

Understanding Spiritual Abuse

Spiritual Abuse

Churches and places of worship should be environments in which both adults and children are encouraged to develop spiritually, emotionally and relationally, in safe and healthy circumstances. Generally, many places of worship are healthy and helpful environments. However, sometimes cultures in places of worship are not healthy. As a result, individuals may be harmed or damaged. There has, rightly, been much work done on issues of child sexual abuse.

More recently the focus has been placed on safeguarding adults at risk of harm within faith-based contexts. However, by contrast, the characteristics of a healthy place of worship and the psychological and emotional abuse that can sometimes occur within faith-based contexts have not been explored. Similarly, very little work has been conducted about how to support people who have been damaged by difficult or abusive experiences within places of worship or faith communities. This Practice Guide begins to explore some of the key questions about what is increasingly being referred to as 'spiritual abuse'.

What is spiritual abuse?

One of the main problems lies in understanding exactly what we are talking about when discussing unhealthy contexts or cultures and unhelpful and damaging psychological and emotional behaviour. Across the four UK nations, there are varying government definitions of the major recognised forms of abuse. However, currently there is no single agreed definition. The term spiritual abuse only began to be used to describe the behaviour described above in the last 15 to 20 years. Understandably it is often misunderstood.

Spiritual Abuse is defined as: "Coercion and control of one individual by another in a spiritual context. The target experiences spiritual abuse as a deeply emotional personal attack. This abuse may include:-manipulation and exploitation, enforced accountability, censorship of decision making, requirements for secrecy and silence, pressure to conform, misuse of scripture or using the pulpit to control behaviour, requirement of obedience to the abuser, the suggestion that the abuser has a 'divine' position, isolation from others, especially those external to the abusive context." (Oakley, 2013 in Oakley & Kinmond, 2013 p21).

To begin with it is important to understand that spiritual abuse is a form of psychological and emotional abuse that takes place within a faith context. Sufferers therefore experience being controlled, coerced and pressurised within churches and places of worship. It is important to realise that there is no evidence that its proponents necessarily intend to harm others. Instead, controlling and unhelpful

ways of behaving might develop unwittingly and, once a pattern is established, it continues.

However, as with other forms of abuse, it is also possible that other forms of abuse will be occurring alongside spiritual abuse (such as sexual or physical abuse or neglect) – sometimes, indicators of these other forms of abuse are the first that bring attention to wider spiritually abusive practices. Much of the information in this Help! leaflet comes from the book ‘Breaking the Silence on Spiritual Abuse’.

What are the key characteristics of spiritual abuse?

So what does spiritual abuse look like? This is quite a difficult question to answer. It may help to use the acronym BADIS (Oakley & Kinmond, 2013) which sets out its key features (of which some or all may be present):

Blame

In an unhealthy context a great deal of censorship is likely. People may themselves be blamed for any issues or problems they identify. They often find that they are unable to raise issues or to ask questions without being accused of either threatening unity or causing trouble. Generally, those in an unhealthy context feel pressurised to be silent and not to raise concerns. Practice Guide Spiritual Abuse is defined as: “Coercion and control of one individual by another in a spiritual context. The target experiences spiritual abuse as a deeply emotional personal attack. This abuse may include:-manipulation and exploitation, enforced accountability, censorship of decision making, requirements for secrecy and silence, pressure to conform, misuse of scripture or using the pulpit to control behaviour, requirement of obedience to the abuser, the suggestion that the abuser has a ‘divine’ position, isolation from others, especially those external to the abusive context.” (Oakley, 2013 in Oakley & Kinmond, 2013 p21)

Accountability

This is being required, forced or coerced to share personal details or to include another person in your decision-making. It is important to note that accountability can be positive if the person involved chooses to engage with it, without feeling pressurised in the relationship.

Damage

One of the key features of spiritual abuse is the damage that it does to the individual, which often occurs through manipulation, fear and shame. Manipulation may be connected to someone feeling pressured to perform different actions or behaviours. They may also be expected to be extremely committed to the place of worship, even if this means they are unable to fulfil other

commitments. People often feel scared of the consequences of not conforming. They may also feel shame. Sometimes they will experience acceptance, followed by rejection, as a way of controlling their behaviour.

Inability to work with others

Often a spiritually abusive individual will find it very difficult to work with others and to be able to take on-board alternative opinions. There is often absence of team decision-making.

Scripture

When used out of context to pressurise individuals to behave in a particular way or to make a particular decision. Misuse of scripture is extremely important to understand because individuals with a faith will hold their sacred texts in very high regard. If passages are used to control or manipulate behaviour this can be very difficult to argue against and may be very damaging in the long term. A warning sign of spiritual abuse is when scripture is used to support an individual's personal agenda. Instead, it should focus on the needs of others and should encourage people to consider and choose their responses for themselves.

Does spiritual abuse happen everywhere?

Spiritual abuse can happen in any place of worship or spiritual context. Spiritual abuse can happen anywhere - but it does not happen everywhere.

Who are the abusers?

Although it is suggested that leaders perpetrate spiritual abuse, it is important to understand that anyone can be a perpetrator of abuse (of any form), and leaders can be spiritually abused by others as much as those without any position can abuse others in faith communities.

What helps to prevent spiritual abuse?

As with all forms of abuse it is not easy to prevent spiritual abuse but there are some suggestions that might help. Again an acronym may be helpful here. ESSTA (Oakley & Kinmond, 2013) can be used as a quick reminder:

Empowerment

It is important that we encourage individuals within spiritual contexts to develop autonomy. That means healthy spiritual contexts encourage people to develop as individuals who can think for themselves and are able to express disagreement or concern.

Supervision

Many places of worship do not have regular supervision or support for those in paid or unpaid leadership roles. Supervision should be a healthy practice within spiritual contexts whereby discussions of helpful and unhelpful behaviours can be held.

Support

It is essential that support is developed for those who have experienced spiritual abuse. This may help to prevent further abuse as people begin to understand spiritual abuse better.

Training

Training is important to ensure that individuals keep developing and operating safer practices. A feature of training should be healthy team working, as team leadership seems to be a protective factor against spiritual abuse.

Awareness

There is a need to increase awareness around spiritual abuse as it is still little understood. Individuals may be unaware of the impact of their behaviour on others, or of alternative methods of behaving. Further, there is a need to raise awareness of scripture and sacred texts in order that individuals become more aware of when these are being manipulated.

What can I do if I think I am experiencing spiritual abuse?

If some of what has been written in this leaflet resonates with you then please be assured that you are right to be concerned and that you are not alone in your experience. Although there are currently few services for those who have experienced spiritual abuse there are some places that you can go for help and support and these are listed at the end of this leaflet. What can I do to help and support others who are experiencing spiritual abuse? The most important thing in providing support is in responding well when people share their experiences. As spiritual abuse is still relatively unknown many people may not really understand what is happening to them. Therefore, the most important thing is to listen and to respond supportively to the individual. If your church has a safeguarding policy which includes spiritual abuse you can follow the guidelines in this with the person's consent.

What if I am a Safeguarding Coordinator?

As spiritual abuse is still a relatively new form of abuse to be identified it may not yet feature in your safeguarding policies. If you want help and support in

developing your policy to include spiritual abuse please contact thirtyone:eight for advice and guidance.

Are there other forms of abuse linked to spiritual abuse?

There is a growing understanding of ‘Child Abuse Linked to Faith and Belief’. Some harmful practices to children have been shown to have their basis in either cultural practices or faith belief systems, such as beliefs in witchcraft and spirit possession. It is important that we develop good practice in areas such as deliverance and healing ministries. This good practice is needed to protect both children and adults from harm and damage. This form of abuse is often extreme, but has a clear spiritual element within it.

Useful Readings:

Exposing Spiritual Abuse. Mike Fehlauer (2001)

Breaking the silence on spiritual abuse. Lisa Oakley and Kathryn Kinmond (2013)

Spiritual abuse: Unspoken silence. Shawn Nelson (2015)

The subtle power of spiritual abuse. Jeff VanVonderen (2005)