: **1 = Never, 2 = Once or twice, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = All the time.**

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|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Being expected to consult my pastor/leader before making non-religious decisions | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. Behavior being excessively monitored by my pastor or group members | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3. My pastor/leader explicitly claiming to speak on God's behalf | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4. Being expected to follow my pastor/leader's personal rules/advice around dating, marriage, and sex | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5. Experiencing extreme pressure to take on a role of pastor, missionary, or other spiritual leader | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6. Vivid descriptions of Hell, Satan, Demons, or the end of the world being taught to young children | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 7. Seeing Scripture used to justify physical violence | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 8. Terror or horror being used to motivate religious decisions | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9. Seeing Scripture used to justify abusive parent-child behavior | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 10. Being shunned or ignored by my pastor or group | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 11. Being pressured to forgive an abuser while the abuse was ongoing | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 12. Seeing the leadership or group protecting or elevating abusive individuals | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 13. Being blamed for harm that I suffered, rather than blaming those who harmed me | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 14. My church community abandoning me in a difficult time | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 15. Being denied opportunities to serve because of my gender | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 16. Being treated as "less than" because of my gender | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

The following are internal states that you may have experienced as a result of negative religious experiences. Please indicate the extent to which you experienced each as a *result of negative religious experiences* throughout your life:

1 = Never, 2 = Once or twice, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = All the time.

17. Feeling isolated	1	2	3	4	5
18. A lack of self-worth	1	2	3	4	5
19. Sadness over the loss of my faith/religious community	1	2	3	4	5
20. Self-hatred or self-loathing	1	2	3	4	5
21. Having trouble navigating life outside my religious community	1	2	3	4	5
22. A lack of spiritual direction or purpose	1	2	3	4	5
23. Anger upon reflecting on negative religious experiences	1	2	3	4	5
24. Personally avoiding religious activities or settings to reduce distressing feelings	1	2	3	4	5
25. Feeling betrayed by God	1	2	3	4	5
26. Feeling as if God harmed me directly	1	2	3	4	5
27. Distrust of God	1	2	3	4	5

Finally, please check all of the following that has ever applied to your experience in Christian churches or groups:

- I was treated as “less than” because of my race or sexual orientation
- I was pressured to stay in an abusive marriage by religious leaders
- I was deterred from seeking mental health care
- I had unwanted sexual experiences in a religious context
- I was taught that I would be risking Hell if I left my particular church
- I was taught to distrust my emotions or intuitions
- Mental or physical problems were interpreted as spiritual or moral weakness
- Love or acceptance was only offered if I performed well enough spiritually/morally
- I was made to feel like I was the crazy one for having doubts or questions
- I developed physical ailments from the stress of conforming to the leader or group’s expectations
- I was “cut off” by more religious family members

References / Relevant Research

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