

Responding to Religious and Spiritual Trauma

One of the areas of psychological trauma that doesn't seem to get as much attention as other areas, is that of religious trauma. I also include here the idea of spiritual trauma. This article gives an introductory overview of some of the literature on the topic. The aim is to help us validate religious trauma that unfortunately many people experience, to know what some of the signs might be, and to start a conversation about how we might respond in a helpful way.

Spirituality is universal

Spirituality is a “universal dimension of human experience” (Cook, 2004, p.548).

Spirituality is an important part of what makes us human, and that within each of us is an innate drive that motivates and drives us towards meaning-making and relationships (Fuller, 2008).

In Aotearoa New Zealand more than many other places in the world, we have an awareness and appreciation of the of the human spirit. It is understood that for healthcare to truly care for the whole person, that includes care of wairua or the spiritual dimension.

This means that without acknowledging and maintaining the wellbeing of the spiritual aspects of ourselves, the whole house of wellbeing or hauora will collapse.



Religion and spirituality

Whilst many people connect to a particular religious organisation, or group. many others prefer to describe themselves as ‘spiritual but not religious’ (Casey, 2013).

Therefore religious experiences can be considered a subset of the broader picture of consciousness as spiritual awareness.

Trauma event and Response

Before we delve any deeper into this topic, for clarity, I suggest that we separate out the *activity* engaged in by the religious person or organisation from the *impact* on those that are the recipients of those messages or activities.

We know from research that some people may experience the same event without exhibiting signs and symptoms of traumatization, whereas others will.

From one perspective, certain actions or experiences in and of themselves are perceived or positioned as abusive or traumatic. In the DSM-5 for example, very specific criteria are outlined as to what a ‘traumatic event’ is.

These include threat to life, physical harm and sexual violence. Only when a person has experienced these very specific kinds of events, can the symptoms they are experiencing afterwards be considered to be physiological trauma responses.

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The model that we most often use here is called Te Whare Tapa Whā which means the four sided house. One side of the house, recognised as just as important as the other three, is tapa wairua.

In an increasingly secularised society, there has been a growing tendency to separate the two, and for there to be an increasing social acceptability of ‘spiritual’ experiences (Hay and Socha, 2005)

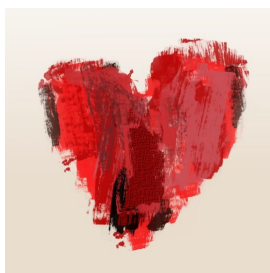
However, other approaches to defining trauma take the position of the experiencer, rather than the type of event. For example, SAMHSA's definition refers to any event that is "physically or emotionally harmful" (2014).

In other words, whether something is traumatic or not, is not defined as inherent in the act itself, but the harm that was caused.

Prevalence

One of the reasons for focussing on religious trauma in this issue is that it is more prevalent than we might have thought.

As a leading author on the topic states: "Religious trauma is more prevalent than the research suggests and often is a contributing factor to many of the problems that bring people to therapy, including depression, anxiety, and relationship difficulties" (Stone 2013, p. 324).



Whether you work in a therapeutic profession or not, it is obviously important to know about how to talk to people about their spiritual lives, and also to be aware of how traumatic experiences in a spiritual context may have affected them.

Definitions

Religious trauma is a phrase that I use to describe a wider phenomenon than religious abuse, which tends to refer to intentional

interpersonal acts of abuse perpetrated by religious authority figures or within a religious context.

Though definitions vary, the topic of religious trauma was first framed in the 1990s. Since then, a respected and well-used definition was provided by Stone (2013) who conducted an extensive review of the literature on the topic.

Religious trauma is thus defined as:

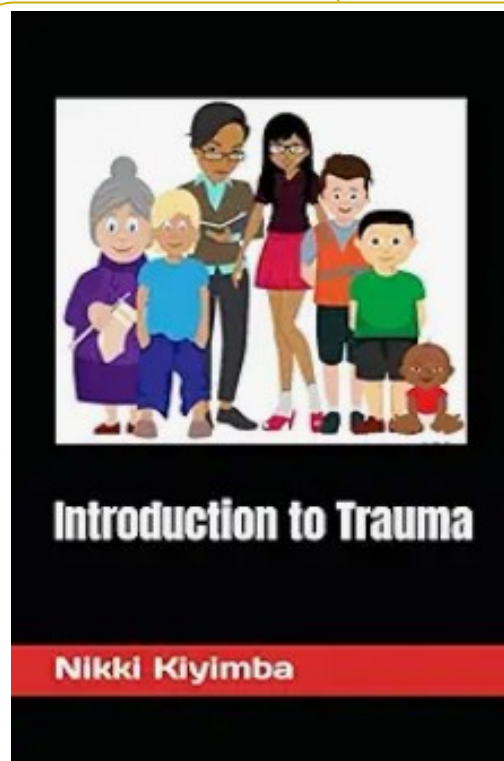
"pervasive psychological damage resulting from religious messages, beliefs, and experiences" (Stone, 2013, p.324).

Trigger events could be singular or an accumulation of multiple events. Some of the ways that traumatic experiences might be understood as distinctly religious are:

- Where the traumatic experience is believed to be a 'act of God' such as an earthquake.
- Where the traumatic experience is the result of the actions of a person with religious authority.
- Where the traumatic experience is claimed to be inflicted for religious reasons.
- Where the traumatic experience is justified by an authority figure on religious grounds. (Panchuk, 2018, p.512).

Although it is not as widely discussed as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), religious trauma shares many of the same symptoms.

These include avoidance of things that are reminders of the trauma, and intense distress if exposed to them (Griffith, 2010).



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Because people who have been affected by religious trauma avoid reminders, they often find that they are not able to engage or participate in religious activities as they had previously (Panchuk, 2018, p. 513).

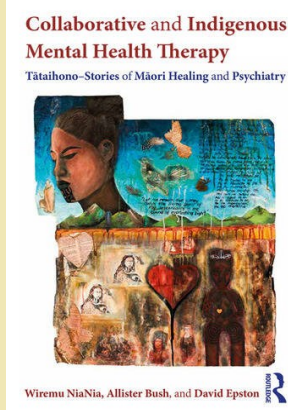
Spiritual trauma

In addition to the more frequently written about area of religious trauma, it is possible for people to have experiences that would meet official criteria as 'traumatic' in other contexts outside organised religion.

For example, children or teens who naturally have abilities to 'see' into the spiritual plane may be very frightened by those images and voices.

In the absence of understanding adults around them to support and guide their spiritual gifts, they may experience confusion, isolation, distress and self-loathing.

Collaborative and Indigenous Mental Health Therapy Tātai-hono – Stories of Māori Healing and Psychiatry
By Wiremu Niania, Allister Bush, David Epston



Available from various places including Fishpond.co.nz

In Aotearoa New Zealand there is beginning to be more mainstream understanding of these 'matekite' gifts. For more information you might be interested to read a very valuable and well-written book; Collaborative and Indigenous Mental Health Therapy. [see side box on previous page for more information].

This book was written from the perspectives of a western medicine trained psychiatrist and an indigenous Māori tohunga or healer, with spiritual gifts of sight into the spirit world.

Spiritual Abuse

There are a lot of definitions and overlapping descriptions of religious trauma and spiritual abuse. The definition used here is:

“Spiritual abuse is coercion and control of one individual by another in a spiritual context. The target experiences spiritual abuse as a deeply emotional personal attack”

(Oakley and Kinmond, 2013, p.21).

Spiritual struggle

Another concept worth mentioning is that of religious or spiritual 'struggle'.

According to Fitchett, and Risk (2009) the features of this are “feeling angry with God, or abandoned or punished by God” (p.1).

Spiritual struggle may be the result of spiritual trauma, or may be caused by other factors such as seemingly unanswered prayers or challenges in life for which there seems no help or assistance from the divine.



Religious Trauma Syndrome

The term Religious Trauma Syndrome was first used by Winell (1993). It was used as a position from which to focus mainly on the process of recovery after a person had been involved in a 'toxic religious community'.

I believe there are religious organisations and leaders who are not aware of the harm they are causing, and conversely may believe that they are doing good.

If like me, you have spent many years as part of a religious community, and would not at the time, have considered that space 'toxic', I invite you to reflect on whether that would be the experience of others in that community.

I suggest we now consider some of the characteristics of spiritual abuse:

- Enforced accountability
- Censorship of decision making
- Pressure to conform
- (Mis)use of scripture to control behaviour
- Manipulation and exploitation
- Required secrecy and silence
- Required obedience to abuser
- Abuse positioned as 'divine'
- Isolation from external others

(Oakley and Kinmond, 2013).

Even for those who have experienced sexual abuse from religious leaders within organised religion, some research reports that:

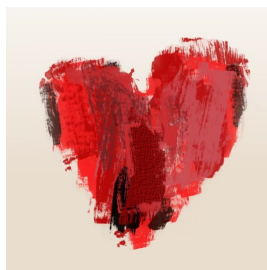
“The impact on the soul is often subtle and grows more painful and debilitating as time passes. many survivors have said that this spiritual pain has been worse than the emotional pain” (Doyle, 2009, p.240).

Think for yourself

One of the key areas to begin recovery from a situation of spiritual abuse is to (re)learn how to 'think for yourself'.

As a psychologist working in the field of trauma, I am aware of how many people with traumatic experiences, have 'learned' through consistent abuse and neglect not to listen to, or even be aware of, their own thoughts, emotions, or desires.

It makes sense in an abusive context that someone may need to suppress their own needs in an attempt to pacify an abuser and to keep themselves safe.



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As such, learning to think for yourself, listen to the needs of your body, and to be able to recognise and accept emotions and desires, is an intrinsic and important part of healing from trauma.

Working safely with spiritual abuse

Some people who have experienced spiritual abuse will never again have anything to do with organisations or people who have anything to do with religion or spirituality (Ward, 2011).

For those who encounter the spiritually wounded in professional work, therefore, a trauma-informed approach is essential, just as we would take with any other form of trauma.

However, there is a little more to the impact on a person where spirituality is concerned. An essential aspect of understanding spiritual abuse, is how central a person's spirituality is to their sense of self and identity.

It has been explained in this way; that an attack of any kind on a person's spirit is **“an attack on the heart of a person, on their integrity, their wholeness”** (Jenkins, 2011, p.29).

Thus, what we need to be aware of is that spiritual harm can severely damage a person's belief in themselves as good or worthwhile or containing any virtue.

Not only will their beliefs about themselves be damaged through spiritual trauma, but also their perceptions about others.

As I have written elsewhere, “the assumptions, or beliefs that the person has about the world, themselves, and others are drastically affected and changed by the traumatic experience” (Kiyimba et al., 2022).

With religious or spiritual trauma, we can also include in the list of belief changes, a change in perceptions and beliefs the person may have about God, or whichever universal or spiritual forces the person previously may have related to.



Healing from spiritual trauma, like other traumas therefore involves a process of ‘relearning the world’ (Kiyimba, 2017).

Who

It is widely believed that only those in leadership or with positions of authority or power in religious organisations engage in spiritual abuse.

However, **“any individual within a spiritual context can abuse another”** (Kinmond and Oakley, 2015, p.150).

Intentions

There is a difference between “the intention to perform behaviour and the intention that

behaviour will be harmful” (Kinmond and Oakley, 2015, p.150).

Some authors argue that those who spiritually abuse others may not intend to cause harm and could be unaware they are doing so (Blue, 1993).

This is just as important to consider in secular environments as well as spiritual settings.

Whether we are the helper or the helped, the guide or the guided, the teacher or the student,

we are human, and are inevitably full of our own beliefs and assumptions.

Especially for those in caring professions there is a desire to help or even ‘fix’ others. This comes from a good intention, but we still need to be very self-reflective and cautious.

The righting reflex

In an attempt to emancipate, liberate or otherwise heal and free others, there is the danger of engaging in what is known as the ‘righting reflex’.

This term refers to the “desire to fix what seems wrong with people and set them promptly on a better course” (Miller & Rollnick, 2002, p. 6).

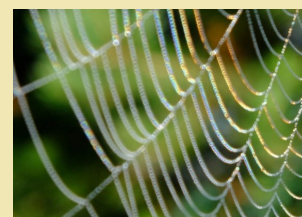
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Whatever our beliefs, let us not point the finger at others, but soberly consider what our own 'righting reflex' might be.

Learned compliance

Supporting someone who has experienced spiritual or religious trauma is not likely to be a straightforward linear process. Additionally, everyone's experiences, personal make up and ways of managing their symptoms will be different.

One of the common situations that can arise as a result of interpersonal abuse, is that the victim learns to be subjugated to the person who has authority or power over them.



The person learned during their abusive relationship that the safest way to behave would be to comply with the powerful person's demands.

In a professional or personal supportive relationship, the recovering person may fall back on this as a way to keep themselves emotionally, mentally, physically or spiritually safe.

It's important to look out for this, because it is likely to look like friendliness, compliance and agreeableness (Ward, 2011).

Survival strategies such as this are sometimes referred to as 'fawning'. Problematically, it can seem like the person is consenting and 'on-board', whilst all the time they are in 'submission mode'.

In this frame of mind, a person may try to make changes at a pace they are not really com-

fortable with, or ready for. They may reveal more than they feel comfortable with because they want to please. Or they may become resistant or hostile in an attempt to push people away and avoid further pain (Kinmond, and Oakley, 2015).

Power dynamics

Coercion and control are usually central factors at play in situations where one person, group or organisation is exerting control over another. In the case of spiritual abuse, this can be exacerbated by a belief that the person holding the more powerful or authoritative position has a divine right to that position.

In the case of psychological trauma generally, two factors are important to take note of. These are:

- Safety
- Choice

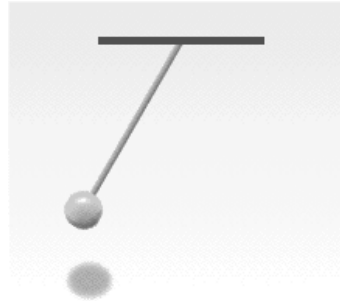
Not having choice or control, and not being safe are defining aspects of a traumatic situation. In the case of spiritual or religious trauma the same applies.

Within the wide range of experiences and encounters that may be experienced as traumatic in religious or spiritual contexts, common traits will be that an actual or perceived sense of safety and choice will be diminished.

In situations of spiritual abuse, forced accountability is one of the elements that restricts a person's autonomy to make their own choices. The impact of forced accountability is often a feeling of being pressurised (Kinmond, and Oakley, 2015).

Supporting recovery

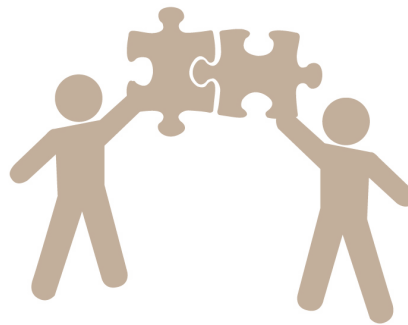
When supporting a person recovering from these kinds of power dynamics, they may switch between wanting to be 'in charge' or allowing you to dictate the agenda.



This pendulum swing is a habit that has been learned through the interpersonal trauma of spiritual abuse and is likely to be replayed in other interactions.

In a supportive restorative relationship, this tendency to swing between submissive victim mode and controlling aggressor mode can also happen. Some of the healing work occurs in finding ways to collaborate in the relationship by sharing decisions.

Making joint decisions, even in small things, helps to recalibrate the power imbalance and to move away from the abuser or abused dichotomy.



Censorship

Censorship is another aspect of coercive control. This occurs when someone may be silenced or the information shared with that person is controlled and restricted (Appleton, 2003).

For example, sometimes people find that if they raise a concern, it quickly gets turned back on them so they become the problem. So, they learn not to say anything.

Control of decision-making is another aspect of censorship in spiritual abuse situations.

This might appear in the form of leaders requiring people to speak to them first before making major decisions.

At face value this may be presented as a way of being supportive. However, loss of control of making one's own decisions can lead to over-dependance on others, and censorship of those who verbalise an alternative preference.

Where censorship extends to relationships outside the religious organisation, this can mean the person is vulnerable to only hearing the voices of the few, and not having others who may be able to offer an alternative perspective.

Supporting someone to express their own preferences, and to allow them to make choices for themselves is a process and takes time. Depending on the length of time someone has been subject to spiritual abuse, learning to think independently, and to trust themselves to make good choices can be an uncertain and anxious thing to try to do initially.

Building an atmosphere that is accepting and does not censor the person in recovery can aid this process. Both verbal and non-verbal communication will send a message about whether certain topics are okay to talk about.

Additionally, spiritual abuse often leaves a person feeling shame and guilt and perhaps a level of moral deficiency. Creating an environment of 'unconditional positive regard' (Rogers, 2007) will be helpful in making a space for that person to find their voice.

By Nikki Kiyimba.
