**Broken, but… Recovery and Growth after Spiritual Trauma**

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[Cover suggestion: Stock images from internet showing broken ceramic, then repaired]

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# Introduction

## Kintsugi 金継ぎ

Broken and useless? No, broken and better.

This is illustrated by the ancient Japanese art of kintsugi. Broken ceramics are repaired with golden (kin) joinery (tsugi). The precious binds the broken.

The early history of Kintsugi is a matter of legend. It may have originated when the Japanese *[shōgun](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sh%C5%8Dgun" \o "Shōgun)* [Ashikaga Yoshimasa](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ashikaga_Yoshimasa" \o "Ashikaga Yoshimasa) sent a damaged Chinese [tea bowl](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chawan" \o "Chawan) back to [China](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/China" \o "China) for repairs in the late 15th century. When the precious bowl was returned, the fragments had been joined with metal staples. This prompted Japanese craftsmen to develop a more [aesthetically](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aesthetics" \o "Aesthetics) pleasing means of repair, with the cracks filled with gold.

Kintsugi is a rich metaphor for the healing journey after spiritual trauma. The broken pieces of our lives are not considered worthless and discarded. Emotional scars are not hidden, but are obvious and accepted. Repair requires patience, since it is a slow and careful process. Our struggles become the catalyst for change and improvement. Beauty comes from brokenness.

# BROKEN

A ceramic can be an object of great physical beauty. Valuable. But inevitably fragile. Equally to be human is to be vulnerable. We can be injured physically, emotionally and spiritually. Many followers of Christ suffer the effects of abuse.

Kintsugi is an art, but more. As a philosophy, *kintsugi* is similar to the Japanese philosophy of *[wabi-sabi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wabi-sabi" \o "Wabi-sabi)*, which encourages us to embrace the flawed or imperfect.  As a [philosophy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosophy" \o "Philosophy), it treats breakage and repair as part of the history of an object, rather than something to hide or gloss over. All this has profound resonance with the healing journey after a traumatic experience.

# Chapter 1 The landscape of abuse and trauma

## Introduction

Life can be cruel. Countless challenges come and sometimes, even worse, life-altering trauma. How do we cope? The first step after a traumatic experience is to regain functioning. But this is not easy. Setbacks happen—like playing the children’s game of ‘snakes and ladders’.

When trauma happens in a spiritual setting, the process of recovery is even more problematic. Healing is needed at multiple levels. If there are physical injuries, then appropriate medical treatment may be necessary. Almost always, in severe cases of abuse, there is an overwhelming emotional impact. This may require years of therapy. But it doesn’t end there. The spiritually abused need to regain trust in religious organisations, being able to receive ministry, and ultimately having a healthy image of God. Difficult? Of course!

How might such a process be navigated? This book is my answer. I hope it will enable you to better understand the impact of spiritual trauma. Psychological theory and theological insights intersect with problematic symptoms to offer a way forward. There are many points of reflection and practical suggestions to achieve post-traumatic spiritual growth. Hopefully it will not be a return to the ‘old you’, but a better—even transformed—‘new you’.

As a clinical and forensic psychologist, I spent thousands of hours helping people deal with broken relationships, psychological distress, addictions, and abusive and neglectful families. They included believers who had been treated badly. Bullied, exploited and betrayed by religious leaders. Their courage and determination to regain a better life, with greater spiritual insight, is admirable.

I have also treated many offenders, so I have some appreciation of spiritual abuse from both sides.

Have you experienced spiritual trauma? Hopefully you will grasp the possibility of spiritual growth, perhaps first glimpsed through ‘the eyes of faith’. Indeed, I believe this is what God intends.

This book may also be of interest to church leaders and those offering pastoral care. There may even be a few readers who admit that they were perpetrators of spiritual abuse and would like to do what they can to repair broken relationships. I have tried to keep all of you in mind. Read on to see if I have succeeded.

*Reflect*: Think about a time when you faced a major crisis. What did you find helpful? Unhelpful? Did you talk to God and draw on spiritual resources? Did you seek professional assistance to process what happened.[[1]](#endnote-1)

*Affirmation:* While I cannot change the past, I can make changes now which will change my future.

## What is spiritual trauma?

What exactly is spiritual trauma? I will offer a brief working definition: it is the trauma that results from spiritual abuse. ‘Spiritual abuse’ means abuse, manipulation or exploitation that claims a religious justification or takes place in a church context.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Trauma is always overwhelming … an impact to the whole self and an inability to integrate the experience.[[3]](#endnote-3) It is not just the original incident, no matter how devastating, but how it persists in intrusive and distressing images, flashbacks, experiences of reliving and sleep shattered by nightmares. In this way trauma becomes a ‘double wound’.[[4]](#endnote-4)

*Reflect:* Have you been overcome by a negative experience? Do memories return as flashbacks? Do you feel the event was recorded in your body? What ‘triggers’ you? Do you feel haunted by ghosts?

Over 30 years ago David Johnson and Jeff Van Vonderen wrote *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*.[[5]](#endnote-5) While this book has been influential, the examples given in the book tend to be on the mild end of the spectrum. They include a woman with depression being told to memorise praise verses from the Bible; wives told to never question but to submit to their husbands; men forbidden to ask questions in a Bible study; females told to not wear make-up as a sign of submission; and legalistic expectations placed on believers. The authors examined subtle indicators of unhealthy church practice leading to spiritual abuse. Wade Mullen wrote *Something’s Not Right: Decoding the Hidden Tactics of Abuse and Freeing Yourself from its Power*[[6]](#endnote-6)which exposed some of the indicators of religious manipulation.

It is not always easy to distinguish milder forms of spiritual abuse from conflict which is present in all churches. Insensitive behaviour is common and it hurts! And yet, if a person is emotionally fragile or highly sensitive they may feel a traumatic reaction. There may be many reasons for this, such as vulnerability from family of origin, or a sensitive temperament. Robustness, a personality characteristic, is variable.

*Principle:* It matters how we treat people with whom we disagree.

However, a trauma reaction would be unusual with subtle expressions of abuse.

Usually less severe forms of spiritual abuse do not target an individual. Preaching may be overly authoritarian, but this is to a whole congregation. Or the negative effect is secondary: for example, when a pastor has an affair with a member of their congregation, all members of the church suffer some impact through the crossing of ethical boundaries.

Poor emotional control can lead to spiritual abuse.

Albert was the senior pastor of a large independent church. At times he was highly stressed and did not manage his frustration well. Things came to a head with the church board when his secretary took stress leave after he shouted at her in a staff meeting. [[7]](#endnote-7)

Certainly milder forms of spiritual abuse, including unrealistic expectations, are more obvious to committed members, those on the inside of a church or religious organisation.[[8]](#endnote-8) This can lead to ‘burn-out’, which is often a reason why people change churches.

We can think of spiritual abuse as lying on a spectrum from mild to moderate to severe. Johnson, Van Vonderen and Mullen focus on the mild end of this range. Barbara M. Orlowski published her doctoral research on why people leave churches and she found a major theme was escaping a feeling of control.[[9]](#endnote-9) Lisa Oakley and Justin Humphreys in *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse: Creating Healthy Christian Cultures[[10]](#endnote-10)* has a focus on moderate abuse using the coercion-control model. They include in their definition:

manipulation and exploitation, enforced accountability, censorship of discernment decision-making, requirements for secrecy and silence, coercion to conform, control through the use of sacred texts for teaching, requirement of obedience to the abuser, the suggestion that the abuser has a ‘divine’ position, isolation as a means of punishment, and superiority and elitism.[[11]](#endnote-11)

They also mention public shaming. At some point a line of criminal behaviour can be crossed.[[12]](#endnote-12) More towards the severe end, and the likelihood of a trauma reaction is increased.

Another way to make a distinction between spiritual distress and trauma is in the effect on an individual. Mild forms of spiritual abuse will generally lead to symptoms of depression, anxiety, perhaps panic attacks, indications of grief and loss. Trust may be shattered. But in general symptoms respond to treatment and do not persist indefinitely. There is a natural process of emotional healing.

But trauma leads to a different place. The healing process breaks down and an individual often becomes stuck.

There is also a risk that if we acknowledge only more subtle forms of manipulation and spiritual abuse, it can trivialise more severe abuse.

There are many potential sources of trauma. The possibilities include the death of a child, physical or sexual assault, motor vehicle accidents, natural disaster, violence by a romantic partner, war-related conflict and assault by a stranger. One thing is common. The event leads to a new normal in which there is no going back. Life is never the same again.

Maja was robbed by a junkie who threatened her with all a blood-filled syringe. She was terrified of the risk of getting AIDS. Later a psychiatrist diagnosed her with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

While such traumas may have spiritual implications, the context is not essentially spiritual.

Generally, my focus in this book will be on trauma reactions from what most people would agree is severe abuse. The magnitude of the injury is a strong predictor of a traumatic reaction, though it is important to acknowledge a subjective dimension.[[13]](#endnote-13) After the experience of severe abuse everything changes. Memory can have gaps like ‘Swiss cheese’. It becomes hard for the survivor to give a coherent account of what happened. An individual’s understanding of ‘how things work’ is shattered and relationships can be ruptured. Clearly there is no clear line between spiritual abuse and spiritual trauma. And I hasten to add that any abuse is toxic and has a damaging effect on the spirituality of all involved.

## Spiritual abuse occurs in a variety of settings

Spiritual abuse occurs in a variety of settings, including those dedicated to religious activity such as a church or temple or synagogue. One example is what has been termed the ‘bully pulpit’ in which a preacher or TV evangelist manipulates followers for financial gain.[[14]](#endnote-14) Religious instruction or spiritual guidance may mask perverse agendas. A teacher in a Christian school may initiate sexual activity with a student. Commonly an abuser will twist sacred texts or religious beliefs to justify unethical or criminal behaviour. Power, deception and abuse are often entangled.[[15]](#endnote-15)

There has not been a lot written about the more severe forms of spiritual abuse. Psychologist Diane Langberg, author of *When the Church Harms God’s People,* has treated survivors of war, sexual abuse, domestic violence, prejudice, hatred and human trafficking.[[16]](#endnote-16) Langberg’s book has a biblical perspective on related issues but does not cover the practical challenges of recovery and growth.

## Spiritual abuse is common

It appears that misconduct by religious leaders has always been an issue. In the Old Testament Hophni and Phinehas were religious leaders who failed their religious duties and engaged in sexual abuse (1 Samuel 2:12–17, 22). The prophet Ezekiel brought accusations against the spiritual leaders of the Israelites (Ezekiel 34:1–6). Jesus reserved his most scathing criticism for the pharisees, the religious leaders of the Jews, who overstepped their authority (Matthew 23). He warned about false prophets who came in sheep’s clothing but were ravenous wolves (Matthew 7:15). The early church set out qualifications for leadership which included a range of indicators of emotional and spiritual maturity, including being kind to others (2 Timothy 2:24).

Instances of severe spiritual abuse are found in large religious organisations, such as church denominations or welfare and educational agencies. Abuse also occurs in relatively isolated cults, where the power of a spiritual leader is difficult to challenge. The victims may include both adults and children, the elderly and people living with disability. And extreme abuse can lead to the death of followers, as in the case of the mass murder/suicide at Jim Jones’s settlement in Guyana in 1978.

As I think back on my early years as a Christian (about 50 years ago), I now recognise that nearly all my mentors engaged in some form of sexual misconduct. For example, after I was ordained an Anglican priest, I had close colleagues, including three bishops, who had illicit sexual relationships. This boundary crossing is possibly the most common and potentially one of the most damaging breaches of trust.

When I was in the USA for graduate studies, I was the rector of Paul’s Episcopal Church, Millis, a parish just outside Boston. At a diocesan election I voted for David E Johnson to be the bishop of the Diocese of Massachusetts. A few years later he had an affair and committed suicide while in office.

In my early days as a Christian I attended evangelistic meetings of Ravi Kumar Zacharias, who had an international ministry. In 2015 he led an organisation with an annual revenue of nearly $26 million. His schedule of international travel enabled him to sexually exploit women on various continents.

While I did not have a trauma reaction to any of these incidents, I suspect that some people who were more closely associated with these leaders did have a trauma reaction. I mention this because those of us who are involved in Christian leadership know how often ethical standards are breached. Inevitably it has a negative impact on those who follow Christ.

The church I currently serve had a difficult period in which a lay preacher sexually abused a number of young children in the congregation. He went to jail for his offences. Even now, 30 years later, emotional scars remain in the congregation.

## Spiritual abuse is not limited to sexual misconduct

Instances of severe spiritual abuse are not limited to sexual misconduct. Many years ago in Canberra, Australia (where I live), a Pentecostal church grew quickly, with hundreds soon in attendance. A relatively young and inexperienced senior pastor encouraged members to use their home equity to get loans to support the ministry of the church. Predictably, it all collapsed, and numerous church members were ruined financially. The pastor was clearly manipulative and spiritually abusive. Many faithful Christians had their trust shattered and possibly some lost their faith.

There are threats that we face as a society. Terrorism is often based on extreme religious beliefs. It is easy to think of examples of mass killing in the name of Allah. September 11. October 7. Some attacks are so well known as to be identified by the date of the atrocity. Hardly a week goes by without something happening somewhere in the world, brought into our lives by the TV news.

Nancy lost her husband, a medical doctor, who was killed in a bomb blast that destroyed an abortion clinic. Three members of a fundamentalist sect were later convicted of the attack.

Such violence is an expression of spiritual abuse—dishonouring the name of God and leaving a wake of trauma to random victims.

Religious faith should be a source of consolation, purpose and community. Typically, the practice of various religions is associated with high ideals. The positives usually outweigh any negatives. Religion and spirituality can be a source of comfort, peace, community and inspiration in life. But falling short is easy. And one possibility is spiritual abuse, with resulting trauma.

Agata joined a Christian youth group. The youth pastor said that she should go out on a date with Brett, effectively deciding what should be her choice. Agata complained that she did not find Brett attractive, but the youth pastor claimed divine authority for his ‘guidance’. Needless to say the relationship between Agata and Brett soon failed with emotional damage to both teenagers.

Laura E. Anderson is a psychotherapist and trauma researcher. She made a significant contribution to understanding spiritual trauma with *When Religion hurts You: Healing from Religious Trauma and the Impact of High Control Religion* (2023)*.* She recognised characteristic symptoms of spiritual trauma and offered practical strategies for recovery. She wrote from a personal experience about the devastating impact of a fundamentalist ‘purity culture’.[[17]](#endnote-17)

*To Do:* Think about the following warning signs. Have you been in religious circles in which any of the following attempts to control you were evident:

* clothing
* behaviour
* sexuality
* decision making
* choice to have children or not
* finances.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Tick any of the above that you have experienced. Did you recognise a ‘red flag’ of warning at the time?

An example of control and submission becoming extreme, certainly controversial, is the shepherding or discipleship movement which began in the 1970s in charismatic circles. The motive was one of accountability and deeper discipleship. However, it became so controlling that a ‘disciple’ could not make personal life decisions, including marriage, house moves, and career choices, without their shepherd’s permission. Some shepherds demanded tithes of their followers. One of the original five members, Derek Prince, withdrew in 1983, stating his belief that ‘we were guilty of the Galatian error: having begun in the Spirit, we quickly degenerated into the flesh.’ Often it is the most committed to following Christ who are most vulnerable to being spiritually exploited.

We can also appreciate that for the person who has suffered spiritual abuse, his or her experience with the abuser or the abusive organisation might not have been all bad. Love was experienced. This often led to a strong emotional attachment which meant that the abuse, when it came, was tolerated far too long.

## A common mistake

Orthodox theology is no protection against spiritual abuse. Nor is success in ministry. Bill Hybels founded Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago, USA, in 1975. His church grew to mega-church status, having 25,000 worshippers each Sunday. Hybels was one of the most influential evangelical pastors in the world. He developed the model of a seeker-friendly church which influenced thousands of congregations. However, allegations of sexual relationships with female church members and staff emerged in 2014. Initially Hybels denied the allegations and blamed the women. He tried to make himself appear a victim of a conspiracy. However, a third-party investigation concluded that the allegations were legitimate. Hybels also had a pattern of intimidating and verbally attacking members of his church staff.

The focus of this book will be on spiritual trauma within the Christian community. While spiritual abuse, as a corruption of faith, is widespread and impacts all religions, I can only talk about what I know best. I am a Christian since my conversion five decades ago. I have served in a variety of ministry roles in churches in Australia and the USA. I have taught in seminaries and I was a research professor in practical theology at Charles Sturt University. My beliefs can be described as broadly evangelical, which I hope I practice with a generous spirit.

*Reflect*: Abuse is always personal. Recall any experiences in which you felt diminished or emotionally injured. Did you find yourself reacting emotionally months or even years later? Can you see a religious or spiritual dimension? You might find it helpful to journal (write about) the experience(s) with a focus on your emotional reactions.

Do you know a perpetrator of abuse? What is your emotional response to anyone who commits severe spiritual abuse?

*Recommendation*: If you have a significant trauma history, you should (a) work slowly through this book and the exercises over a couple months; or (b) read through the book quickly to get an overall perspective and then read it again slowly and take your time working through the exercises. If, at times, you feel overwhelmed by the process, this is a sign that you are moving too quickly. Slow down. If you find the content or exercises emotionally overwhelming, stop and talk to a mental health professional. Think about finding a balance between risk and safety. If there is too much risk you will find yourself avoiding the exercises; but if there is too much safety then progress slows down and becomes difficult. Getting the most out of this book will take commitment and considerable effort.

## About vulnerability

Not everyone is equally vulnerable to being abused. It is not the child’s fault that he or she is born into a family with domestic violence. This and other forms of abuse are external to the child but increase vulnerability to further abuse. An adult with a trauma history is more likely to have relationships that repeat patterns of abuse, such as romantic relationships with alcohol-dependent or violent spouses.

This is not about ‘blaming the victim’. Perpetrators know who to target. Consider the following to be ‘warning flags’ to indicate that someone is more likely to be groomed for abuse:

### (a) Individual factors

Younger children may not recognise inappropriate behaviour or be able to report it. As well, children with physical, intellectual or developmental disabilities may have a limited capacity to understand or communicate abuse. Children with low self-esteem and minimal confidence can be more easily manipulated or coerced.

If a child has not been taught personal boundaries and safe touch, he or she may not recognise intimate activity as abuse. Also, a child who has experienced prior violations is at a higher risk of being re-victimised.

Children vulnerable to abuse are often those who are isolated from peers, either playing alone or belonging to the ‘rejects group’. Often vulnerable children are attention-seeking or highly needy. Note that behaviour problems can be an attempt to gain negative attention. A perpetrator may also target those with low self-esteem by making them feel special.

At the other end of the age spectrum, older people are also more vulnerable to abuse. Research would also suggest that culturally and linguistically diverse communities are vulnerable.

### (b) Family-related factors

Children who are left unsupervised or whose caregivers are inattentive are more vulnerable. Unmonitored internet use increases the risk of online predators. Caregivers may have substance abuse issues, which can create unsafe environments. A related factor is poverty, which limits the resources available to a family. At worst financial hardship can lead to situations where children are exploited by parents for financial gain. I assessed a family where the parents sexually exploited their children to support their drug addiction. Indications of poverty related neglect include torn clothes, unwashed appearance, and a lack of provision of food at school.

Exposure to violence at home can make a child more vulnerable to grooming by abusers. Sometimes there is a climate of unquestioning power and controlling relationships. Family instability through frequent changes in residence or homelessness adds a dimension of risk.

Mental illness in caregivers may result in poor child protection and supervision. Frequent changes in caregivers or family breakdowns can increase risk. The introduction of a new step-parent, especially if it occurs often, can be a problem.

### (c)Environmental and social factors

Children with few trusted adults or limited social connections may have no one to confide in. This can lead to an over reliance on people in authority, such as teachers, coaches, religious leaders or family friends, who can abuse such trust.

### (d) Cultural and societal factors

In some cultures, talking about sexual abuse is discouraged, making it harder for survivors to speak up.If child protection laws are weak or poorly enforced, children are at greater risk. Abuse is more likely to occur in communities in which sexual exploitation or coercion is overlooked or accepted. In some societies there are ideologies justifying ‘power-over’.

There are a number of factors that increase the risk of a child or adult being vulnerable to abuse. The above attempts to be reasonably comprehensive, but not exhaustive. It helps to be aware of dynamics that contribute to abuse.Bottom of Form

*Reflect:* Look carefully over the above risk factors. Tick any that apply to you or your family. If you want to better understand your family dynamics, I recommend doing a genogram. See if you can identify any intergenerational themes. For how to do a genogram, Google genogram and see: [Genogram Symbols and Meanings | EdrawMax Online](https://www.edrawmax.com/article/genogram-symbols.html)

*Important advice*: If you identify an intergenerational pattern of sexual abuse or have children in your care it is important that you teach them to be body and safety aware. Google for important principles including: teaching correct names for body parts, places no one except a parent should touch, the nature of consent, how to distinguish safe and unsafe secrets and how to identify trusted adults.

Some people are more vulnerable, as we have seen, as they are more targeted for abuse. Sadly, this can include people who are re-traumatised.

Suzanne grew up in a home in which her father was a violent alcoholic. He would get in a rage and hit anyone with arm’s reach. After Suzanne married a Church of Christ pastor, she found that he became ‘physical’ in arguments. She said, ‘It’s like reliving my childhood. As the old saying goes, out of the frying pan and into the fire. I have to do something now because I am frightened for my life.’

If you realise you are at risk of abuse you should have an additional layer of caution. Perhaps be more vigilant in situations that might become compromising.

Juana was unhappy in her marriage. She saw a pastoral counsellor, who offered to teach her how to please her husband sexually. Naturally this was professionally inappropriate and led to sexual boundaries being crossed. She was vulnerable because her older brother had sexually abused her when she was nine years old.

Grant Sinnamon has proposed seven stages of sexual grooming:

(1) victim selection

(2) research

(3) creating personal connection (trust)

(4) meeting needs, establishing credentials

(5) priming the target

(6) instigating sexual contact; and

(7) controlling the victim.

This can include establishing trust with the target and their family and social network; normalising intimate interactions; blurring the lines of what is and is not appropriate behaviour; desensitising the victim to the warning signs of abuse or exploitation; and creating a psychologically, socially, emotionally and often physically reinforcing experience.[[19]](#endnote-19)

*Reflect:* Langberg suggested some useful questions to ask yourself. For example:

* What did I learn about power growing up?
* What did I learn about empathy? Relationships?
* How did I respond to people who confronted me?
* What did I learn about male and female roles?
* How did my family respond to people in authority?
* How did my family react to difficult emotions such as rage, shame, humiliation?
* What bad behaviours do I engage in but rationalise?
* Where do I feel powerless? How do I respond to the feeling?[[20]](#endnote-20)

There has been considerable research on styles of attachment. This refers to how a young child relates to caretakers or parents. Healthy or secure attachment can be seen in non-anxious attachment and a capacity to explore. Anxious attachment can be characterised by distancing self-containment or dramatic attempts to gain attention. There is also a chaotic form of attachment which is generally the result of abuse and neglect in the home. The important point of attachment theory is that trauma affects the way we connect with others, both as children and later as adults.

*Reflect:* This might be a good time to think about what attitudes, emotions, and practices no longer serve you well. What can you ‘prune’ from your life?

*Risks:* There are considerable risks for those who have suffered severe trauma and these include: re-enactment with harm to others, self-destructive acts, and re-victimisation by abusive people.

## A survivor’s story**[[21]](#endnote-21)**

I think it is important to hear from survivors of spiritual abuse. This is the story of Dr Isabelle, a doctoral-level psychologist (not her real name):

In the weeks before my experience of spiritual abuse began, the image of Jesus in the boat in the middle of a storm kept coming up. Jesus said to his disciples in the storm: ‘Don’t be afraid,’ he said. ‘Take courage. I am here!’ (Matthew 14:27 NLT). I wish I could say I held onto this scripture during what I experienced, but when my own confusion, disorientation and isolation overwhelmed me, I forgot about it. In fact, I became confused and uncertain about who God was.

I had looked up to Pastor Andrew for many years, as a godly man and a passionate, Spirit-filled preacher. This image was shattered when my husband, Caleb, made a significant life decision that Andrew disagreed with. Andrew responded in an authoritative, controlling and aggressive way, initially in a small meeting. Across the sermons that followed, Andrew publicly condemned the decision and claimed rebellion, likening us to Ananias and Saphira, although without naming us specifically. He named me in sermons as a psychologist whenever he brought up psychology being ‘of the devil’ and directly challenged me on one occasion. However, I felt for the people in the congregation on medication for mental health difficulties who now had the added burden of believing that they were betraying God by getting help. More generally, education was linked to pride and worldliness. Coupled with a pre-existing culture of harsh judgement and secrecy, the targeted misuse of the pulpit and Bible took a spiritual and emotional toll.

We stayed for two more years, attempting to promote Bible reading and a Gospel focus through the ministries we were involved in. Andrew was frequently agitated up the front, and frequently sought out conversations with Caleb to ‘resolve things’. At one point I found Andrew with his face inches from Caleb, demanding a meeting.

Finally, things came to a head when Andrew suggested we bring our theological concerns to the eldership. In a very intimidating meeting, we faced the entire group of elders for an entire morning, hopeful that someone would listen to our concerns. Instead, they defended Andrew’s character and teaching, stating that in all the many decades they had known him, they had never seen error in him. This was deeply disappointing and rejecting of both us and our experiences that had been challenging to share and articulate. Finally, we left, feeling that there was no more that could be done.

During those two years, when I opened my Bible, the words often felt like they were read in Andrew’s voice, screaming condemnation. I was riddled with self-doubt. I grieved for the loss of my own inner compass and worried that I would never be the same again. Most of all I worried I would lose my faith. I questioned God’s love and presence. I was scared He had left me. Prayer and Bible reading became unsafe. At some point, I felt I gave up. Instead of a raging condemnation, what I felt was that God was still holding me. Leaving brought relief, and then a whirlwind of disorientation and disconnection.

Community was such an essential part of the process. We didn’t speak to anyone within the church for a long time about what we were experiencing. (There was enough talk from the pulpit about ‘gossip’ and ‘slander’ and it felt like the eldership had eyes everywhere.) However, I spoke openly with good Christian friends outside of the church, whose genuine reactions of shock and anger helped ground me when I didn’t know who to trust. These friends patiently listened and carried us on their prayers when we couldn’t pray ourselves. These relationships were supportive when we lost our church community. Thankfully, we were able to find a new church and settle into a new community relatively quickly.

I sought therapy about a month after leaving the church when I felt I had hit rock bottom. My therapist gave two analogies that helped me immensely. First, she noted that being in the abuse was like being in a tunnel—dark, restricting, yet familiar. Coming out of the abusive situation was like emerging from a tunnel into the light—initially too bright to see and incredibly disorienting. She helped me locate that this was where I was and that eventually I would step into a ‘new normal’. She helped God feel safe to me again, by reminding me what Jesus would say to me in a moment of suffering. She encouraged me to picture myself sitting in a boat with Jesus, where I could sit, stand, sleep, whatever I needed. He would be there.

These words were enough to help me slowly start reading the Bible again. I started small and I didn’t touch the Old Testament for nearly a year, given the heavy focus of the church on a works-based theology and God’s judgement, which would be easy to read into the Old Testament. I read the Book of John on repeat, and studied Philippians in depth while recovering from major surgery. It was a relief to be reminded of Jesus’s humility (He was not like my abuser!) and His open condemnation of leaders that oppress His people and become obstructive to them connecting with God (He took this kind of behaviour very seriously). It felt like a rebuilding of my faith and connection with Him.

About six months after leaving the church, I had a large benign growth removed from my abdomen. I described to my therapist that I saw this as a sort of physical manifestation of my trauma. The surgery recovery time brought rest, routines and shows of support from others. In many ways I felt I needed that time for my emotional scars more than my physical ones. I reflected regularly on how even at a physical level post-surgery I went from being unable to walk to being able to walk again in such a short period of time. Yet, I didn’t return to a sense of normalcy for many months.

Much like I still carry the scars from my surgery, my experience of spiritual abuse is a part of me. I feel it helps me to connect deeply with those who are suffering, and it has caused me to research many topics deeply both in the Bible and psychology. I believe this has deepened my clinical work. There is a security I feel in my relationship with God that I wouldn’t otherwise have. I have never been more passionate about solid Biblical teaching and it has caused me to seek humility in leadership positions I hold, to be like Christ, by His Spirit.

## Conclusion

There are many causes of spiritual trauma. Sexual transgressions are common and highly destructive, but breaches in trust may include financial and other forms of exploitation. It is obvious that allegiance to a religious group does not always bring out the best in a person. And we are left to deal with the resulting brokenness. The vulnerability of potential victims is an important factor to consider. It can be obvious or hidden, but both can be noticed by predators.

If you have suffered spiritual abuse it is important to be aware of how the trauma has affected you physically, emotionally and spiritually. But there is hope. Clinical psychologist Arielle Schwartz noted, ‘We adapt to adversity by orienting to our strengths, attending to the pain, and taking charge of the narrative that defines our lives.’[[22]](#endnote-22)

# Chapter 2 Into Darkness

We act badly. Flawed without exception. Certainly ‘There is nothing new under the sun.’ (Ecclesiastes 1:9) And in some instances spiritual trauma is the result. In this chapter I will present some vivid examples.

## Jean Vanier (1928–2019)

Vanier was a Canadian who founded [L'Arche](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/L%27Arche), an international federation of communities spread over thirty-seven countries who cared for people with [developmental disabilities](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Developmental_disabilities). In 1971, Vanier with [Marie-Hélène Mathieu](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marie-H%C3%A9l%C3%A8ne_Mathieu) founded [*Faith and Light*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Faith_and_Light), which serves people with disability and their families. Vanier continued to live as a member of the original L’Arche community in [Trosly-Breuil](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trosly-Breuil" \o "Trosly-Breuil), France, until his death in 2019.

Vanier formed a friendship with a Dominican priest Fr [Thomas Philippe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Philippe" \o "Thomas Philippe), and became aware of the plight of thousands of people institutionalised with developmental disabilities. Vanier invited two men with disabilities, Raphael Simi and Philippe Seux, to leave the institutions where they resided and live with him in a village in France. Their time together led to the establishment of L'Arche at Trosly-Breuil. Since that beginning a network of 150 L'Arche communities has been established in thirty-eight countries. In 1968, Vanier gave a Faith and Sharing retreat in [Mary Lake](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Lake_(Ontario)" \o "Mary Lake (Ontario)), Ontario, the first of many retreats.

Over the years Vanier wrote 30 books on religion, disability, normality, success and tolerance. He received many honours in his lifetime. In many respects Vanier led an exemplary life and accomplished an improvement in living conditions for countless people with disabilities. He led by choice of lifestyle.

However, Vanier crossed sexual boundaries. In February 2020, an internal report published by L’Arche concluded that Vanier sexually abused six womenin [Trosly-Breuil](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trosly-Breuil), France, between 1970 and 2005. According to a joint statement by leaders of L’Arche International, Vanier had engaged in ‘manipulative and emotionally abusive’ sexual relationships with six women, who included assistants and nuns (they were not people with disabilities). Sexual relations were instigated by Vanier, usually in the context of giving spiritual guidance.

The statement read, ‘These women reported similar facts associated with highly unusual spiritual or mystical explanations used to justify these behaviours ... The relationships ... had a significant negative impact on their personal lives and subsequent relationships. These actions are indicative of a deep psychological and spiritual hold Jean Vanier had on these women.’ It also said that Vanier asked the women to keep their encounters secret.

The report included:

The inquiry team investigated a number of allegations of sexual assault all from women who were adults and not people with disabilities. The relationships involved various kinds of sexual behaviour often combined with so called ‘mystical and spiritual’ justifications for this conduct. The relationships were alleged to have taken place under conditions the inquiry team label as ‘psychological hold’ and are described as emotionally abusive and characterised by significant imbalances of power, whereby the alleged victims felt deprived of their free will and so the sexual activity was coerced or took place under coercive conditions. This includes allegations that some of the sexual activity took place within the context of spiritual accompaniment whereby Jean Vanier as a person of significant power and authority would offer guidance to certain assistants he chose to accompany. Several of the women stated that they were vulnerable at the time and Jean Vanier was aware of this.

The following are quotes from those abused:

(a) ‘I was in an inappropriate sexual relationship with Jean Vanier. Was I consenting? I think at the beginning yes, but as time went on, the more I believe that I was not consenting.’

(b) ‘In 19xx, when in Trosly, I was very upset (about a personal issue). I was very upset and very vulnerable. … He told me to come late (for spiritual direction). We prayed, I got an invitation to meet him in xxxx. It was very intimate, he did everything except intercourse.’

(c) ‘I was like frozen, I realised that Jean Vanier was adored by hundreds of people, like a living saint, that he talked about how he helped survivors of sexual abuse, it appeared like a camouflage and I found it difficult to raise the issue.’

(d) ‘I think it was in 19xx, when the spiritual accompaniment transformed into sexual touching. I told him I had a lover, he said that it was important to distinguish (what happened between us) referring to the Song of Solomon. It went on for 3 or 4 years. Each time, I was frozen, I was unable to distinguish what was right and what was wrong … He told me that this was part of the accompaniment.’

(e) He said, ‘This is not us, this is Mary and Jesus. You are chosen, you are special, this is secret.’

(f) ‘When I expressed my astonishment saying … how could I manifest my love to Jesus and to him, he replied: “But Jesus and myself, this is not two, but we are one … It is Jesus who loves you through me”.’[[23]](#endnote-23)

What these women suffered was clearly sexual and spiritual abuse. Vanier was widely admired, even considered a ‘living saint’. While not ordained, he led retreats and guided people in their spiritual growth. He offered himself as a model of spiritual maturity. And yet he sexually exploited numerous women within the context of spiritual guidance. He justified this with passages from the Bible and possibly the most holy of human relationships, that between Mary and Jesus. It is astonishing that Vanier got away with such aberrant practices for so many decades.

A fuller report by an independent group commissioned by L’Arche was published in January 2023. This documented 25 different women who had experienced a sexual act or intimate gesture with Jean Vanier. These relationships were over a considerable length of time, from 1952 to 2019. Vanier would typically initiate contact through meetings that were nominally about spiritual accompaniment; after some time body contact and nudity would gradually be introduced into the sessions. Vanier would often quote from the [Song of Songs](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Song_of_Songs). The practices were founded on so-called ‘mystical’ or ‘spiritual’ beliefs that had been condemned by the Catholic Church. The investigation was carried out by the independent UK consultancy GCPS.

What do we make of all this? Vanier was a remarkable person who did much to make the world a better place, especially for those living with disability. He left a legacy of good works that continues, and he became a spiritual model inspiring many to follow Christ in self-sacrificial ways. And yet he engaged in spiritual manipulation and sexual abuse. Many of those who were abused appear to have had a trauma reaction. While it is not unusual for leaders to seek gratification, in various ways, through their influence and power, there is something deeply unsettling about his story.

Spiritual abuse is a nine-headed Hydra. There are many forms of it, and countless people have been exploited and had their lives diminished. Some, in my clinical experience, have suffered years of trauma-related symptoms as a result.

*Reflect*: How do you react emotionally when you read about Vanier?

Peter served as an altar boy and was sexually abused by the parish priest. As a young adult he had a severe car accident which resulted in a permanent disability. He continued to worship in the Roman Catholic Church and he financially supported the work of L’Arche. After reports of abuse by Vanier he was triggered and felt flooded by memories of his own abuse. Peter also noted that he was more aggressive in his interpersonal relationships. Eventually he came to understand that this was part of his fight-flight behaviour.

After suffering sexual abuse, a person will often have problems with intimacy and will need specialist counselling to have a healthy sexual relationship.

It is almost commonplace today to argue that sexual abuse, especially sexual violence such as rape, is an exercise of power. I believe that this is a partial truth. Other factors may be relevant. I would include a sense of entitlement, often associated with narcissistic personality, impulsivity and the desire for sexual gratification. The whole is made up of many parts.

## Conversion ‘therapy’

In the decades I practised as a clinical psychologist, I was well known in Canberra for being a Christian. Pastors and church workers would often refer patients to me. On a number of occasions, I saw a patient who believed that his or her same-sex attraction was against the will of God. I was asked to provide what would now be called conversion ‘therapy’, which is a misguided attempt to change sexual orientation. Naturally, I always refused. There is no question that attempts at this kind of treatment have led to countless instances of trauma for LGBTIQA+[[24]](#endnote-24) people. It is a ‘therapy’ that has been widely discredited and condemned, due to its harmful effects, by medical and psychological organisations, including the Australian Psychological Society. Here are some of the major negative impacts:

### 1. Psychological and emotional harm

Researchers have established that such treatment results in an increased risk of anxiety and depression. The resulting cognitive dissonance is highly stressful. There are more frequent suicidal thoughts and incidents of self-harm, including suicide attempts. Such ‘therapy’ is an attack on self-esteem, and it is devastating to have someone in authority say your experience of self is wrong.

### 2. Social and relationship damage

Submitting to such treatment is often the result of family and community pressure. Naturally it leads to pressure on relationships and after ‘failure’ there is the likelihood of rejection. Predictably there is a loss of social support when it is most needed. Often the legacy of such treatment includes guilt, shame and rejection.

### 3. Increased risk of substance abuse

This treatment and the resulting distress can increase the risk of substance abuse with alcohol and drugs.

### 4. Physical harm

While thankfully rare, some forms of conversion ‘therapy’ include physically abusive tactics such as electroshock therapy, food deprivation or other harmful practices.

### 5. Lack of scientific validity

There is no credible scientific research providing evidence that sexual orientation or gender identity can be changed. Organisations like the American Psychological Association (APA), World Health Organization (WHO), and United Nations have all condemned conversion ‘therapy’ as unethical and extremely harmful.

### 6. Reinforcement of stigma and discrimination

Conversion ‘therapy’ perpetuates the false belief that being LGBTQIA+ is a disorder which needs to be ‘fixed.’ It perpetuates social discrimination, especially in conservative churches, and internalised homophobia/transphobia.

## Check list of harmful effects from conversion therapy

If you have undergone attempted conversion ‘therapy’, tick any of the following which apply to you:

### Psychological harm

* Increased depression
* Increased anxiety
* Symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
* Feelings of shame, guilt, and self-hatred
* Increased risk of suicidal ideation and attempts
* Loss of self-esteem
* Development or worsening of other mental health disorders

### Emotional and social harm

* Alienation from family and community
* Loneliness and isolation
* Damage to trust in healthcare providers or religious leaders
* Difficulty forming or maintaining healthy relationships

### Behavioural and developmental harm

* Substance abuse as a coping mechanism
* Self-harm behaviours
* Disruption in identity development
* Difficulty in academic or career performance due to psychological distress

### Physical harm

* In extreme cases, use of physical abuse or aversive methods
* Long-term health problems related to chronic stress

### Spiritual and existential harm

* Spiritual confusion or crisis when religious values are used to justify conversion efforts
* Loss of faith or religious trauma

These are some of the harmful effects widely reported on the Internet. Kym Robinson, a psychosexual therapist and my daughter, adds:

Many individuals who have undergone conversion therapy, or who have been subjected to religious messages condemning their sexual orientation or gender identity, experience profound internal conflict. They are often forced to choose between living authentically and maintaining acceptance within their faith community. This dichotomy leads to masking, suppression of identity, and the psychological toll of concealing one’s true self when authenticity no longer feels safe. The resulting guilt, particularly the belief that one’s sexuality or gender identity precludes spiritual salvation, can be deeply corrosive. This prohibition against forming romantic relationships consistent with one’s orientation often leads to relationships established out of obligation or perceived compliance rather than genuine desire. These dynamics may contribute to emotional disconnection, failed relationships, and instances of infidelity as individuals seek the intimacy and connection they were expected to deny themselves.

There are countless Christians who have undergone some form of conversion therapy. It is abusive. The premise that God requires celibacy of gay people is highly debatable. I am persuaded that it is possible to accept the authority of the Bible and have an inclusive attitude toward LGBTIQA+ people. The argument of evangelical biblical scholars Christopher and Richard Hays in their important book *The Widening of God’s Mercy* (2024) is that the biblical picture of God includes many instances in which God changed his mind, but always towards greater mercy and inclusiveness.[[25]](#endnote-25)

This might be considered a step in the right direction. Fundamentalist Christians might hesitate, but I think we need to establish a church culture which embraces and affirms, indeed celebrates LGBTIQA+ identities.

*Reflect:* How could such a change in church culture come about? Do you see this as a work of the Holy Spirit?

*To do:* There are resources which can be helpful. Check out the following: Born Perfect ([bornperfect.org](https://bornperfect.org/)), the Trevor Project ([thetrevorproject.org](https://www.thetrevorproject.org/)), PFLAG ([pflag.org](https://pflag.org/)), and Survivors of Conversion Therapy Network (SCTN). Note that there are numerous accounts of Christians who have gone through conversion ‘therapy’, such as *Outlove: A Queer Christian Survival Story* by Julie Rodgers.[[26]](#endnote-26)

Madeline was raised in a conservative Christian home. She was part of a youth group associated with an Independent Bible Church. She enjoyed the fellowship, but she did not feel comfortable with the expectations that she would date teenage boys in the group. At university she ‘came out’ and identified as a gay person. This alarmed her pastor and Christian community. She was pressured to see a Christian counsellor with the goal of becoming ‘normal’. She found the experience confusing and the lack of validation painful. She did not feel that the ‘homework exercises’ respected her boundaries. Eventually she sought support from a Metropolitan Community Church, which embraces same-sex relationships. She saw a queer-affirming social worker to combat her internalised sense of shame from the first ‘therapy’. Unfortunately, she was not able to repair relationships with her family, but now has the support of a same-sex partner.

I currently serve as an associate minister at Wesley Uniting Church, Canberra. A number of our youth are in same-sex relationships, and some same-sex couples have married. Some are transgender, some are gender diverse. I am pleased that we can support them in a Christian context, especially since a few were asked to leave previous churches. We are known as a LGBTIQA+ safe place.

Conversion ‘therapy’ is somewhat aligned with a ‘purity culture’ promoted in fundamentalist church circles. Sexuality is understood to be like an on-off switch (off before heterosexual marriage). This also results in difficulties turning the switch on after marriage. It has been argued that purity culture has sexually abusive messages about gender, sexuality, gender roles, modesty, lust, boundaries, consequences of sexual sin for racism or purity of race, purity of mind and heart. Women are expected to be gatekeepers and not to tempt men with provocative clothing. Bodies are thought to be dangerous.[[27]](#endnote-27) Kym Robinson agrees, ‘This narrative inherently assumes that women are devoid of sexual desire, while portraying men as incapable of self-control and, therefore, absolved of responsibility for their actions. Within purity culture, a woman’s worth is frequently equated with her sexual ‘purity’ or virginal status, a belief system that perpetuates shame and reinforces harmful gender stereotypes.’

*Reflect:* Could it be that the churches seeming obsession with sex is competitive? Whoever controls the body controls the person.

## Exorcism?

Various branches of the church perform the rite of exorcism. There is biblical precedent with the example of Jesus casting out evil spirits (Mark 1:21-28). But this depends upon a worldview of cosmic spiritual conflict, which not all Christians today would endorse. Opinions differ on whether such spirits exist.

What is beyond doubt, however, is that some attempts at exorcism have been ill-conceived and misused and at times have led to trauma for those who sought deliverance ministry. Sadly, it is an area in which ill-informed and naïve, perhaps well-meaning, people have caused considerable damage.

Marcus was converted while a university student and joined a Pentecostal church. The validity of his conversion was called into question when he admitted to same-sex attraction. The youth worker pressured him to submit to an attempted exorcism to deliver him from a ‘spirit of homosexuality’. Needless to say, this was unsuccessful and Marcus continued unchanged in his sexual orientation, but with much guilt and shame.

Sometimes a mental disorder is mistaken for possession,

Sally heard voices. Auditory hallucinations were symptoms of her schizophrenia. She thought they were demonic and asked for an exorcism to give herself relief. Unfortunately, this reinforced her denial about the nature of the voices and her illness.

There is no warrant for physical abuse as part of a rite of exorcism. This has no Biblical precedent. And the potential for harm even to the point of manslaughter has been repeatedly demonstrated in the history of the church.

## Emerging forms of abuse

The Internet is an increasingly powerful force in our society. Many adolescents seemed trapped by their screens. While I am not that interested, or experienced, in social media I recognise that it introduces a range of opportunities for spiritual abuse. Vulnerable people can be groomed by someone who is or appears to be a spiritual leader. There is also the possibility of trolling, which can result in shame and even attempts at suicide. There are also a vast range of scams that can target religious people who are willing to donate to a worthy cause.

There are increasing instances of online harassment, cyberstalking and cyber bullying. This can happen in a youth group chat line. Being a Christian does not make a person immune to sextortion, an area of emerging concern. Doxxing is publishing private or identifying information about someone online with malicious intent. I can only imagine that these will increasingly become opportunities to spiritually abuse vulnerable people.

Rajib’s family left Pakistan because they felt it was unsafe there to have a Christian faith. He joined a youth group at a local independent church. He was not readily accepted, because of ‘the colour of my skin’ and was trolled in an online chat group used by the youth of the church.

I would also note that in some abusive environments repeated small injuries can add up to cause a trauma reaction. There can be a cumulative effect.

*Note:* Numerous times in this book I recommend professional mental health treatment. It is sometimes essential, but not always available. An additional option is what has been called ‘companionship’.[[28]](#endnote-28) The companion is sensitive to trauma and the emotional aftermath. If you are suffering trauma there is no expectation that you do things in a certain way; the companion will be comfortable allowing you to be yourself. The best companions stay focused on your needs and your strengths and provide guidance when it is useful. Of course, you can see a mental health professional and seek a companion for additional support. They are not mutually exclusive. But it is essential to be able to ask for help.

*Affirmation:* I am stronger when I ask for help, not weaker. God wants me to be fully my unique self.

Spiritual leadership is seen in a variety of ways by people from different church traditions. For a Catholic the priest embodies a sacramental element, and abuse might lead to difficulties in taking the sacraments. For a Protestant preaching and teaching shape the expectations of ministry. This might lead to problems in trusting the Bible and following scriptural guidance.[[29]](#endnote-29) This is something of a generalisation, because there are all sorts of subtle differences in the way ministry is offered, but some appreciation is helpful to understand when a corruption of ministry ideals takes place. Additionally, clergy are associated with the presence of God. So a lot is at stake, ‘They lead and influence us in significant spiritual experiences such as conversion, moral self-examination, confession and repentance before God, as well as spiritual renewal.’[[30]](#endnote-30)

*Reflect:* How do you see people in your church who offer ministry? How has this been impacted by your experience of spiritual abuse?

## The story of Mark Stibbe

Mark Stibbe has written and spoken to the media about his experience of abuse. He was one of about 100 school boys who were physically and spiritually abused by a senior barrister John Smyth QC. Smyth was a dynamic speaker in conservative Anglican circles in England. He was known as a right-hand man of the Christian campaigner and social activist Mary Whitehouse. He was actively involved in Christian ministry for children as chairman of the [Iwerne Trust](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Titus_Trust), which ran the influential [conservative evangelical](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conservative_evangelicalism_in_the_United_Kingdom) [Iwerne holiday camps](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iwerne_camps) for elite private school boys and girls. Stibbe was one of the students who boarded at Winchester College and participated in the school’s Christian Forum.

In December 2017 Stibbe spoke to Cathy Newman of Channel 4 news about his experience of abuse by Smyth in the years 1977 to 1982. He had to come to terms with the way Smyth had been protected when his actions were first revealed in 1980 and how survivors have been shamelessly neglected. You might ask how intelligent boys could be persuaded by Smyth to believe that God wanted him to beat them savagely with a cane, indeed up to hundreds of strokes in all-day sessions. Stibbe said that Smyth talked about ‘being a “spiritual father” to us using spiritual language to appeal to the psychological need we had to feel worthy of love and belonging.’[[31]](#endnote-31)

His primary tactic was to use the Bible to induce a religion of fear and of performance. He said to Stibbe, ‘God is our father in heaven. Therefore, he cannot be your father on earth. So I will be your spiritual father.’ Smyth insisted on a relationship of ruthless accountability from the victims. Every aspect of life was under scrutiny, ‘most of all, he had intense obsession with masturbation, asking us frequently if we had fallen in this area. He created in all of his followers a tortured view of human sexuality.’ He once told Stibbe that he could not hold a girl’s hand until he was aged 25. This was an example of his obsession with his followers maintaining a life of extreme sexual purity.

How did he justify such extreme punishment? One of Smyth’s favourite verses was ‘You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood’ (Hebrews 12:4), which he used to justify severe beatings. He used Hebrews 13:17 to justify subservience to his leadership and authority.

Stibbe said that he remembered Smyth as a man who used religious language to justify violence. When he broke away from control of Smyth he was subjected to isolation and intimidation from his close friends who were still under the power of Smyth. However, the leader of the Christian Union at Cambridge came to his defence, but at a cost—he also suffered greatly. Gradually Stibbe recovered and later served in Christian ministry.

He said about Smyth, ‘He escaped the human justice that he spent his life representing. He died in 2018, just after the Crown Prosecution Service had decided that there were grounds for prosecution. Justice for the survivors, as with so many other victims of spiritual abuse, cannot be done here on earth.’

While not mentioned by Stibbe, it seems likely that Smyth’s abuse had sexual overtones. The 2024 Makin Review into Smyth’s behaviour revealed that he had continued his abuse of boys, including ‘beating with table tennis bat, enforced nudity, naked swimming, and showering’. Smyth left England for Rhodesia and later South Africa, where he continued with Christian camps. It is reported that a child died after physical abuse. Smyth also ‘disciplined’ his own son Peter John from age seven to eleven.

On 12 November 2024, the Archbishop of Canterbury, The Most Rev [Justin Welby](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Justin_Welby), announced he would resign due to the part he played in the church’s failure to acknowledge Smyth’s abuse.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have looked at some more severe types of spiritual abuse. This includes sexual abuse by Jean Vanier, a significant leader in an international ministry to disabled people. The discredited conversion ‘therapy’ has led to psychological and spiritual trauma for many Christians. I have considered the practice of exorcism, which has some biblical precedent. On-line trolling and scams targeting believers is an emerging area of concern. The story of Mark Stibbe is one of religiously justified violence. It is clear that vulnerable people have been traumatised and naïve expressions of ministry cannot be justified.

# Chapter 3: The many faces of trauma

Trauma is like a bridge to another country. Most people who experience trauma describe a change in themselves. You become a different person. Normal coping resources are overwhelmed. This happens at all levels. Painful memories become intrusive. Small reminders trigger intense emotional reactivity. Structures of meaning, which are built up over a lifetime, can become dysfunctional. The trauma reaction is always unexpected, unpredictable and uncontrollable.

The original Greek the word ‘trauma’ means wound. This is the sense in which it is used in the New Testament, in the story of the good Samaritan who rescued a man who had been robbed and left half-dead (Luke 10:34).

The effect of trauma on people varies from person to person. In this sense trauma is highly subjective. But it is possible to recognise common symptoms. The following are typical:

1. *Emotional*: Feeling alone, feeling afraid, angry and frustrated, mood swings, difficulty sleeping, feeling sad, feeling helpless, feeling panic, anxious and numb, having nightmares and loss of confidence.
2. *Mental:* Loss of concentration, disorientation and confusion, memory loss, obsessional thoughts, distractibility, indecisiveness, thoughts about death and dying, and racing thoughts.
3. *Behavioural:* Withdrawal from others, impulsive behaviour, aggression, crying, arguing with family, increased sleeping, changes in appetite, being easily startled, and increased drug and alcohol use.
4. *Physical:* Aches and pains, fatigue and tiredness, racing heart, nausea and vomiting, shakiness and trembling, headaches, numbness and tingling, diarrhoea, and hot flushes.[[32]](#endnote-32)

Symptoms may be linked in surprising ways. For example, emotional arousal and goal-directed action are often disconnected.[[33]](#endnote-33) Trauma may result in boundary violations, a loss of autonomous action and a loss of self-regulation. The affected person will commonly display mechanistic compliance or resigned submission.

*To do:* Tick any of the above to indicate any symptoms you may have at present. How do you react to the possibility that you may have a psychological disorder?

The Burns firmly had a proud military tradition. Two of the sons enlisted at the youngest possible age and were deployed to Afghanistan. The older Tom came back with significant symptoms of PTSD, Bob did not seem adversely affected.

Trauma has ingrained symptoms which can be chronic—lasting for years in some cases. The signs of spiritual trauma are often hidden, but they can have a devastating effect on what is best in a person.

It is important to understand the physical dimension of trauma. Your body is involved. Trauma survivors are often caught in a state of fight or flight. You know if you are in fight mode with tell-tale signs of anxiety, stress or panic. If you are in shut-down mode then you experience fatigue, fogginess, dizziness, depression and/or nausea.

Van der Kolk observed that his patients, when asked to focus on internal or body sensations, would either feel overwhelmed or be in denial. When they did pay attention to the inner world, they usually encountered a minefield of trauma related perceptions, sensations, and emotions. It was common for a person to feel disgusted with themselves and have a very negative body image. Often a patient would pay the least possible attention to their bodies. It was possible to have a somatic sense of threat as a ‘speechless terror’.

*Reflect:* Embodiment means living as a body while engaging the world. How much of your time do you do this?

One troubling aspect of trauma for the survivor is that it can be hard to differentiate past frightening experiences from what is happening in the present moment. Hence a situation that is actually completely safe might be ‘read’ as dangerous. This can result in chronic hypervigilance, an ‘early warning system’, with the body on constant alert.

Judith Herman, a psychiatrist, wrote *Trauma and Recovery*, one of the groundbreaking studies which influenced our understanding and treatment of trauma.[[34]](#endnote-34) She observed, ‘Atrocities refused to be buried … Denial does not work. Folk wisdom is filled with ghosts who refuse to rest in their graves until their stories are told.’[[35]](#endnote-35)

## Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Some survivors of abuse will meet the criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD can occur at any age, including during childhood. It is a normal reaction to an abnormal amount of stress. Aphrodite Matsakis compared it to a thigh bone—no matter how strong the bone, with sufficient pressure it will break.[[36]](#endnote-36) The sad fact is that a single life-or-death incident lasting as little as a few seconds can be enough to traumatise an individual. The overwhelming incident happens too fast, too soon, too much for a person’s coping normal mechanisms. In those few seconds a sense of trust in the world as a secure place can be shattered.

Thandeka was physically assaulted at a church youth camp. She feared that her face might be permanently scarred. She was later diagnosed and treated for PTSD.

PTSD is one of the most extensively researched of all psychological conditions. In brief, characteristic symptoms include:

* aspects of the painful experience(s) keep returning ‘uninvited’ through memory
* there are attempts to avoid anything associated with the painful incident(s)
* it is hard to respond positively to the important things and people in our life
* there is an overreaction to normal but stimulating things, leading sufferers to be overly irritable, suffer from insomnia, have heightened anxiety and lack of concentration, be ‘jumpy’ or startle easily, et cetera.

The American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental* *Disorders* (DSM-5) is considered the ‘Bible’ of psychiatrists and other mental health professionals. It notes criteria for diagnosing PTSD. Meeting all the criteria is essential for a diagnosis. These are listed below and are specific to adults, adolescents and children older than 6 years. Diagnostic criteria for PTSD include a history of exposure to a traumatic event that meets specific stipulations, and symptoms from each of four symptom clusters: intrusion, avoidance, negative alterations in cognitions and mood, and alterations in arousal and reactivity.

*Criterion A: Stressor* The person was exposed to: death, threatened death, actual or threatened serious injury, or actual or threatened sexual violence, as follows: (1 required) 1. Direct exposure. 2. Witnessing, in person. 3. Indirectly, by learning that a close relative or close friend was exposed to trauma. If the event involved actual or threatened death, it must have been violent or accidental. 4. Repeated or extreme indirect exposure to aversive details of the event(s), usually in the course of professional duties (for example first responders collecting body parts; professionals repeatedly exposed to details of child abuse). This does not include indirect non-professional exposure through electronic media, television, movies or pictures.

*Criterion B: Intrusion symptoms* The traumatic event is persistently re-experienced in the following way(s): (1 required) 1. Recurrent, involuntary, and intrusive memories. 2. Traumatic nightmares. 3. Dissociative reactions (for example flashbacks) which may occur on a continuum from brief episodes to complete loss of consciousness. 4. Intense or prolonged distress after exposure to traumatic reminders. 5. Marked physiologic reactivity after exposure to trauma-related stimuli.

*Criterion C: Avoidance* Persistent, effortful avoidance of distressing trauma-related stimuli after the event: (1 required) 1. Trauma-related thoughts or feelings. 2. Trauma-related external reminders (for example people, places, conversations, activities, objects or situations).

*Criterion D: Negative alterations in cognitions and mood* Negative alterations in cognitions and mood that began or worsened after the traumatic event: (2 required) 1. Inability to recall key features of the traumatic event (usually dissociative amnesia; not due to head injury, alcohol or drugs). 2. Persistent (and often distorted) negative beliefs and expectations about oneself or the world (for example, ‘I am bad’, ‘The world is completely dangerous’). 3. Persistent distorted blame of self or others for causing the traumatic event or for resulting consequences. 4. Persistent negative trauma-related emotions (for example fear, horror, anger, guilt or shame). 5. Markedly diminished interest in (pre-traumatic) significant activities. 6. Feeling alienated from others (for example detachment or estrangement). 7. Constricted affect: persistent inability to experience positive emotions.

*Criterion E: Alterations in arousal and reactivity* Trauma-related alterations in arousal and reactivity that began or worsened after the traumatic event: (2 required) 1. Irritable or aggressive behaviour. 2. Self-destructive or reckless behaviour. 3. Hypervigilance. 4. Exaggerated startle response. 5. Problems in concentration. 6. Sleep disturbance.

*Criterion F: Duration* Persistence of symptoms in Criteria B, C, D and E for more than one month.

*Criterion G*: *Functional significance* Significant symptom-related distress or functional impairment (for example social, occupational).[[37]](#endnote-37) Note that culture mediates how we think about a psychological condition.[[38]](#endnote-38) DSM-5 reflects a medical culture.

*To do*: Do you think that you might meet the criteria above for PTSD? Be objective and recognise how intensely you might react emotionally when triggered. Note that many survivors of trauma tend to shut down emotionally. Ask someone who knows you well, maybe your spouse or a close family member, whether they think you have been disrupted by the experience. Note that some symptoms, such as irritability, are more obvious to others than to yourself.

If you think that you might meet the criteria for PTSD, consult a mental health professional for assessment and treatment. There are evidence-based treatments such as Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR) available. If you engage with the exercises in this book, you may find that your recovery is enhanced, but unless you are in unusual circumstances do not substitute self-help for professional assistance.

*Recommendation:* Trauma is an overwhelming experience. Especially if you think in terms of the whole event and its impact. Can you think about what happened in smaller ‘bite-sized’ chunks?

One of the ways that you will notice a trauma reaction is when you are ‘triggered’. You react with high emotional intensity. More than the situation requires. It is as if you have travelled back in time to the dangerous situation and it is all happening again.

There are spiritual implications for PTSD. Langberg observed that ‘trauma silences, destroys relationships, and squashes power in humans created and loved by God.’[[39]](#endnote-39)

*Affirmation:* Jesus overcame the power of death by his resurrection. There is no trauma so great that God cannot help me heal.

Severe trauma can result in a number of psychological disorders. The following are rare but possible.

## Dissociative identity disorder

Dissociative identity disorder (DID), formerly known as multiple personality disorder, is a complex psychological condition characterised by the presence of two or more distinct personality states or identities. DID is rare, but it can happen in response to extreme trauma. DSM-5 also has a number of dissociative disorders, some of which are more common. Sometimes a person will have a brief psychotic reaction in response to severe trauma.

### Dissociative Identity Disorder symptom checklist

Identity disturbance

* I feel like there are different parts of me that take over or act independently.
* People have told me I seem like a completely different person at times.
* I have different names, ages or identities that feel ‘real’ or separate inside me.

Amnesia and memory gaps

* I frequently forget things I have said or done.
* I lose time or find myself in places with no memory of how I got there.
* I find evidence of things I don’t remember doing (for example receipts, messages, clothes).

Depersonalisation and derealisation

* I often feel disconnected from myself, like I'm watching myself from the outside.
* The world around me sometimes feels dreamlike, foggy or unreal.

Sudden shifts in behaviour

* My skills, handwriting or speech patterns change unexpectedly.
* I experience rapid mood swings or sudden personality shifts.

Internal voices

* I hear voices inside my head that argue, comment or talk among themselves.
* These voices feel like separate people, not just my inner thoughts.

Trauma history

* I experienced severe or repeated trauma, especially in childhood.
* I feel like certain memories are blocked, fuzzy, or don’t belong to me.

Distress or impairment

* These experiences cause problems in my work, relationships, or daily life.
* I have engaged in self-harm, or others have said I behave dangerously at times.

*Please note:* This list is not sufficient for a diagnosis, but if you have ticked a number of these it can provide some information for you to discuss with a mental health professional.[[40]](#endnote-40) Note that dissociation while experiencing the distressing incident(s) is highly predictive of a trauma reaction.

*To do:* If you recognise a high level of dissociation, see a mental health professional. Not everyone has experience in this area. See if you can find a therapist who has an Internal Family Systems perspective.

## Complex PTSD

This refers to the PTSD that results from exposure to multiple, prolonged or repeated traumatic events. Often the experiences are of an interpersonal nature, and typically they begin in early life. This can deeply affect an person’s development and functioning. Complex PTSD was discussed as a mental health diagnosis but was not included in DSM-5.

The following are characteristic of complex trauma: repeated exposure to trauma, often caused by caregivers and usually beginning at a young age impairing critical developmental stages, severe in impact (for example repeated domestic violence, sexual abuse or neglect) and leading to chaotic attachment. A person with complex trauma will have difficulty trusting others and maintaining healthy relationships. Usually, the person will have difficulty managing emotions and may experience sharp mood swings and explosive anger. There may be problems with concentration and memory. Perhaps understandably, a person will have low self-esteem and negative beliefs. Impulsive and risky behaviour can be a problem. Physical complaints without a clear medical cause may be evident. Hypervigilance and exaggerated startle responses are likely. Typically, a person will feel constantly on edge and unsafe. He or she might rationalise the abuse as deserved or brought on by the self.[[41]](#endnote-41)

*Reflect:* Ask yourself what percentage of your life has been adversely affected by trauma? How much of your identity as a person has been shaped by it? Do you believe that you can have a life after trauma?

*Affirmation:* I may be wounded but I am not destroyed.

There is a considerable symptom overlap between complex PTSD and borderline personality disorder (BPD). Both may cause difficulties with intimate relationships, and the pathway to having healthy and satisfying relationships is very challenging. Issues include explosive outbursts, feelings of abandonment, feeling empty, impulsive behaviour and brief flashes of paranoia. Van der Kolk conducted research that indicated that severe early childhood trauma can lead to the development of BPD.[[42]](#endnote-42)

There is a difference between dissociative identity disorder, in which the sense of self has been shattered, and complex trauma in which experiences of trauma are integrated into the sense of self. People who have suffered abuse are also more likely to have somatic or physical disorders and need medical treatment. It has been suggested that people from non-Western cultures are more likely to exhibit physical symptoms related to trauma. An emerging area of research is ‘culture bound stress responses’[[43]](#endnote-43) when cultural patterns, identities, and relationships are lost life becomes unpredictable. But generally a healthy culture is supportive, and meaningful rituals can protect an individual from the full effects of trauma.[[44]](#endnote-44)

## Can false memories of abuse be created?

The answer to this is yes. About three or four decades ago the issue of creating false memories led to considerable confusion among counsellors. The research of Elizabeth Loftus established that false memories could be created and young children are particularly suggestible.[[45]](#endnote-45)

In my clinical experience when an adult recalls childhood abuse there is usually a thread of memory to specific events. The memory of an actual event may have a fragmentary quality and may reflect a child’s worldview. For example, when I was assessing a child reporting sexual abuse, she described ejaculation as ‘snow’.

A memory of abuse is rarely a complete surprise and without precedent. I remember one exception to this. I was seeing a university student who was emotionally reactive if a man showed any romantic interest in her. She had no memories of sexual abuse, but an older brother wrote her a letter of confession to having molested her when she was very young. This brought back vivid memories of abuse which became a focus in therapy.

Here is an example of false memories.

René was seeing a domestic violence counsellor in relation to depression and an unhappy relationship. The counsellor suggested that her symptoms indicated that she had been sexually abused as a child. René’s first thought was of Mr Brown her favourite Sunday school teacher. Suggestive questions followed and René began to ‘remember’ inappropriate advances. She saw a psychiatrist recommended by her pastor, and she questioned the validity of the memories due to the questionable therapeutic technique of the counsellor and the untainted reputation of Mr Brown. Eventually René was relieved that she had not taken matters further.

*Note:* Years ago, in the 1980s and 1990s, there were numerous reports of satanic ritual abuse (SRA). After much investigation it was concluded that there was no evidence for such practices. Most reports were based on false memories or motivated by financial gain.

## False memory risk factors

The risk that a memory is false is higher with any of the following:

1. *The memory emerges during suggestive therapy.* False memories can arise with therapeutic approaches using hypnosis, guided imagery or suggestive questioning. Such methods can inadvertently implant or reinforce false memories.
2. *Highly suggestible individuals* are more susceptible to forming false memories.
3. *Sudden onset of detailed memories.* A sudden and abrupt recall of detailed memories, especially after therapeutic interventions, may indicate false rather than true memories.
4. *Lack of supportive evidence.* False memories are often not supported by physical evidence or trustworthy accounts from other sources. Usually with true memories there are some confirming features such as the perpetrator being charged similar offences, abusing alcohol or drugs, and having criminal convictions in other areas.
5. *Influence of external information.* Exposure to misinformation, leading questions, or discussions about abuse can shape and distort an individual’s recall.

The possibility of false memories of abuse is now well documented. It remains a highly emotional topic. Unfortunately, uninformed people in the church often exist in a ‘time-warp’ with dated attitudes and inadvertently cause great damage. Indeed, the risk is of induced trauma.

*Reflect:* Almost everyone has what may be called a negativity bias. We give more weight to negative life events than positive.

*To do:* Can you get in touch with a positive emotion such as contentment or happiness? Is it located in your body? If so then can you expand that feeling to fill all of yourself?

## Conclusion

There are a range of possible psychological and physical symptoms of trauma. In more severe cases there can be a chronic psychological disorder such as PTSD, as outlined in this chapter. Some unusual disorders can be caused by more extreme trauma such as dissociative identity disorder and complex PTSD. The risk of false memories of abuse must be considered.

Before you begin a journey of recovery from a traumatic experience it is helpful to acknowledge ‘ground zero’. This is where you start. Then can you track your progress. The goal is a full recovery and beyond that to psychological and spiritual growth. But first repair.

# REPAIR

A ceramic can be an object of utility. And great beauty.

In the National Museum in Seoul, Korea, there are glorious examples of celadon ceramics. The glaze is pale green or blue-green with a slight grey undertone. But ceramics are fragile: if mishandled or dropped they break easily.

The Japanese art of Kintsugi illustrates the process of repair. Nothing is discarded. Broken pieces are gathered and meticulously fitted together, as if solving a puzzle. With mindful concentration. The joints are filled with an adhesive mixed with gold powder. Eventually the piece is returned to its former shape and function.

The damage is not hidden. It is re-birthed as a work of art.

There are many deep truths—found and tested by life experience. Our emotional scars may be obvious, but they do not define us. They are part of our history. Paradoxically, the wounds display resilience and strength. In recovering from trauma we can learn to be more accepting of our imperfections. We can practice gratitude and be more loving of ourself and others. We can practice self-compassion.

The whole self is embraced. Accepted. And celebrated. Flaws included. Not denied. Not camouflaged.

In this section the focus will be on repair and recovery from psychological and spiritual trauma.

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# Chapter 4: Psychological strategies for recovery

The treatment of trauma is constantly changing. Advances were made to help ex-soldiers with war-related psychological injuries. But there are many other survivors of trauma similarly afflicted. Almost all feel out of control. The essential first step is to regain a sense of safety and bring back some control. The following techniques have proven to be very helpful.

## Self-care strategies

The Safe Place Visualisation is widely practised. Google this for examples. Or you can use your imagination to create a visual safe place, perhaps somewhere you have visited. Or not. You can go in your mind for relief or later when you are working on a traumatic memory. It provides an ‘escape hatch’ as needed.

Once you are imagining your safe place, make it more vivid by using all your senses. See colour, hear sounds, notice any tactile elements, and so on. You might make it a place of spiritual retreat by choosing a church or spiritual place. Some people find it helpful to have a doorway. It may not make logical sense, especially if your place is a beach or a scene from nature, but a visualised place can be easily adapted to include what is psychologically needed. Doorways are helpful for ease of access as well as a boundary to keep any disturbance from your safe place.

Another exercise is Grounding. Advice about this is also found widely on the Internet. Grounding facilitates feeling in the ‘here and now’ through sensory awareness. You can respond to emotional overload by, for example, pressing your feet against the floor and noticing your environment using all your senses. The regular practice of grounding provides a helpful way to manage intense emotions. Once you have mastered these techniques you will be better prepared to work through the various exercises designed to assist with your recovery.

Antonio lived near the beach. On a winter day he took off his shoes and sunk his feet into the cold sand. He said, ‘I was part of nature. I felt myself well and truly grounded.’

Progressive Muscle Relaxation is also widely practised. It is simple and involves clenching muscles (count 1 to 5) and relaxing muscles (count 1 to 5). Start with your hands and then work through the various muscle groups, eventually covering your whole body. This can disrupt ‘wound up’ feelings and bring a sense of relaxation.

*To do:* Make sure you have practised and mastered the safe place visualisation. This is essential, if you intend to do any of the following exercises with intrusive memories. It will only take a few minutes to establish and with time it can be more fully elaborated.

Ned created a safe place visualisation by recalling a visit to the Australia’s Kakadu National Park. He said, ‘It was the wet season, and I could see the lakes in full flood. I looked around to see the birds and I could hear their mating calls. I could even see the crocodiles lurking under the water with just their noses and eyes visible. I pictured myself inside a boat and I didn’t feel threatened in any way.’

When you have established a safe place through visualisation be aware of the *feeling* of safety. This can function as an anchor point in your recovery.

*Also:* Try a visualising a container. John Omaha offered some useful guidelines:

Visually design a container that is sufficient to hold ‘every disturbing thing’ about something distressing in your life. You do not need to remember everything, just visualise a container that is strong enough to hold it. Sometimes it helps to see yourself making it out of thick steel and welding the pieces together. Then create a hatch on the side of the container that allows you to take out a single issue and work on it without releasing the contents of the container. Material that is not fully processed or newly emerging can go back to the container through the same opening, which is locked when you are finished with it. On the container you can put a large sign ‘Only to be opened when needed.’

Take your time to elaborate this image. Visualise ‘every disturbing thing’ passing into the container and then seal it. There is no need to notice everything; it is enough to know that it is all there. If you have anything left over, then consider what percentage of ‘every disturbing thing’ remains uncontained? Then you can ask, ‘What help do I need to complete the process?’ You can see yourself receiving this help and completing the containment exercise. You can use a visual helper to get what remains into the container. This begins with the question, ‘Who could help you to get that remaining percentage into the container?’ Omaha called this an Alliance Resource.

Aarohi thought about the emotional turmoil of being stalked as a receptionist at a large Baptist church. In her imagination she built a concrete bunker with metre thick walls and a steel door. This was bolted with an iron bar and locked with a large padlock. She was able to ‘stuff’ her emotional turmoil into the bunker with the aid of her closest friend (who helped in her imagination). Her friend also helped her to lock the door. In therapy she ‘took out’ specific issues to work on, and she felt less stressed between sessions.

You may also feel some relief when this is done. You get to choose when and how you deal with difficult memories.

*Affirmation:* It is within my power to do something to feel safe.

*Warning:* You cannot banish emotions forever. The container exercise allows you space to work on an issue. You can use the visualisation to manage distress but not to avoid since, it will not get rid of difficulties. You will need to make an agreement with yourself to work on the issues as you feel stronger and more ready to engage. But you must work on them.

*To do:* Draw a picture of your container in your journal. If you find it difficult to visualise then drawing something first may help. This uses your imagination. Or you can use a different sense:

Molly found it difficult to imagine her container. She was not a naturally visual person. However, she could ‘hear’ it being constructed and felt it to be present and able to contain her issues.

I will now outline some additional strategies to assist you in the process of recovery.

## Mindfulness

Recovery from spiritual trauma has many challenges – like climbing a mountain in the Himalayas. You will need a basic level of emotional fitness to make it to the summit. For this reason, I will suggest some evidence-based psychological strategies, including mindfulness.

The idea of mindful noticing is in Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount:

Look at the birds of the air, they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, and how they grow; they are neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. (Matthew 6:26-29).

Mindfulness is all about focus. Noticing.

*To do:* Stop and listen. What do you hear? List five things. Listening in a focused way is a form of mindfulness.

Mindfulness is simply paying attention, internally or externally, in an accepting way. It is characterised by attention with gentle curiosity. Emotions are pieces of information, not facts. You could mindfully count the bricks in a wall or books on a shelf. It is about observing without judgement, without labelling.[[46]](#endnote-46) There is no pressure to be ‘perfect’. Mindfulness is not a religious practice. Psychologists tend to use it in a secular way.

Mindfulness now plays a significant role in psychological treatment. This includes Cognitive Behaviour Therapy and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. The effectiveness of such therapies has been shown through thousands of randomised controlled trials.

Mindfulness can be helpful when our minds are full of ‘speeding thoughts’. We become grounded, present and not tossed around by the uncontrolled negative thinking that is a common feature of trauma.

Ani felt most in the moment when her cat Claws was asleep in her lap. She loved running her fingers through his soft fur.

How is mindfulness different from meditation? There is a lot of common ground, but mindfulness does not encompass the idea of sustained concentration associated with meditation. It can be brief—just a few seconds or a minute or two. Hence it is accessible to all and does not require a developed skill or a high level of discipline.

*To do:* Look around you and notice anything that has the colour red. Blue. Yellow. And so on.

*Reflect:* Maybe you have had the experience of eating a packet of chips in front of the TV and later thinking that you have not tasted a single chip. Or reading a page in a book and not being able to recall what you have read.

This might be described as living on auto-pilot. Practising mindfulness can help you to anchor in the present and observe your thoughts and feelings without judging or pursing them. There is no need to get caught up in random thoughts. Simply observe. It provides a space-between. And it can help you to be more present in relationships and have a greater sense of connection.

The first step is to reclaim awareness. We can do this most easily with our usual daily activities: eating, household chores such as washing dishes, ironing or hanging out clothes. Any activity can be done mindfully. You could, for example, try being mindful in the shower. Simply notice the sensation of water hitting your body. No need to do anything extra, just notice.

Monica joined a mindfulness group in her local church. Initially she thought the exercises were boring, but then she noticed that some of her ‘brain fog’ was clearing up. She said, ‘It has been a few months, but I find that I can concentrate more and that is helpful in the weekly Bible study.’

*Mindfulness of Breath*: Use attention to your breathing to centre yourself. Practice this as you go to sleep – it will help you ‘climb aboard the snooze train’! It is important to *practice* mindfulness skills. Not just to try an exercise out. It is about a skill being available on demand, especially when you are in a dysregulated emotional state.

We can identify three components in mindfulness: you practice mindfulness *on purpose*, with an intention to focus; you *pay attention* to the contents of consciousness moment by moment; and you do it *in a particular way* or with an attitude of open-hearted non-judgment.

*Advice:* When you begin to practice being mindful or beginning a period of meditation start with a couple of minutes, then slowly build up to five and then 15 minutes.

*To do:* A useful application of mindfulness is Urge Surfing. I will use food as an example. I have type 2 diabetes, which I mostly control with diet rather than medication. I try to avoid carbohydrates. What if in the coffee time after church I spy a large chocolate chip cookie and feel tempted. Urge surfing would encourage me to observe the urge, watch as it becomes the stronger and more compelling, but then wait for it to pass the peak ‘of impulse to eat’ and then see the urge pass. I can walk away. The technique of urge surfing has been very useful in the treatment of addictions to alcohol and recreational drugs (although sometimes the cookie does win!).

If you have been coping with trauma by overusing alcohol, prescription medication or recreational drugs, try Urge Surfing. If you experience yourself repeatedly losing control, then see a mental health professional.

*To do:* As you practice some of these coping strategies, congratulate yourself when you have some ‘wins’. Improved outcomes are empowering and counter feelings of helplessness and shame.

It is important to understand that one of the goals of Safe Place Visualisation, Grounding and mindfulness practice is to create an internal sense of safety. This is an important step on the road to recovery from trauma. It is easy to experience life as always threatening, with a need to be on guard and hypervigilant. The only solid foundation is one built on safety.

The idea of having a spiritual focus for our thoughts is part of our Christian tradition. The Bible frequently talks about the spiritual benefit of meditation. The psalmist noted:

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take a path that sinners tread or sit in the seat of scoffers; But their delight is in the law of the Lord and on his law they *meditate* day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water which yield their fruit in due season and their leaves do not wither. In all they do they prosper. (Psalm 1:1–3)

There are some useful spiritual practices which can be practiced mindfully. These are found in the contemplative tradition of Christianity. I have never been particularly good at contemplation, since I tend to be impatient and given to hyperactivity, but even I have gained some benefit. This includes:

1. *Mindful breathing.* Extend the focus on breath to breathing in the Holy Spirit. The original understanding of spirit in the Hebrew language is breath.
2. *Repeating a Christian mantra* using a Bible verse such as ‘In the beginning God’ (Gen 1:1).

The Eastern Orthodox Church has a tradition of repeating a piece of liturgy or a Bible verse to help our mental focus on God. For example, ‘The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus’ (Philippians 4:7). Notice that the verse has both protective and encouraging aspects to keep the focus on our Lord.

*To do:* Try repeating ‘The peace of God passes all understanding.’ This phrase can become a repetitive prayer like breathing in and out, resting in the presence of Christ.

These spiritual exercises can be done prayerfully, with an openness to God, or to an amorphous spiritual dimension, or even the ‘best-in-us’. The Holy Spirit blows where God wills (John 3:8).

## Reconnect with your body

Trauma breaks connections. If your body has experienced abuse, you might feel it is safer to ‘shut it down’. This cut-off uses dissociation, and can have a range of symptoms including feeling tired, lightheaded, nauseous, foggy or numb. You might notice gaps in memory or a feeling of ‘lost time’.[[47]](#endnote-47) Dissociation is a useful defense mechanism to keep intolerable emotions and arousal states out of your awareness.

Brad had tried to rescue one of his youth group who was caught in a strong beach current which quickly took him out to sea. Brad was unsuccessful and the young boy died. Brad recalled, ‘It was like I was in a dream, well more a nightmare. Nothing seemed real.’

Marta was 8 years old when she was sexually abused by a church elder. She said, ‘I tried to disappear. Part of me would look at what happened from a distance. Removed.’

Connecting to your body will take time and commitment. Both grounding and mindfulness exercises are very useful.

It is good advice to respect the body’s need to rest. There is no benefit in pushing yourself when you are exhausted. Take a nap, do a guided relaxation exercise, get a massage. I like to play with Truff, our Lagotto dog, who is always willing to engage and distract me from any of my usual stresses.

*Reflect:* Can you learn to read your body? What negative beliefs do you have that are expressed in body sensations? You can use mindfulness to focus on your physical self and inner landscape.

Just as trauma was recorded in your body, your recovery will also be marked by changes in your physical self.[[48]](#endnote-48)

## Identify and manage negative thoughts

Negative thinking is often found in the aftermath of trauma. It is important to identify such thoughts and not to let them slip by unnoticed.

Letti felt that she was bombarded with negative thoughts such as, ‘I am worthless.’ Her Christian counsellor encouraged her to do a thought diary to keep track of what thoughts she had and the frequency. After a week she was surprised by how often her thoughts were negative and associated with a low mood.

Once negative thoughts are identified, you can try a technique from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy called thought diffusion. Begin with saying to yourself, ‘A thought is just a thought.’ A thought may sound authoritative, as if it was out of the mouth of an Old Testament prophet, but it is just a thought. Thoughts are what brains produce.

Sali identified his most common negative thoughts. He was encouraged by his clinical psychologist to visualise the thoughts as sky writing, then to watch the words break up. He also tried a visualisation in which he wrote the thoughts on a balloon and watched the balloon float away. This provided distance between him and the thoughts—a significant step in his eventual recovery.

## A note about rumination

The distinction has been made between reflective rumination, characterised by active problem-solving, and ruminative brooding which is trapped in negative thinking.

Anthony could not escape his thoughts. He experienced them as racing and ‘all consuming’. He continued, ‘I just keep going over the same things, time and time again. Nothing resolves. Nothing becomes clear. I am stuck.’

Sometimes recovery is delayed because a person will brood on what cannot be changed, ‘I should have done … to avoid this happening.’ This is an attempt to change what it is not possible to change.

*Reflect:* Think about how you might be able to accept past events.

Steps to break out of brooding on negative thoughts:

Step 1: Notice that it’s happening:

* Be aware of when your thoughts go around in circles, especially around regrets, fears or ‘what ifs’.
* Ask yourself: ‘Is this problem-solving, or am I getting nowhere?’

Step 2: Interrupt the thought stream:

* Say STOP out loud or in your head.
* Visualise a stop sign or imagine putting the thought in a container.

Step 3: Distract yourself:

Engage in a different activity

* Physical activity: Go for a walk, stretch or run on the spot.
* Sensory grounding: Run cold water over your hands. Name 5 things you see, hear, or feel.
* Focused task: Do something requiring concentration—reading, a crossword, on-line chess.

Step 4: Journal the thought:

* Set a timer (no more than 10 minutes) to write down the thought or worry.
* Distinguish what is in your control from what is not. Perhaps underline what you can do.
* Then close your journal and say, ‘Enough is enough; I will do something else.’

Step 5: Reframe the thought:

* Dispute negative or unhelpful beliefs:

‘Is this really true? Is it completely true?’

‘What would I say to a friend in this situation?’

‘Is there a more helpful or compassionate way to view this?’

Step 6: Practice Mindfulness:

* Focus on your breath, body, or sounds around you. Bring your mind back each time it wanders.

Step 7: Connect with others:

* Call a friend and talk, even if only briefly.
* Admit, ‘I’m stuck in my thoughts. I can break the cycle.’

Step 8: Set a ‘worry time’:

* Schedule 10 to 15 minutes daily to think about concerns.
* If a worry pops up outside that time, remind yourself: ‘I’ll think about this later in worry time.’

*Note:* Consistency is vital.

Brooding on negative thoughts is a habit. It takes some effort to replace it with new habits. Do not expect perfection; aim for progress.Top of FormBottom of Form

*Reflect:* Write in your journal how your life would be different today if it were not for the trauma. The negatives will come readily to mind, but include some positives.

## Try to be kind to yourself

*Thought experiment:*This will take about 10 seconds. Imagine the following:You have walked out your front door and forgotten your keys. You must return to your house. What are you saying to yourself? Hear the words, notice the tone. Are you kind or gentle on yourself?

In doing this experiment you might recognise the harsh voice of your Inner Critic. For many people the voice is familiar and running constantly. Bruising and even lacerating. Unfortunately, after trauma you may feel damaged, and this easily slides into feeling flawed and unworthy of love. The Inner Critic can be relentless. But rather than accepting its authority in your life, you could try to build self-compassion—being kind to yourself.

Dr Kristen Neff is a leading researcher in self-compassion. You can explore her findings at [www.self-compassion.org](http://www.self-compassion.org) Use her rating scale to gain some insight into how self-compassionate you might be – or not.

She has articulated three principles of self-compassion. Consider them three portals or door-ways to being more kind to yourself:

1. *Self-kindness versus self-judgment.* Self-compassion encourages you to relate to yourself with kindness and understanding, not harsh judgment. Sometimes it seems natural to be ‘tough’ on ourselves. We justify this with words like being ‘realistic’ or keeping our standards high. But I think it’s like punching yourself with the goal of making yourself stronger.

When we are self-critical it leads at the least to psychological bruises and probably depression; at worst to self-destructive urges. The person we most often injure through self-criticism is ourselves!

Begin to notice automatic self-talk. A thought diary can help. Once we notice we can also see how cutting it is to talk to ourselves that way.

1. *Feelings of common humanity versus isolation.* Do you expect yourself to be perfect? If you were to be perfect you would be a member of a very select group! (for Christians only Jesus would qualify). This is isolating. The alternative is to see your failures as part of a universal human experience. To be human is to err, to be imperfect. Understanding this can help us to feel connected to imperfect humanity. Christians might think of the Biblical ‘all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God’ (Romans 3: 23). Eastern religions recognise being finite or limited—but again being human. This is our common ground.

*Affirmation:* I am human. I make mistakes. It is natural for me to fall short of what I expect of myself.

This can lead to a dramatic shift in how we evaluate and speak to ourselves. It is an important step towards self-compassion.

1. *Mindfulness versus over identification.*Mindfulness encourages us to change our relationship with negative thoughts (which are associated with low moods). Symptoms are secondary; acceptance comes first.

*Remember:* A thought is just a thought. Self-compassion encourages the balance of holding painful thoughts and feelings in mindful awareness, rather than avoiding or being overly fused with them.[[49]](#endnote-49)

The first response from self-compassion is to recognise that we are hurting and to respond with care-of-self. This might be as simple as acknowledging that we feel an uncomfortable emotion—for example frustration about a situation—and then acknowledging that it is normal to feel that way. It is not the stoicism of ‘grin and bear it’; it is active in offering soothing and comfort to the self.[[50]](#endnote-50)

I had to practice self-compassion after an ex-patient murdered his estranged wife. While this happened a couple of years after my counselling with him, my therapy did not cure his homicidal tendency. I said to myself, ‘I am a ‘good enough’ but not perfect psychologist. I do some good work and I help people, but not everyone is cured.’

Ultimately any theology of self-compassion will rest on a theology of how God *sees* us. Does God love us? This seems easy to assert. But does God like us? Are we likeable? This implies ‘as we are’, which I think is more theologically confronting. James Alison is an influential theologian who has written *On being liked*. He is an openly gay Roman Catholic priest. By admitting this in a largely conservative church, Alison drew much criticism. Indeed, he was expelled from his religious order. He wrote, ‘God likes us. All of us. God likes me and I like being liked. It has nothing to do with whether we are good or bad, indeed, he takes it for granted that we are all more or less caught up in the sacred lie.’[[51]](#endnote-51) We have our categories, which we find hard to look beyond, but God’s category for us is created. And at the very least this means we are worthwhile to God.

The word love can be over-used. In Christian circles, according to Alison, it carries the sense of being forcefully rescued. But behind the word *liked* is an astonishing gentleness. Accepting this can lead to self-compassion.

*To do:* Use your imagination to see God or Jesus saying, ‘I like – (insert your name.)’ How does it feel?

Self-compassion is especially important for survivors of abuse. There is some tendency to see the self through the eyes of the perpetrator, with harsh judgement. This makes all the more need for self-compassion.

*To do:* You might feel it is helpful to ‘give voice’ to different aspects of yourself in your journal. Write what your Inner Critic has to say about an issue you are facing. Then respond with a self-compassionate voice. You can go back and forth with the dialogue. What does it feel like to believe the kinder voice?

*To practice:* The Loving Kindness Meditation has a long history of practice in Buddhism. It involves three steps:

1. Focus on your chest in the ‘heart area’. Feel the sensations as you breathe in. Repeat in your mind some kind thoughts about yourself.
2. Now let feelings of compassion go out to those you love. Visualise the love going out. Perhaps it can be a light or a colour.
3. Now allow the feelings to go out to all humanity. Include animals and plants. In this way you extend care globally.

This implies an ‘order of things’. It is important to begin with self-compassion before we can extend compassion to others.

*Reflect:* What are the ways in which you are compassionate? To yourself? To others?

## Resilience can lead to personal growth

Resilience implies adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress. Resilience involves ‘bouncing back’ from these difficult experiences. It can also involve profound personal growth. Developing resilience involves behaviours, thoughts and actions that anyone can learn and develop. Being flexible enough to adapt is an important key concept. It is like building muscles—increasing your resilience takes time. It is grounded in realistic optimism.

Take a moment to review this brief checklist from Cooper University Hospital covering the four core components of resilience. Set a goal of working on any area you feel needs more attention.

1. *Connections:* Plan connectionsto individuals and groups. Go on a weekly date night with your spouse. Plan a lunch out with a friend. Become active in civic groups, faith-based communities or other local organisations.
2. *Wellness mind and body:* Improve nutrition, sleep and hydration. Get regular exercise. Increase time in mindful journalling, yoga and other spiritual practices like prayer or meditation. Reduce or eliminate alcohol consumption or emotional eating.
3. *Meaning:* Help others, be proactive, focus on self-discovery. Volunteer with a local homeless shelter or simply support a friend. Be practical, asking yourself, ‘What can I do about a problem in my life?’ Break the answer down into manageable goals and tackle one at a time. Think of a hardship during which your relationships improved despite or because of the difficulty. Apply that to the present.
4. *Thinking:* Keep perspective, accept change, maintain hope and learn from your past. If you feel overwhelmed by a challenge, remind yourself that what happened to you is not an indicator of how your future will go, and that you are not helpless. Accept that change is part of life. Certain goals or ideals may no longer be achievable, so shift your attention to goals that are achievable. Visualise what you want, rather than worrying about what you fear. Think of past trials. Remind yourself of when you have been able to find strength, and ask yourself what you have learned from those experiences.

Rate yourself on these four domains from one to ten out of ten. Where do you need to improve? All of the above suggestions are practical and useful. Choose a few that appeal to you and notice the difference they make in your life.

Francesco was raised in a boy’s home and had a succession of foster parents. He was often abused, mostly with harsh discipline. However, he built up his resilience while serving ten years in the military. Although he saw active conflict, he did not develop PTSD. He helps with a church group providing meals to the homeless, ‘I am lucky, and I feel grateful to God. I want to give something back.’

*Reflect:* What messages about resilience did you receive as a child? Have you begun to re-evaluate these since you became an adult?

You can target various areas of resilience. Physical resilience can be built through regular exercise and eating a healthy diet. Think about what constitutes a ‘healthy gut’ (reduce sugar intake, consider supplements and identify any hidden food intolerances). A good sleep pattern is essential.

*To Do:* Google sleep hygiene and evaluate what you do.

Mental resilience is enhanced by a positive attitude that considers challenges as opportunities to grow. Emotional resilience is built up by processing emotions through your journalling or personal therapy. To increase social resilience it is important to stay connected to people in a supportive network. Consider ways to extend and build up your social network. And spiritual resilience is assisted by deepening your relationship to God through regular worship, prayer and Bible study. If you consider yourself more spiritual than religious, consider a pattern of connecting with nature.

*To do:* Choose a new activity to increase your resilience. Re-assess its effectiveness after a few weeks. If you do not notice a benefit, try something else.

What builds resilience is personal to you. It is not a fixed formula, so find what works.

*Reflect:* What strengths do you have on which you can build resilience? Tick any of the following: creativity, persistence, integrity, kindness, open-mindedness, prepared to learn, humility, gratitude, humour, hope, and a sense of responsibility,

## Use of medication in managing PTSD

When it comes to dealing with a significant trauma, we all start at different places. A ‘slow and steady’ recovery is likely to be the most stable. However, if you find yourself frozen with anxiety or stuck in a low mood, talk to your medical practitioner. You may need medication to help with a depressive disorder, especially if you are frightened of self-harm.

Trauma affects a number of internal processes in your body. You might, for example, notice states of hyperactivity. Certain medications can help to restore the balance.[[52]](#endnote-52)

Many survivors have found medication helps their recovery. If your normal resources, even aided by mindfulness practice, are insufficient then medication might be necessary.

Saanvi was nervous about taking the antidepressant medication prescribed by her doctor. She said, ‘I thought that if I had enough faith, prayer would work and God would heal me. But I could hardly get out of bed. And I had dark thoughts about how much better it would be if I was dead.’ She began taking Prozac and after a week or two she felt calmer. Her pastoral counsellor was delighted when she was able to do her homework exercises, and gradually her mood lifted.

The most appropriate medication to treat PTSD is usually determined by a psychiatrist. Most commonly the first line of treatment is antidepressants, for example the class of medication called Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs), which includes Prozac. Typically such medication will reduce symptoms of re-experiencing, hyperarousal, and avoidance. If these prove ineffective, then Serotonin-Norepinephrine Reuptake Inhibitors (SNRIs)such as Effexor may be tried. Sometimes Prazosin is used to treat PTSD-related nightmares and sleep disturbances. Mood stabilisers and atypical antipsychotics can be tried if other approaches fail. Note that antidepressant medication takes two to three weeks to be effective. It is tempting to use benzodiazepine drugs, such as Valium, for anxiety, but these are highly addictive.

*To do:* Make a list of your current medications. Underline any that have a psychological effect. If you have a long list, it is best to review it with your medical practitioner.

## Defence mechanisms don’t necessarily promote resilience

Psychological defence mechanisms are constructed to protect you from experiencing your pain. They take many forms. You may try to shut down all feelings, wearing a kind of ‘body armour’. You may find yourself becoming overly self-reliant, or the opposite, being overly dependent on people close to you. While a defence mechanism may initially help you to cope, it can make you more vulnerable in the long run.

*Note:* Realistically, not everybody recovers from trauma. A number of maintaining factors have been identified: drug or alcohol abuse; self-demeaning thoughts; withdrawal from family friends and other social supports such as community and religious groups; not seeking professional help; and anger, resentment and depression.[[53]](#endnote-53)

The healing journey is not a straight line. It has many twists and turns. It is where you end up that counts. Aim to stabilise and feel safe. Then to return to some kind of functioning since your responsibilities do not cease.

## When a coping strategy fails

A major focus of this chapter has been on managing anxiety or high arousal levels, which are often symptoms of trauma. What if you try a given technique and it doesn’t work? Think it is helpful to track your arousal levels by rating them on a scale from one to ten. For example, if you are highly anxious and the verge of a panic attack, it is unlikely that anything other than an antianxiety medication is likely to help. Each of the techniques including mindfulness, grounding and containing have a range of effectiveness. You might find that you are too distracted by negative thoughts to do mindfulness, but you might be able to manage a safe place visualisation. Then use what works. As you work to better regulate uncomfortable emotions, use a trial and error process to get a sense of what works at various levels of arousal. This is practical and sensible.

Magda was recovering after a serious motor vehicle accident. She found that she was waking in the middle of the night on the verge of a panic attack. She tried a number of techniques but with little success. Her GP recommended having a warm bath to relax her muscles and Magda found that this was helpful and would reduce her anxiety to about five our of ten, which she managed with other techniques that worked at a lower level.

It is important to experiment and find what works for you.

*Affirmation:* I am committed. Nothing will stop me finding solutions that work for me.

## Conclusion

You may have found yourself shattered after a spiritual trauma. This is understandable. First you need to find what is helpful to facilitate your recovery, with attention given to establishing a Safe Place, Grounding, Containment and mindfulness. Not everyone recovers from a traumatic experience. There are significant barriers, including shame from the abuse, alienation from people who are considered normal, personality characteristics such as a ‘stiff upper lip’, and cultural factors such as explaining away trauma in a fatalistic way.[[54]](#endnote-54) But reading this book and engaging with the exercises gives realistic hope. Resilience helps you both to resist if you are targeted for abuse and to recover if you have been abused.

The treatment of trauma is constantly advancing through research and practical application. A quality of neuroplasticity has been identified in a brain affected by trauma. This is an inherent capacity to adapt. We can build on cognitive flexibility to enable repair and growth.

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# Chapter 5 About Progress to Recovery

There is no single path for recovery. We will explore a number of ways forward in this chapter. Some, such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, are evidence-based.

The most effective treatments involve visualisation. I introduced this technique with Safe Place. Using your ‘mind-sight’ is more active than just talking about what happened (though of course that is also essential). Being visual engages different pathways in the brain and potentially touches unconscious beliefs.

Stanley is a policeman who was involved in a violent encounter with an extremist religious group. Shots were fired. He was sent by his medical practitioner to a clinical psychologist because he suffered from insomnia and broken sleep. A diagnosis of PTSD was made. As part of the treatment he was asked to rate his distress level as he visualised events of that day. As his distress raised, he was encouraged to see the events as more distant. This helped him to tolerate his rising anxiety and he could better manage the exposure to what he experienced.

The past is not past. Imagery work makes significant past events feel present. There are highly effective therapies that rely on visual exposure, which make the injury less toxic by habituation (getting used to it). I prefer the visualisation approach of Schema Therapy, which employs rescripting.

*A positive visualisation.* Can you identify something you would have liked to hear from your mother or father? When you arrive at a single sentence, visualise yourself as a child and see your parent saying what you wanted to hear. Try to hear the words in his or her voice. See your parent looking at you and speaking the words in a soft and comforting way.

Astrid could not remember her mother saying, ‘I love you.’ Unfortunately, her mother had died years before and Astrid would never have that opportunity in real life. However, she was able to visualise herself as a young child giving her mother a hug and her mother spontaneously saying, ‘I love you.’ She found this enormously comforting.

## Rescripting a negative experience

Try this exercise, which will illustrate how Schema Therapy visualisation works. Recall an incident from your childhood in which you felt intimidated. Perhaps while you were at school. Do you have a sense of how threatening the experience was? Do not select an incident that was life changing or had severe consequences. If, in doing the exercise, you feel emotionally overwhelmed immediately, shift to your Safe Place (this was why the Safe Place was established first!). Try to see the people who were intimidating you as if you are holding a video camera. Feel the threat. Now visually shrink the people to about six inches tall. They are saying the same things but in a squeaky voice. How do you feel?

Note that this exercise incorporates a past incident that was distressing. You experience it again through visualisation. And it is rescripted to become safe. This is what Schema Therapy and other therapies do in rescripting.[[55]](#endnote-55)

The steps I have advised so far should be uncomfortable but tolerable. I know I am repeating myself, but I recommend if possible seeing an experienced mental health professional to engage with you in trauma recovery, especially if you have received a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

I would like to think that most people can attend treatment, but you may be limited by lack of access or limited financial resources. If you are motivated to work on your issues but for any reason you cannot see a therapist, then think about the psychological injuries you have suffered. I assume that you have written them down. If there are different aspects or a number of incidents, rate each on a distress level of one to ten. Start with the least painful and work carefully through the list.

1. *Visualise your Safe Place*. See the door to enter if you need to enter later in the exercise.

*Warning:* When you start visualising a negative experience you may find a sharp increase in your level of distress, as if you were back in the scene that you are remembering. This can be quite surprising and it may feel like an ambush, but it is just a result of the memory activating a neural network. You have experienced being triggered. The increase in anxiety is perfectly normal. When this neural circuit is activated, you are in the old ‘movie’ again.

1. *Identify and visualise a support figure.* For the Christian this can be Jesus, an angel or a saint. Pick someone kind (and strong!).
2. *You can make a choice* between shutting your eyes and seeing the scene again. If this is too threatening, try reading aloud your written account of what happened. This allows more emotional distance. Even reading the written account includes an element of visualisation. If you choose to see the encounter, initially place the figures at a comfortable distance. This will help you to regulate your emotions.
3. *Change the ending.* Find the point when you feel you lost control in the incident. Stop the video. You have the remote control in your hand. Nothing bad can happen now. Imagine a different ending. Become aware of your feelings. Consider what you needed emotionally at the time.
4. *Strong enough?* Do you consider yourself now to be a strong enough person to have dealt with that incident? If so, then picture yourself entering as an adult. If necessary, bring some powerful people to protect you. For example, you might see a policeman enter the scene to arrest the offender and later have Jesus comfort you. Remember that you can call on your ally anytime you want.
5. *Find a confident phrase.* Put your corrective experience into one phrase expressing your new insight like ‘Today I can protect myself.’ Or ‘Today I can go for help and get support.’

*To do*: If you plan to face a traumatic memory using some of the principles of Schema Therapy, note that it does not require exposure to the whole scene. Do not replay the whole incident—only go to the point when you feel threatened. A positive outcome is what matters. You do this by changing the ending so that you feel safe and cared for at the end of the exercise. Feel that fully in your body. This will help to anchor the emotional change associated with that memory.

Martin was troubled by intrusive images of an incident when he was threatened at gunpoint. He was serving as a pilot with Missionary Air Fellowship and a rebel group threatened to take him hostage. Martin visualised the sequence of events leading up to seeing the rebels, prior to weapons being raised, and he changed the ending to visualise one where he took a different path through the village and avoided the rebel group.

Keep asking yourself: What did I need as a child or as an adult being abused? You may be surprised that visualising a different ending will often change how you feel. Memory is ‘plastic’, which means it can change. Emotional meaning can be modified, which is the point of the rescripting.

It has been said that a memory of a past event is actually the memory *of the most recent memory* of the event, not of the event itself. This is reassuring when it comes to disturbing memories.

Selma had an affair with the pastor of her church. She was filled with shame and regret when it became known. She lost close friends ‘in Christ’. In retrospect she could see incidents of mutual flirting. She admitted, ‘I played my part in “the dance”. When I visualise what happened, I get to the point where I was invited to have coffee at the manse, but now I see myself saying no. I can stop the music. The dance stops. It feels good to regain control and to maintain a healthy boundary.’

*Reflective Exercise:* Look through an album of your childhood photos. Talk to your spouse or partner about the memories brought back by this tour ‘down memory lane’. List any photos that arouse upsetting memories to work on with visualisation. For example, you may find a photo of the church where you worshipped as a child. Since you have a visual image, it is very natural to work visually.

Amir (age 47) was a senior consultant to large corporations. He recalled a time when the deputy headmaster at his boarding school, a prestigious Anglican school, repeatedly beat him with a cane for minor infractions of school rules. He had bruises that would last a week or longer. Amir was nine years old at the time. This memory was rescripted to seeing the teacher stopped before the abuse occurred, taken away by police and prosecuted for child-related violence. He visualised being comforted by the house mistress whom he admired and trusted.

## Dealing with threats

Often abuse is reinforced by threats. First, realistically assess the danger to you. This can lead to the practical step of safety planning. Identify safe zones. Think about who are safe people and include their phone numbers in your speed-dial. Have an exit strategy or emergency plan.

If the threat is controllable, use problem-focused coping: identify the actual threat, break it into manageable parts and develop an action plan. If the threat is not controllable, use emotion-focused coping: seek support from a friend, practice mindfulness, and use journalling.

Can you reframe the threat? For example, ‘This is a test of my faith.’ Or ‘God will protect me.’ You can use visualisation to make threats less toxic. See the abuser shrunk to three inches high and speaking in a squeaky voice. With less power the threats may seem absurd. You can disregard any threatened consequences. Can you visualise angels to protect you?

*Warning:* Be realistic about any physical threat(s). You may need to talk to the police and consider seeking a court order. Be cautious about any indication of risk.

A perpetrator of incest will often make threats. You might feel there is a danger of losing your family. In a similar way an abusive pastor can threaten exclusion from your Christian community. Realistically assess this possibility and get advice.

## Some myths about trauma

Schwartz argued that we need to reject certain myths about trauma:

* 1. ‘Time heals all wounds.’ Not necessarily. It is essential to take an active role in the recovery and healing process.
  2. ‘You must expose yourself in an aggressive way to the most disturbing aspects of the trauma.’ This is an unhelpful attitude which denies the survivor control of the recovery process. Exposure is helpful, but not what has been called ‘flooding’. Safe and controlled levels of exposure are essential and recommended in this book.
  3. ‘You should be over this by now.’ Not necessarily. There is no timeline. Your continuing pain is not a sign that you are doing anything wrong.[[56]](#endnote-56)

*Affirmations:* Can you say to yourself (and believe) the following: I am contributing to the healing process. I trust that I am doing what is healthy for me.I will know the best time to make changes. I can depend on God, who will not ask more from me that I am able to give. Take a moment to say each. Can you make them into a prayer?

## Conscious and unconscious: exploring hidden beliefs

Some areas of injury are not obvious. We will look at hidden beliefs, in order to bring healing to all levels of your psyche. This section is challenging. Hopefully, you will find it helpful to plunge into what is little known.

Some negative beliefs remain ‘out of sight’—unconscious and therefore not easily accessible. Obviously, unrecognised assumptions are hard to change.

There have been many attempts to name and explore a hidden realm of psychological activity. Sigmund Freud first identified the ‘unconscious’. Psych 101 courses often refer to what Arthur Reber called ‘implicit learning.’ This concept appeals to me because it emphasises learning without words. Indeed, there is much that we learn but find difficult or impossible to articulate in words.

*Reflect:* Think about an activity that you do but cannot easily describe how it is performed. You may know how to ride a push-bike or drive a car. You know how to act appropriately in a variety of social situations. This just touches the surface of the countless important things we have learned but lack words to describe.

What exactly is unconscious learning?[[57]](#endnote-57) Consider your psychological beginnings. Your earliest assumptions about people and the way things are. We begin to speak at about 18 months old. But we were never a ‘blank slate’. We learn much by that age (from the womb!). This learning may lack words, but many lessons derive from the first years of life.

Robbie was a ‘child of the manse’ but had a disturbed childhood. His father had frequent rages; his mother was submissive, ineffectual, and a perpetual victim. Robbie was slow to learn to speak, well after two years old, but he had learnt much about how families work.

What do you think Robbie has learnt about male and female relationships? Who is more powerful? Whose needs get met? How? If Robbie acts on this learning, what kind of partner or husband do you think he will be?

Kylie was Robbie’s younger sister. She grew up in the same home. At 15 she became pregnant to the high school ‘bad boy’. He did drugs and was increasing violent when he was on methamphetamines. He kept asking her to ‘look out for him’ when he burgled houses to support his habit. Kylie had low self-confidence, but something stopped her agreeing to be a criminal accomplice. She sought counselling, and this helped her think more clearly about the future she wanted for herself and her child.

What Robbie and Kylie learned in their dysfunctional family has been called emotional learning by Bruce Ecker,[[58]](#endnote-58) though I prefer the term unconscious learning.

Seeing dysfunctional unconscious learning in a person can be like watching a disaster unfold. For both Robbie and Kylie their understanding ‘about the way things are’ had been laid down like railway tracks before words formed in their minds. This is unconscious or non-articulated learning. It is simply a way of learning what is ‘normal’ in life, how to act and how to treat others. Unfortunately, it is also learning about how intimidation and violence can control a family. This leaves a silent legacy.

## Low self-esteem is a risk factor for becoming a victim of abuse

Earlier, low self-esteem was identified as a risk factor for being vulnerable to abuse. This is a good example of unconscious learning, because self-esteem is a felt sense of having personal value. Something has been learnt without words. Often a foundation for low self-esteem was built in the first years of life through deficits in nurture. It can be the result of emotional neglect, speech that belittles and rejecting behavior by parents. The toxic cocktail might have included chaotic caring. Then it makes emotional sense to feel worthless. What follows the feeling is the words, ‘I hate myself’ or ‘I’m bad.’ It is easy to see the link between low self-esteem in a child and later being vulnerable to abuse. The ability to protest is undermined by unconscious beliefs such as, ‘I have no right to refuse.’

## How might this change?

The first step is to discover unconscious learning. I have found that sentence completion is one of the most effective ways. Ecker wrote about ‘naming into awareness.’[[59]](#endnote-59) Sentence completion is illustrated in the following:

Freya wondered why she felt so unworthy when she received the mass in her Roman Catholic church. She talked to the priest in a counselling session. He suggested: ‘Try this. Complete the sentence I am bad because … Think about this and we can talk tomorrow.’

Freya was surprised by the answer she thought of: ‘I’m bad because I have freckles.’ She recalled her experience of being teased and shamed as a child at a church school because she had red hair and freckles. She judged herself as not just different but ugly, and she wanted to hide. At the core of herself, she concluded that she was bad. This is an example of dysfunctional learning that affected her sense of worthiness before God—which attending worship brought back to her.

*To do:* Try for yourself the following stem: ‘The most important thing I learned as a child was …’

A friend did this and ended the sentence with ‘You’re on your own, kid!’ This message revealed his hidden learning, providing a script of self-sufficiency throughout his life.

I tried this sentence completion myself. I was surprised by my ending: ‘It’s hard to be noticed.’ I recalled that my parents were emotionally entangled. While my basic needs were met, there was not a lot of noticing of me. This message explained my narcissistic quest to be noticed. I can now see that was the basis of my unconscious learning, which has shaped my adult life. It is something I now accept as a mixed blessing, since it has driven me to some success, which I now enjoy.

*Reflect:* You might like to try some of the following sentence completions:

* As a child I learned that I must …
* I always accepted that I have to … with people I love.
* If I do something different, then the result will be …
* What I never question about myself is …

Try writing out four or five different completions to each stem. Then look over the list. Do any feel emotionally charged? This is a signal that your response is likely to contain unconscious learning. Then refine the sentence until every word feels 100 per cent right.

If nothing comes, then shift to another sensory pathway. For example, a visual image or a sound or a sense of touch may come. Stay with that sensation and see where it leads you. Then try to express what you feel in words.

When you have a statement that feels absolutely true, write it on a card and look at it once a day. Do nothing else in relation to the sentence for a week, or maybe two weeks. You might find that you are starting to question what you have written. Does another perspective arise? Do you start to question what you initially felt so certain about? You are in a process to challenge your unconscious learning.

Also try this referring to early decisions you might have made:

* My most important decision as a child was to …
* One commitment I never question is …
* I have always known that I must …

When you first try the sentence completion exercise, you may encounter a wall of resistance. This is a good indication that something is present outside your awareness. It is as if you are in a boat and hit something in the water, unseen, that blocks your way. It is time to acknowledge and explore that. Resistance to completing a sentence is *significant* because it will be based on prior learning. Persist. Trial and error is fine, since it allows for a process of discovery.

*Try:* What’s blocking me is …

An important theological point is that God wants you to recover. Reflect on the passage of Isaiah 61:1–3: ‘The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because he has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favour, the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.’ This is an amazing list of promises to enable your full recovery.

*Reflect:* As a first step, can you see yourself *willing* to change? Can you see yourself making choices? Perhaps inviting something new and different.

## Self-care: radical acceptance

To be utterly practical, what if your trauma does not fully resolve? Years later you may still be triggered. Or your may have difficulty finding a satisfying relationship. Maybe you suffer from the internal lacerations of the inner critic. Laura Anderson talks about a trauma legacy which can be lifelong.[[60]](#endnote-60)

Rosa went on a mission trip to Thailand. She was assaulted in a robbery. She was thrown to the ground injuring her back. She was left with a permanent limp and occasional back pain. She was advised that medical treatment could do nothing more for her condition.

I suggest radical acceptance, a technique that many people have found useful for living with a permanent condition or injury.

Radical acceptance does not mean giving up. It is not resignation. It is an emotional decision ‘I will accept this inescapable reality’. I am reminded of a line I read in a novel recently ‘the world never turned out the way you wanted it to. It simply turned. And you hung on.’ (*Still Life* by Louise Penny)

Radical acceptance is about accepting what is outside of your control. There is no judgment. This breaks the link of attachment to pain. For example, grief is felt fully, but the link to needless suffering is broken. This means [watching your thoughts](https://www.verywellmind.com/mindfulness-meditation-88369) and feelings to identify when you are allowing yourself to feel worse than absolutely necessary.

*How to:* Radical acceptance is about saying yes, accepting without judging. It takes practice to keep saying yes when you want to say no!

This is not a surrender to despair. Perhaps it is best expressed in the Alcoholics Anonymous serenity prayer, ‘God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.’

## How is radical acceptance applied in psychology?

Acceptance will start with emotions. Your emotions can be likened to a floating cork. It takes energy to keep a cork under water. Equally it takes energy to suppress negative emotions. Think about all the good things you could use that energy for! Acceptance stops pushing the cork down and allows the cork to bob on the water, just floating and going with the ripples on the surface.

A psychologist will apply the principle of radical acceptance with inescapable physical pain or an incurable disease, but will encourage the patient to live life to the maximum—even at the cost of more pain.

Radical acceptance has many benefits. I have had seven years to come to terms with a diagnosis of Parkinson’s disease. There are many ways in which I am fortunate: late diagnosis, relatively slow progress and symptoms which are not currently disabling. Of course, my long-term prognosis is grim, but I intend to maximise every year of relative good health. I want to keep serving in ministry, to enjoy travel and to delight in my life with Ann, our dog Truff and my wider family. I can honestly say I have not had one day of depression since the diagnosis, largely because I have approached Parkinson’s with radical acceptance. This is not to make any promises about the future. I may have times of depression, but for the moment I will take it day by day and enjoy my quality of life.

*Reflect for a moment* about what you find hardest to accept in your life. Visualise it if you can or think of something that represents that reality. Now ask God to help you accept it. Does it make any difference?

Sandra’s marriage ended when her husband left. She said, ‘I knew we had problems but I wanted to work on our relationship. But that was not my choice to make.’

Life is relentlessly mixed: there are examples of beauty and incredible generosity, of selfless love but equally random events which none of us can control. Sometimes people will act badly and abuse others. Radical acceptance encompasses the totality of experience and enables us to better lives as followers of Christ in a challenging world.

*Note:* There is a tension, perhaps paradox, between pushing for healthy change and accepting what we cannot change.

The focus is not on the problem, whether it be depression, anxiety or the remnants of trauma, but on our *relationship* to the problem. Hence radical acceptance or letting go.

## Conclusion

Visualisation brings what needs to change into sharp focus. It is immediately accessible, and it does not have the last word. You can use rescripting, and fashion a different ending to a past traumatic experience. We looked below the surface, and what came into focus was unconscious learning. When unacknowledged, the beliefs we learn unconsciously can shape life ‘for good or ill’. Some practical suggestions were offered to discover such beliefs and to challenge them. And when nothing else works? Radical acceptance.

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# Chapter 6 Spiritual trauma: a two step recovery

After suffering spiritual abuse, resulting in trauma, how do we navigate a way forward?

I suggest a two-step process. First deal with the emotional impact of the abuse. Commonly you re-live the abuse through intrusive memories and being over aroused.

Second, recover from the injury to your spiritual self.

Ioannis was raised in a devout Methodist family. He was sexually abused by a minister when taking confirmation classes. The church admitted fault, and he received some financial compensation, which he wisely invested in therapy. First, over a couple of years he saw a psychiatrist, who helped him to recover from trauma-related symptoms. Then he had sessions with a nun, a qualified social worker, who helped him regain his trust in the church as an institution. Ioannis said, ‘I needed to discover God as a loving father, rather than as someone harsh and judgmental. I gained a fresh appreciation of Jesus. And I needed to see the church as a mixed community, including mostly good but some bad people.’

## Recovery from abuse

People with deviant motives often ‘hide out’ in a church or religious institution. This can mask appalling acts. The range of bad behaviors is almost limitless. Regrettable but too often true. This can lead to a betrayal of the duty of care. Abuse can also include sexual grooming and molestation. At more extreme levels, violence can be involved leading to rape or murder of a loved one. Clearly there are many pathways to psychological injury.

It is tragic when abusers believe that they are empowered by religious belief. In a perverse way they will even justify the abuse with Bible verses taken out of context. Jesus never intended his teachings or example to be used to diminish those who follow him. However, spiritual encounters, because they are often intimate, can provide an opportunity for abuse.

*Principle:* What is best in us can be corrupted.

## A way forward?

If you feel you have been abused in a church or religious context, initially it is helpful to establish the facts of what happened. Make this as factual as possible. It may be used later for legal purposes. Sadly, the church or a religious agency may not welcome and rarely supports a report of abuse. But you can record what you recall and provide evidence if needed.

Once you have a clear sense of the facts, you can take what you can recall and any notes to make a full written account.

Michelle had no reason to mistrust Andrew. He was a seminary student. They had been dating for six months and were talking about marriage. Unfortunately, Andrew had a gambling problem and gained access to her savings account. All this came out after Michelle noticed $5,000 was missing.

In this example, Michelle’s therapist encouraged her to record her relationship with Andrew and include her emotional reaction as events unfolded. She also retained all her financial records for the process of mediation and possible reimbursement.

*To do:* To bring in spiritual resources, consider opening your written account with a prayer. This might be ‘Lord help me to accept the following …’ Also you can conclude with a prayer, ‘God, thank you for helping me to survive what happened and to recover.’

## Exposure

An essential component of treating trauma is exposure. This is hard, because we may want to deny what is unpleasant and avoid negative feelings such as betrayal. While this is natural, the process of recovery comes to a stop when the abuse is denied.

Michelle was encouraged to read her account of the financial exploitation once a day for the next few weeks. She added to it when she recalled any new details. She found reading it aloud helpful. This made the injury more objective, indeed ‘out there’—like removing a splinter from under her skin. The flood of emotions could be worked through and better managed. Michelle said to her therapist, ‘I found that I no longer woke in the middle of the night with nightmares of being chased. And when I thought about it, I didn’t feel overwhelmed with emotions. Gradually the anger changed to regret.’

Inevitably trauma is intrusive. Raw memories can become part of the problem and can ambush the survivor in unexpected ways.

## Managing difficult emotions

Anger is natural following abuse. It is an expression of ‘I protest!’ To deny its validity can result in questioning your sense of reality. Some Christians think that being angry is sinful, but as Paul advised that the two are not the same (Ephesians 4:26). But if your anger is explosive it can drive the people closest to you away. There is useful advice on the Internet to help you shift from the extremes of being passive or aggressive to being assertive. If this is a difficulty you face, give your attention to learning the skill of assertiveness.

Survivors of abuse often feel shame. You might feel this because of the abuse you suffered, even if objectively you did nothing wrong. Shame is different from guilt, which is specific—‘I feel guilty about taking that last cookie.’ Shame is a whole body experience—‘I want to disappear.’ The gaze of others is intensely uncomfortable.

Dr Shaminka Mangelsdorf, clinical psychologist, has developed a sophisticated model of shame.[[61]](#endnote-61) She notes that shame is a social emotion; it arises in the context of relationships with self and others. There is a back and forth dynamic within an individual and between them and the people around them. The driver of shame is the desire for social acceptance, since it provides a sense that something unacceptable has happened. Whereas guilt drives the individual toward repair, shame commonly drives distance in relationships if it is not dealt with.

Mangelsdorf identifies three distinct, yet overlapping, ‘flavours’ of shame. Often all are present at once, but sometimes one is more prominent than the others.

These components are:

1. *Judgement* leading to a sense of exposure.
2. *Contempt* leading to a sense of rejection.
3. *Disgust* leading to a sense of being undeserving, almost in my word contaminated.

Each comes with its own action urges, which when acted upon, can perpetuate a sense of shame: blame of others, grandiosity when talking about the self, and self-sabotage.

The way out of shame in each case is to adopt strategies such as self-compassion and opposite action (acting in a way that is the opposite of how you feel):

1. *Taking responsibility*, which first involves non-judgemental awareness or humility.
2. *Being known*, which first involves identifying as a normal human being with flaws but part of common humanity. A sense of grace helps.
3. *Moving towards* extending kindness towards one’s self and others.

Your spirituality can help you to cope with shame.

It is important to acknowledge painful emotions: anger, hurt, humiliation, embarrassment. Simply name them. And turn towards them, not away. There is no healing in avoidance.

Georgie was sexually abused by a teacher in a Roman Catholic school. She felt intense shame and guilt. In counselling she decided that a healing ritual would be helpful to deal with her toxic feelings. She went to a traditional church with a confessional box. She said, ‘The priest assured me that it was abuse and that I was not at fault. Emotions are not always rational. I felt better.’

*To do:* Google a list of emotions. Print off the sheet and circle any that are difficult for you.

There is well-established research that indicates that self-esteem is increased when avoidance ceases. A challenge is faced. An inner battle won.[[62]](#endnote-62)

## Window of tolerance

Many survivors of abuse fear being overwhelmed by frightening thoughts, negative emotions and uncomfortable physical sensations. It is tempting to avoid or emotionally shutdown. But this freezes your recovery. Unexpressed emotions build up and surface as tension in the body resulting in headaches, tight shoulders or difficulties with digestion.[[63]](#endnote-63)

Daniel Siegel developed the idea of a ‘window of tolerance’ which indicates a zone of arousal you can manage.[[64]](#endnote-64) This idea is widely used in the treatment of trauma. You can apply it yourself. Think about a time, in relation to the trauma, when you were triggered. Perhaps you experienced overwhelming flashbacks. You felt out of control, even to the point of a panic attack. Rate this experience as nine out of ten.

At the other end of the spectrum, rate feeling completely calm while acknowledging the trauma as one out of ten. Now fill in the steps in between so you can rate any experience related to the trauma. Identify a tolerable zone which is stretching. Usually this is in the range of six to eight out of ten. It is best if you can manage your exposure to this range, since it will facilitate healing but not the loss of control. Using the window of tolerance can also help to counter dissociation (feeling cut-off).

You can use grounding, mindfulness, and other coping strategies to expand your range of tolerance. In facing the legacy of your trauma, you are doing the opposite of avoidance. You are taking realistic steps towards a full recovery. And you will find, in surprising ways, opportunities to grow.

## Hot spots

There may be aspects of the trauma which are highly triggering. We can think of these as ‘hot spots’. They may be associated with intense flashbacks and require special attention. When you begin to process such aspects of the trauma, pay special attention to your safety measures and emotional supports.

Theo witnessed a terrorist attack. He reacted strongly to the screaming voices which featured in his frequent flashbacks. In visualisation with his therapist, he was encouraged to see the events more in the distance. This enabled him to experience the screams in a more muffled way. Eventually he was able to better manage the flashbacks.

*Reflect:* If you are experiencing ‘hot spots’ which you find difficult to manage, is it time that you had assistance from a mental health professional?

## Treatment strategies for nightmares

You need not suffer repeated nightmares. Some strategies have been proven to be effective. Imagery Rehearsal Therapy (IRT) works best with repeating trauma-related nightmares. You write down your nightmare in your journal and then modify it (rescript) to a non-distressing version and then mentally replay ‘the altered dream’ at least once a day. Perhaps just before going to bed.

It is also helpful to practice sleep hygiene (Google for advice) to improve your quality of sleep. Also check out Exposure, Relaxation, and Rescripting Therapy (ERRT). There is also Lucid Dreaming Therapy which you are taught how to become aware you are in a dream and can choose to change the outcome.

## Eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR)

In 1987 Francine Shapiro discovered that certain eye movements appeared to reduce the intensity of disturbing thoughts. She developed eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR) therapy, which has proven to be an evidence-based treatment for trauma.Her assumption was that traumatic or disturbing experiences can become ‘frozen’ in the brain in an unprocessed form. EMDR helps reprocess these memories, so they become integrated and less distressing. The treatment involves bilateral brain stimulation through eye movement (it can include bilateral tapping). Shapiro wrote the popular *Getting Past Your Past* (a layperson’s guide to EMDR, published 2018). However, my advice would be to get treatment by an accredited therapist in EMDR.

Fatima had EMDR treatment. What she found helpful was seeing the face of her rapist at a greater distance. She said, ‘His face used to be a few inches away, now he appears about two meters away.’ This provided some emotional space and considerable relief.

The successful processing of memories also involves what Schwartz called ‘dual awareness’[[65]](#endnote-65). This is the ability to maintain awareness of the present moment while simultaneously addressing the memories related to the traumatic event. It is, of course, difficult to do this emotionally when you are triggered. But if you can achieve this it means you have made significant progress.

## Trauma and the body

Trauma has a profound effect on the body. Dr Basil van der Kolk explored the link between physical and emotional aspects of trauma in *The body keeps the score* (2015).[[66]](#endnote-66) The body holds memories of what happened and provides feedback about the impact. You might find it difficult to relax. Notice your posture; it can point to your emotions. You may have tightness in the throat if you could not cry out for help. Schwartz recommends that once you are aware of patterns of tension in your body, you should make small changes in your breath, posture, eye contact and body movement. How does it feel to take up more space?[[67]](#endnote-67)

The body can indicate physical symptoms as entry points for change.[[68]](#endnote-68) You become aware of the way an experience is managed and how it can be expanded. Challenge yourself to be motivated by curiosity rather than fear. Can it be fun and playful?

*To Do:* If you feel tension in your jaw, you might try scrunching up your face. Then the opposite to totally relax—become a ‘jelly face’. Another strategy is to identify where in your body you feel discomfort. Then imagine a tap in your head washing the sensation out through your fingers and toes.

## How do you see God?

Spiritual trauma contaminates all that is healthy and good. The benefits of spirituality are undermined. Hence, the destructive effects are potentially more extensive than psychological trauma alone. We need to consider how the image of God can be distorted.

It is important to ‘take stock’ of your spiritual beliefs. Have you noticed a change since you experienced spiritual trauma? Jacob and Rachael Denhollander observed that safety, compassion, love, security and care are all corrupted by the perpetrator of abuse.[[69]](#endnote-69) Think about the following areas:

1. *Image of God.* Describe in your journal how you see God. How do you see Jesus Christ? Do you have a sense that God is loving and generous? Do you believe that God’s love extends to you?
2. *Religious leaders.* Do you think that most (not all!) faith leaders are trustworthy. Can you receive ministry from a pastor or elder when you need it? Do you participate in religious rituals such as regular worship? Are you open to new insights in a Bible study group?
3. *Beliefs.* Are your religious beliefs broadly compatible with your denomination or faith tradition? If your beliefs have changed, is that change the result of prayerful consideration? Sometimes our beliefs change for the better, but good changes are not likely when we are driven by emotional reactivity.
4. *Community.* Can you belong? Do you participate in the give-and-take of healthy relationships with other members of your faith group? Do you believe that most people in your religious tradition are trustworthy? Can you participate in rituals such as baptism, weddings and Holy Communion?

*Reflect:* Once you have clarified your thinking, you might find it helpful to talk over any changes in your beliefs with one of the spiritual leaders in your tradition. Clearly choose someone you trust, and who is open and not judgmental. This is helpful to get a sense of whether your beliefs and attitudes are healthy in terms of your religious background. If you find that there is a significant divergence, assess whether the difference represents progress that has taken you in a new direction or whether you are stuck theologically in the abuse.

Brenda had always attended a Pentecostal church. In recent years her participation included attending an adult Bible study group. This was led by Mark, a theological graduate and a member of staff. He was married with young children. Brenda greatly admired him for his biblical knowledge. Gradually, it became apparent that his interest in her was more than normal. It made her uncomfortable and she suspected that he was grooming her for a sexual relationship. Fortunately, she was able to stop the process and initiate an inquiry by the church leadership into Mark’s ministry. All this took a few months and Brenda felt exposed as ‘the one who complained’. Attending church became awkward. In her words, ‘I no longer felt safe there. My thoughts raced and I felt anxious. I could no longer relax enough to worship God.’ A pastoral counsellor helped Brenda to regain a sense of safety in attending church and to participate more fully in related activities such as helping in outreach to homeless refugees.

Not all believers begin with healthy beliefs. Consider the following:

Jimena had low self-esteem from childhood. This was the result of negative parental messages. She was excluded from games with other children. In late adolescence she joined a religious cult and experienced manipulation and control over her savings. After she managed to escape the cult, she joined a fundamentalist church which emphasised her being ‘a sinner and helpless before God’. She thought about her feelings of being worthless. ‘All the messages I heard were consistent. I had nothing of value to offer God.’

Jimena is an example of someone who never had healthy beliefs about her value as a person. A healthy self-image would have to gained, not regained.

Anderson noted that, ‘fundamentalism is a pattern of thought and relating; it is the belief that a certain person or group of people know the right way to think, act, talk, relate, believe, and engage with the world that those who do not subscribe to this worldview are less available, dangerous, hard to relate to, or to be avoided.’[[70]](#endnote-70) It provides an illusion of certainty.

Jimena went back to university. She joined a study group led by a student minister. He helped her through a series of Bible studies to see that God sent Jesus ‘because I was worth saving.’ She also felt accepted for who she was. She added, ‘I didn’t have to do anything. God doesn’t make junk!’

Since God is unseen, the divine can seem like a ‘blank screen’. We project what we want to see (or fear!). This can include negative and distorted images from our own dark side. David Johnson and Jeff VanVonderen list some of the common distorting images of God: harsh and judgmental, vindictive, apathetic, powerless, fickle, and detached because he is ‘utterly holy’. In some church circles there is pressure to see God as obsessed with our spiritual performance. Unfortunately, this squeezes out any possibility of grace and a close spiritual relationship. There is also the negative effect of ‘success’ leading to self-righteousness and ‘failure’ leading to shame. For a person flooded with shame, the belief follows that they are unworthy of love and disqualified to belong to a caring community.

*Reflect:* Can you identify a novel, painting, sculpture, or musical item that expresses your spirituality? I would nominate Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead.*[[71]](#endnote-71)Her novel conveys a wonderful sense of grace in ordinary daily life.

## Marko Ivan Rupnik (born 28 November 1954)

*To do:* Read through this case study and identify any theological justifications which appear to be wrong or behavior contrary to professional expectations of ministry. What would be the best way to correct such distortions?

Fr Rupnik is a [Slovenian](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slovenia) Catholic priest. He is famous as an artist working in mosaics. His work is in numerous churches including the Vatican’s Apostolic Palace. The [Society of Jesus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Society_of_Jesus) issued a statement on 2 December 2022, confirming that Rupnik had undergone a canonical investigation in the previous months at the request of the [Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dicastery_for_the_Doctrine_of_the_Faith). They had received a complaint of alleged abuse against some nuns in 1995, who were members of a Slovenian religious community he co-founded in the 1980s. No minors were involved in the allegations.

The superior general of the Jesuits, [Arturo Sosa](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arturo_Sosa), revealed in 2022 that, after a complaint, Rupnik had been convicted and sanctioned by the Holy See for the [ecclesiastical crime](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecclesiastical_crime) of absolution of an accomplice. Rupnik had absolved a woman in confession of having engaged in sexual activity with him.

In 2024, Gloria Branciani, a former nun who was one of Rupnik’s earliest accusers, made her story public for the first time. She alleged, among other things, that Rupnik subjected her to ‘spiritual, psychological and sexual abuse.’ He forced her and another nun into three-way sex with him and also had her visit pornographic theatres during a visit to Rome.

A former religious sister gave an [interview to the Italian newspaper *Domani*](https://www.ncregister.com/blog/former-religious-sister-allegations-father-rupnik) detailing the extent of the depravity she experienced. ‘Anna’ (not her real name), 58, a former Italian religious sister of the Loyola Community, suffered for nine years at the hands of Rupnik.

Rupnik was her spiritual director. She explained how Ignatian discernment works: you are called to total availability and openness, and it is your spiritual father who guides you in understanding what is good and what is evil. Saying no to Rupnik would have been like saying no to God.

She said the on one occasion:

He kissed me lightly on the mouth, telling me that this was how he kissed the altar where he celebrated the Eucharist. I was bewildered: on the one hand, I wanted to run away; on the other, Father Marko encouraged me by telling me that I could experience that reality because I was special and it was a gift that the Lord gave only to us—that only with me could he experience, even physically, belonging to God without possession, in freedom, in the image of Trinitarian love.

She continued,

Father Marko at first slowly and gently infiltrated my psychological and spiritual world by appealing to my uncertainties and frailties while using my relationship with God to push me to have sexual experiences with him. And so, feeling loved like ‘wisdom playing before God’, as is written in the book of Proverbs, turned into a request for more and more erotic games in his studio at the *Collegio del Gesù* in Rome, while painting or after the celebration of the Eucharist or confession.

She also recalled,

Father Marko’s abuse continued and took place in the car when I accompanied him on his journeys. He became more aggressive: I remember a very violent masturbation that I was unable to stop and during which I lost my virginity, an episode that initiated pressing requests for oral intercourse.

She added,

The dynamic was always the same: if I had doubts or refused, Rupnik would discredit me in front of the community, saying that I was not growing spiritually. He had no restraints. He used every means to achieve his goal, even confidences heard in confession. There began my psychological collapse. Father Marko asked me to have threesomes with another sister of the community, because in his opinion, sexuality had to be free from possession, in the image of the Trinity where, he said, ‘The third person would welcome the relationship between the two.’ On those occasions, he would ask me to live out my femininity in an aggressive and dominant way, and since I could not do so, he would deeply humiliate me with phrases that I cannot repeat.

The final step in this descent into hell was the move from theological justifications of sex to an exclusively pornographic relationship.

Many sisters suffered abuse had his hands. As Anna recalled, ‘At the beginning of the 1990s there were 41 sisters and, from what I know, Father Rupnik managed to abuse almost 20.’[[72]](#endnote-72)

## A healthy image of God

Correcting a false image of God is not easy. It is best to keep returning to a biblical witness as to who God is, as revealed in Jesus Christ. Each Christian tradition, I believe, has its own wisdom and a good sense of what is important for spiritual maturity. I recommend talking with a pastor or an elder in your church, but with the caution that no single denomination has *all* the truth.

Ayodele joined the board of a missionary society. He contributed more than he could afford to enable a number of missionaries to remain in the field. It was later revealed that the agency’s financial difficulties were the result of embezzlement by the treasurer. The agency eventually collapsed and later Ayodele realised that he had been manipulated by the director’s ‘words from the Lord’. While it was painful to realise the extent of this, Ayodele became more discerning through a renewed study of the scriptures on the topic of spiritual guidance.

There is a delicate balance between being faithful to your religious tradition in what you believe and creatively rethinking received dogmas. Stability and dependability versus creativity and change. I have tried to capture this tension in this chapter. We cannot predetermine the direction of our thinking will take us. Equally, there are checks and balances.

Gavin lost two of his close friends in a car accident travelling to a church function. He found a renewed relationship with God, ‘I needed someone who is stronger than death.’

*Reflect*: Think about the following criteria for a healthy image of God. Tick any you agree with; put an X alongside the rest:

* God is loving, accepting, and compassionate.
* You have no fear of rejection or arbitrary punishment from God.
* You have a growing sense of the worth, dignity and value in yourself and others.
* God is reliable; you have a sense of security and stability in the relationship.
* God will keep promises and is not manipulative.
* God’s justice restores the sinner with grace.
* You are encouraged in moral development without invoking guilt, fear or shame.
* God is approachable and desires a relationship, not just blind obedience or self-sacrifice.
* Dialogue, emotion and doubt are acceptable in the relationship with God.
* God is not slow to forgive and encourages transformation rather than condemnation.
* God helps the individual to grow from mistakes instead of being trapped.
* God wants people to flourish, not to be cast down or diminished.
* God encourages agency, growth, creativity and inner freedom.
* God respects human freedom.
* God desires free, authentic love and response.
* For Christians, Jesus is the clearest picture of God, so any view of God should not contradict what is seen in Jesus.

*Reflect:* Is there anything that you believe that contradicts the biblical statement that God is love (1 John 4:7). God loves each of us as if we were his only child.

## Toxic beliefs? hyper-spirituality

There are many potentially positive aspects of a religious faith. One example is community support.

Gretta is a transgender theology student. She appreciated the prayers of the church that sent her to study and supported her financially. This helped her to feel connected to her sending community.

Religious rituals mark important transition points in life: birth with baptism, adult decision-making with confirmation, committed relationships with marriage, and death with funerals. Additionally, religion provides a transcendent justification for moral teaching and practical assistance for the poor. I could go on and on.

However, I will raise an issue, an important one, about which I have mixed feelings. Are some religious beliefs so toxic they can cause trauma? There are certainly negative religious beliefs which can lead to feelings of distress. This would include the idea of eternal torment in hell; committing an unforgivable sin; predestination to damnation; dogma requiring a purity culture (masturbation as evil!); LGBTIQA+ individuals must live lives of celibacy; ideas about gender inequality and ‘women as ontologically inferior’; and surveillance by eldership, just to mention a few. In my clinical and pastoral experience, I have seen a number of people with heightened anxiety and depression, sometimes with obsessive or scrupulous attempts to improve themselves, but not what I would call trauma reactions. I have seen physical reactions such as an irritable bowel syndrome closely related to negative aspects of faith.

I suspect that trauma reactions are possible but rare (thankfully). It is also possible that are potential secondary effects with a doctrine such as wives being told to submit and remain in abusive marriages, with resulting violence leading to trauma.

An area of concern is beliefs about the future. In Christian theology this is called eschatology. The question arises: does the Bible predict future events?

On this issue there is a wide divergence of beliefs in the church. Some Christians engage in unhelpful speculation. This has led to comic scenes in which groups of Christians wait by a beach or on a mountain for the return of the Lord predicted by some esoteric calculation of dates in the Bible.

Over 50 years ago, when I was a young Christian, I was fascinated by Hal Lindsay’s book *The late great planet earth* (1970). Thankfully I grew out of it. But such speculation can be abused. People can believe that God has a knowable timeline and become fearful of being ‘left behind’. I also suspect that people have been manipulated into making unwise financial decisions from thinking that the end is near. While I believe in the return of Jesus Christ in glory, I believe that if God wanted us to focus on the future the Bible would have been clear on the matter. Mostly, wild predictions have been made by fringe groups within Christianity and do not reflect the mainstream.

Generally my experience of conservative expressions of Christianity has been reasonably positive. Negative beliefs may be held, but there is a balance with the idea of grace and a loving God. Also, I suspect that most believers do not take ideas such as a loving God requiring eternal torment literally or seriously. Any faith has many beliefs, but believers do not give all of them the same weight.

Mark Karris is the author of *The Diabolical Trinity: Healing Religious Trauma due to Believing in a Wrathful God, Tormenting Hell, and a Sinful Self*.[[73]](#endnote-73) He wrote from personal experience about harmful beliefs he found imposed on him in the fundamentalist Christian circles. He mentioned *The Spiritual Harm and Abuse Scale.*

*To do:* Complete *The Spiritual Harm and Abuse Scale* (SHAS) 27 item self-report inventory by Dan Kok, see uploads/1/1/7/6/117689856/spiritual \_harm\_\_abuse\_scale\_-\_screener\_v1.3.pdf Reflect on what it might say about you.

## The problem with certainty

Religion tends to the bring out certainty in a person. Obscure beliefs can be held with unshakeable conviction. While it may be comforting to the person, it can be problematic to others.

Bragi was converted in a Seventh-day Adventist crusade. He was convinced that only worship on a Saturday was acceptable to God. This was a mark of a person who was faithful and wanted to please the Almighty. He found it difficult to mix with and support other Christians.

The poet John Foulcher described a ‘bully, who was certain about uncertain things’.[[74]](#endnote-74)

*Reflect:* Do you agree with the following statement? Doubt is sinful; having faith is virtuous.

In any group of religious people, some will be black-and-white in their faith. Generally there is no ‘demand’ or manipulation of others. But when reality is denied or twisted it becomes a problem.

Tara Westover in her book *Educated* provides a vivid picture of problematic certainty.[[75]](#endnote-75) It is her account of growing up in Idaho in a fundamentalist Mormon family. The father believed various conspiracy theories and had a survivalist mentality. He was paranoid about the impact of government in the lives of believers. His beliefs and actions were certainly not mainstream Mormonism. Tara did not attend primary or secondary school, effectively having very little education beyond an ability to read. There was family harmony as long as she was faithful to the odd beliefs of her parents. The father used his authority as the male head of the family, a priestly role in Mormonism, to testify. This involved speaking what he believed was a word from God and expecting unquestioning obedience to his dictates.

Severe problems began to emerge in the family. An older brother Shaun was hyper-controlling and used violence to enforce his will—at one point stabbing a dog to death to threaten Tara.

Gradually Tara began to break out of the family mould for women and became interested in going to college. She qualified to enter the selective Brigham Young University. Then family pressure escalated. Her father entered her bedroom and said, ‘I been praying about your decision to go to college. The Lord has called me to testify. He is displeased. You have cast aside His blessings to whore after man’s knowledge. His wrath is stirred against you. It will not be long in coming.’ This authority is later used to cover up the violence of her older brother, in effect denying reality, and to require her to submit to her father’s will.

Fortunately Tara’s story does not end there. She gets into Brigham Young University, graduates with honours and eventually completes an MPhil and PhD at Cambridge University, England. It is a struggle for her to establish her own perspective, even a sense of reality, in light of shifting family loyalties and rigid demands. But eventually she succeeds in breaking the attempt by her father to ‘colonise’ her mind.

On rare occasions I have had a sense that God was speaking to me. My experience is of a gentle guidance and never coercive—nothing like the assumed authority in Tara’s story. Even with such qualifications, I allow for the possibility that I could be wrong. This is healthy.

## Hyperspirituality

There are dangers in hyperspirituality. The dark side of the prosperity gospel included preachers making promises that God would return sacrificial offerings up to 10 times.[[76]](#endnote-76) Often such preachers drove luxury cars to prove their spirituality and give evidence of God’s blessing on their lives.

A prosperity preacher challenged those in attendance at a gospel rally to put engagement and wedding rings in the offering plate as a sign of dedication to God.

A friend, Shane Clifton, previously a pentecostal pastor and theologian, suffered a tragic bike accident which resulted in him becoming quadriplegic. In the years following his disability he suffered many intrusive attempts of prayer healing by enthusiastic but insensitive believers. He wrote about this in a theological journal.[[77]](#endnote-77)

There are also problems with appropriate medical treatment being with-held. There are numerous accounts over the years about followers of Christian Science avoiding medical treatment and Jehovah’s Witnesses refusing blood transfusions.

Such hyperspirituality can lead to something approaching madness.

Many years ago in Canberra a pastor was convinced that he had the power to raise the dead to life. When a young woman in his congregation died from breast cancer, he went to the morgue to pray for her to be restored. He did not seem daunted by the loss of essential organs donated to help others. In spite of all his fervour and excess of faith, she remained dead.

The pastor drew inspiration from the example of the Apostle Peter with Tabitha in Acts 9:36-43, but he appears to have been more motivated by grandiosity than divine inspiration.

*Reflect:* What is it about a religious faith that, on occasion, makes irrational hyperspirituality more than acceptable? It becomes an indicator of abundant faith in God, no matter how unrealistic. Virtue signalling?

## A note about boundaries

Boundaries set the limits and help you define yourself. The foundations are positive self-trust and self-esteem.

You can and must be vigilant in self-protection against further harm. It is your choice what level of interaction is best for you with anyone including the abuser. You can choose your own healthy future.[[78]](#endnote-78)

Usually with spiritual abuse there is a violation of boundaries. Abuse weakens them, so they need to be rebuilt. Note that many Christians have heard a message from childhood to be ‘nice’. This makes it challenging to have the assertiveness necessary to set boundaries. There is social pressure to be agreeable and even submissive to those in authority.

Ray was a member of a conservative Christian Bible church. When he made a choice to explore gender expression, he was excluded from the fellowship. The difficulty he faced was that almost all his friends and family had prejudiced attitudes to his transition. Ray, now Rayleen, had to make decisions about significant gatherings such as birthdays and religious holidays. Would she participate? How would she protect herself emotionally? She discussed some practical strategies with her pastoral counsellor, who suggested visualising a ‘safety bubble’.

Boundaries do not need to be rigid and inflexible. They are best being porous and allowing safe nurturing people to come close to us. As Kym Robinson explains, ‘Boundaries are fundamentally about ensuring your own safety — they should be as firm or as flexible as necessary to protect your wellbeing’.

*Reflect:* Take at least an hour to identify any area in which you feel people intrude on you. Rate the areas in terms of frequency and severity. Start with the least severe and plan ways in which you can avoid boundary violations. Be practical. Listen to your body. It is a good early warning system.

[Iliana](https://www.momjunction.com/baby-names/iliana/) noticed that her supervisor in the church office would often get behind on projects and then place unrealistic demands on her. She would often have to come to work on the weekend and do overtime without pay. She listened to a podcast on assertiveness and started with small ‘push back’ messages. She said to her counsellor, ‘It isn’t making a huge difference, but I feel better about myself. At least I can speak up and my supervisor is more aware of the impact on me. And I am looking for a new job!’

Dr Laura Anderson has a good discussion of healthy boundaries. She makes the point that fundamentalist religion requires rigidity of boundaries and strict and unwavering adherence to all rules. Deviation is seen as sinful. However, flexible boundaries allow an individual to move along a spectrum between permeability (being open to change influence) and impermeability based on an individual’s internal awareness, atunement to the body and understanding of the external environment and relationships. Good boundaries come from a place of empowerment where an individual can trust themselves and their experience.[[79]](#endnote-79) Boundaries will change over time as you grow and mature.

*To do:* Anderson suggests the following exercise. Draw a large square on a piece of paper. The lines of the square are a fence. Inside the square write what needs to be present for you to feel safe; outside the square write what generally makes you feel unsafe. This can help you to distinguish where your boundaries should be placed. Note that boundaries may need to be negotiated.

Google healthy assertiveness. Being assertive is different from being aggressive though it may feel similar, at least initially. With practice assertiveness will come more easily.

*To do:* Imagine that you have a piece of rope and you can place it on the ground to surround yourself. How much space would you need for a healthy boundary?

## An emotional wake

Susan Scott developed this idea in her book *Fierce conversations*.[[80]](#endnote-80) Think for a moment about a boat moving through calm water. It will leave behind a wake. This is a good description of how we leave a trail of emotions. If our interaction with people is negative the trail may include bitterness, anger, resentment, blame and judgement. It can be positive, as the apostle Paul wrote, ‘The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. There is no law against such things.’ (Galatians 5: 24–25) This is a helpful way of seeing our emotional impact on others.

*To do:* A challenging exercise, that you may find helpful, is to write your obituary. How would you like it to read after a lifetime of successfully achieving your goals, living your values and doing what you can to help others? This can help you clarify an overall direction for your life and provide hope. Think about how you can take concrete steps today to achieve such an outcome.

*Affirmation:* My life can and will be a blessing to others.

## Hope

It would not be surprising, in the wake of trauma, to have feelings of despair. Indeed, thoughts and feelings that the future can be very negative. This can paralyze and defeat you before your journey of recovery begins.

Hope is a powerful antidote to helplessness and despair. Hope looks forward. It can be a stimulus for change.

Joseph identified three ways of thinking that fuel hope: goal setting, agency thinking, and pathway thinking.[[81]](#endnote-81)

1. *Goal setting.* It is necessary to have goals and try to achieve them. This provides direction.
2. *Agency thinking.* This is personal. We take responsibility and do what we can to shape the future.
3. *Pathway thinking.* This is about choosing a way to make something happen. The practical application.

It may be helpful to read some biographies of people who have overcome incredible adversity. I find that Michael J Fox’s way of dealing with Parkinson’s disease inspiring, especially since he was diagnosed as a young adult and my diagnosis was much later, at 68.

*To do:* A number of therapeutic approaches use the miracle question. Imagine you wake up tomorrow morning and something has changed for the better. A miracle has happened. And now comparing with today, what will have happened? How will you feel different from how you feel today? This may help you clarify your goals.

*Reflect:* Can you visualise the person you want to become? What aspects of yourself would you have to set aside? What new traits would you like to see in yourself? Would this new self be more spiritual?

## [Natalie Rose](https://cptsdfoundation.org/author/natalie-m/)’s story: With patience and perseverance, renewing my faith on my terms

‘You shouldn’t have done that, Natalie. That’s hypocrisy. And hypocrisy is the yeast of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law. Pretty soon, the Christians will be separated into the sheep and the goats. You don’t want to be a goat, do you?’ Another member of the congregation admonished me, referencing the parable of Matthew 25:31–46. I always knew I would be a goat. I was never going to be good enough for God and make it into heaven.

This raises the question of spiritual abuse at the hands of my eternal ‘family’. What ‘sin’ had I committed? After years of suffering in silence, I finally stood up for myself against my church group leader, who made a habit of humiliating me in front of the congregation. I politely asked her to stop mistreating me, and that she and her superiors stop meddling in my private life, including their demands to oversee my medical decisions.

I knew that any church member who pushed back against the leaders faced strict discipline, accompanied by Bible verses thrown in their face as a reprimand, but I was at my wit’s end. The congregation had exerted control over my life—dictating who I could talk to, what I could wear, who I could date, what I could read, and even my access to the Internet. But their demand that I surrender control over my medical care was intolerable. Once I set this boundary, I was shunned and excluded from participating in church activities.

It has been over two years since I have been involved in any religious communities or surrounded by the people I once considered my spiritual family. I grew tired of feeling insecure, inadequate, humiliated, uncomfortable, unworthy and terrified around other Christians. Was it too much to ask that my ‘brothers and sisters in Christ’ treat me better? After all, they had promised me that they loved me far more than my friends and family did and that we would spend eternity in heaven together once our physical bodies were united with the spirit and perfected in Christ.

The doctrine of eternal life gave me immense hope. It connected Bible verses in a way that promised that one day everyone—including those whose physical bodies had already died—would all live together in a beautiful heaven on earth with God.

Previously, I wrestled with the idea that this same loving God would send some people to hell. I didn’t want that to happen to anyone. My new understanding of the Book of Revelation was the hope I had been searching for. I longed to be in heaven with everyone I knew, in a world with no more death, mourning, crying or pain. The church continued to reassure me that things would get better; it was just a slow healing process to cleanse the world of sin; but in the meantime, I needed to work hard to help God by sacrificing my health, sleep, career, relationships and sanity. I clung desperately to this hope as I continued to struggle with my anxiety, flashbacks, and suicidal thoughts, not understanding why I still wanted to die.

Eventually, I woke up to the fact that my pure heart had been manipulated. I was flabbergasted that I had ever believed these people truly loved me, preached the only correct doctrine, and had the right to control every aspect of my life. I needed to completely remove myself from the grasp of all religious communities I had been connected to. I packed my bags and trekked to a small town across the country to be closer to home.

I changed all my contact information to prevent congregants from harassing me. This may sound extreme, but it wasn’t. These people habitually showed up at members’ workplaces and homes, reminding them of the consequences of leaving. If members choose to abandon the flock, they were labelled betrayers, akin to the beast with seven heads and ten horns described in the Book of Revelation. Biblical plagues were wished upon them, and they were excluded from heaven. At this point, I was officially a ‘betrayer’ in their eyes.

My ‘pagan’ life? Losing my eternal hope—the very thing that kept me going—was a type of anguish I would not wish on anyone. I couldn’t believe in God anymore. I wish I could say that after escaping those people and starting a new life in a tiny town, it was just God and me. But it wasn’t. It was just me.

For the first two months of my pagan life, I genuinely thought I was going to burn in hell. My suicidal thoughts peaked, and I was bedridden in terror and guilt.

One frenzied night, I finally carried out my fantasy of destroying my Bible. I grabbed it, threw it on the floor repeatedly, stomped on it, ripped out its pages and smeared leftover pizza grease all over it. I tossed every remnant of it into a bag and watched it fall down the trash chute of my apartment.

Picking up the pieces. I could write volumes about the effort I invested in going down Internet rabbit holes, listening to podcasts, and meeting with theologians to seek answers to my questions. However, it is best to focus on the positive that emerged from my despair, with the hope of encouraging other survivors that it is possible to restore their faith in a healthy and meaningful way, but only if it feels right for them.

I still hold profound hope for meaning beyond my physical body. Throughout my healing journey, I have worked hard to let go of the false narratives others instilled in me about what my faith should look like. I define my faith on my terms. While I still have many unanswered questions, I am at peace with my faith. I accept that I don’t have all the answers, yet I can still hold onto hope for something greater than this life.

The following are practical ways I restored my faith during my healing journey. There was a time when I never thought I could utter or hear the word God again without experiencing a trauma response in my body. However, I have gradually reached a point where I can listen to discussions about religious topics and read faith-based literature. Here are some practical ways I’ve grown in my recovery:

1. I prioritised my recovery from Complex PTSD and put my search for spiritual answers on pause.

In the past, I wanted answers. And I wanted them now. I accepted that I could never find those answers while I was still grieving, dissociated and going through intense withdrawal from medication.

I took the time and space I needed to heal all aspects of myself. I mourned the years I lost while living under the control of others, who falsely positioned themselves as religious authorities. Pausing my faith was not a sign of weakness or a lack of belief; it was a mature choice, with the understanding that rebuilding my life of peace, safety and contentment must take precedence over everything else.

2. I recognised that my religious trauma was not my fault and I allowed myself to feel the emotions I had internalised for years. I now understand that I didn’t deserve the spiritual abuse I experienced. I no longer blame myself for failing to recognise it as abuse. I allowed myself to be angry about the unfairness of having to work through years of indoctrination that violated me, all to release emotions that weren’t truly mine. I processed these feelings in therapy, and as a result, I no longer have any emotional attachment to my religious experiences.

3. I stopped pressuring myself to attend a physical church and looked within my heart. After leaving religion, the thought of stepping into a church again made my heart race. After moving to the small town, I began working with an equine therapist on her farm. (Who would have thought that horses calm the nervous system?!) My equine therapist kindly offered that, when I felt ready, I could join her at church, sitting in the back, and we could leave the minute I felt uncomfortable. I appreciated her gracious offer, but my pounding heart told me I still wasn’t ready.

Letting go of the pressure to find a new church community was incredibly liberating for me. I no longer believe that I need to be around others to grow in my faith. My faith is private and personal; it resides within me.

4. I focus on a faith that promotes positivity, love and non-judgment. Currently, I engage exclusively with faith-based topics that emphasise love, acceptance and personal growth, rather than fire and brimstone. I read what aligns with my heart’s current state. I don’t pressure myself to delve into complex theological works that dredge up painful memories and stall my personal growth. I do not subscribe to any doctrines that lift one group of people above another.

5. I set boundaries with those who use their religious beliefs to judge and criticise me. I only discuss faith with people who don’t pressure me to conform to their personal beliefs. I set boundaries with many people in my life who tend to correct, criticise, or analyse me through the lens of their own religious beliefs. I no longer consider religion to be a safe topic of conversation with them and prefer to focus on other subjects instead.

If my story inspires anyone wrestling with their recovery from spiritual abuse, I want to emphasise that it is possible to experience tremendous growth and healing—both within yourself and in your faith—beyond what you could have ever imagined, despite everything you have been through. I am truly sorry that you have been hurt by those you placed your trust in. Remember that you always had good intentions. It is possible to find peace as you separate yourself from the lies of what you endured under the guise of love, salvation, edification, sanctification and charity. There are no requirements for the future. Your faith is on your terms.

My faith helped me navigate my struggles long before anyone else became involved. It was other people’s motives that corrupted my genuine desire for answers and community. I always set out with good intentions, extending my time, love, energy, money, possessions and friendship without expecting anything in return.

Although my autonomy, voice and strength were stolen from me in the past, I no longer carry any guilt or blame. Today, I am stronger than I have ever been. I no longer let the lies others try to plant in my mind about who I am affect my beliefs and my relationship with my faith. I will never again allow another person, group or institution to extinguish the flame of my eternal hope.[[82]](#endnote-82)

## Conclusion

Trauma will knock you off balance. That much is certain. But you can use psychological techniques, as outlined in this chapter, to regain a sense of stability. Eye movement therapy changes how memories are stored and offers hope to those who suffer from intrusive memories. Perhaps nothing is more important for your spiritual growth than how you view God. Arguably this is central to your spirituality and religious practice.

Additionally, there is a possibility that some beliefs, widely held in the church, can be toxic and even traumatising. Preachers and Christians in general can use beliefs in a manipulative way. This includes examples such as prosperity teaching and end-time predictions. There is also a danger from hyperspirituality. You can protect yourself by practising assertiveness and having healthy boundaries. Hope encourages us to move towards a better future—including a full recovery from trauma.

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# Chapter 7 The Church - not always safe

If trauma is *figure* there is always *ground*. Context. Abuse happens somewhere, in a physical place. In a web of relationships, and possibly with ideology or belief structures. It is important to have a big picture perspective, which we will explore in this chapter.

The church can be described as a somewhat formal community which meets on a regular basis and has prescribed rituals and conditions for membership. There are many advantages to belonging to a church, including community support, opportunities for friendship, emotional connection, spiritual teaching, the opportunity to serve others and a regular acknowledgement of God. But with every benefit there is a corresponding risk. People trust, which is natural, and on rare occasions this trust can be betrayed.

## What is ‘systems abuse’

Church members often refuse to believe an account of abuse. They may want to defend a leader or the church, ‘Pastor Smith would never act that way. You MUST be wrong.’ And so too church communities. This leads to what has been called system abuse. This is when an organisation is used to control, intimidate, or harm a victim.

Perhaps the most common form of systems abuse is denial.[[83]](#endnote-83) Historically churches have tended to respond to allegations of spiritual abuse with silence. Leadership will often justify this as ‘defending the reputation’ of a church, evangelistic ministry, missionary agency, Christian school, welfare service or campus outreach (and by implication God). However, this worsens the impact on a person who has been subjected to spiritual abuse. [[84]](#endnote-84)

[Linnea](https://www.momjunction.com/baby-names/linnea/) was subject to sexual grooming by her pastor. She hesitated to report, ‘Who will believe me? Maybe they will think it is all in my head.’

While it is tempting to preserve the reputation of the church or ministry, this perpetuates the abuse and distorts the survivor’s reality. All in the name of God, with devastating impact.

So understandably, the traumatised person, who has been denied a voice, has doubts about the church.[[85]](#endnote-85) Doubts about their faith. Why did God allow this to happen in the church? If the Spirit is active among believers … Doubts about God. Doubts about self.

*Warning:* A common response of a church or a religious organisation to a report of abuse is to blame the survivor. Do not expect an easy path.

There are many tactics used to blame the survivor. Accusations can be made of unconfessed sin, lack of faith, rebelliousness, pride, being tested by God, being tricked by the devil, being demon possessed, or engaging in idolatry of self. Threats can be made of excommunication or ending up in hell.[[86]](#endnote-86)

Historically, when claims of sexual abuse by priests in the Roman Catholic Church were first made in Australia (and elsewhere), diocesan authorities tended to simply move the offending priest to another parish—with predictable results! The cycle of abuse was repeated, with the offender claiming ‘repentance’, going on a spiritual retreat and then finding new victims with the next appointment. Moving the perpetrator also occurred in the Anglican Church and other denominations.

There is something to be learned from all this. Offending priests and other leaders, who have the ability to groom victims, were also capable of grooming institutions. They were ‘believable’, especially when the church wanted to deny and cover up abuse.

Luka was sexually abused in the Anglican Church as a child. The priest, Archdeacon Albert, was moved to a different parish and reoffended until his criminal behavior was reported to the police. Albert was convicted, went to prison and was eventually defrocked (the church cancelled his ordination).

*Note:* The silence of those in authority enables abuse. Sadly, such avoidance was a common response and further children were exposed to abuse.

In Australia a 2017 royal commission report recorded the catastrophic effects of institutional sexual abuse.[[87]](#endnote-87) This was compounded when religious organisations tried to dodge accountability. It was easy for survivors of abuse in this case to assume that the silence of the church or agency equates with indifference by God.

*Principle:* Our actions result in spiritual effects.

*To do:* Phyllis Willerscheidt listed the following needs of survivors:

* 1. To be believed by the church.
  2. To hear stated that it is not the survivor’s fault. For officials to believe that it is the behaviour of the perpetrator that is wrong, not the fact that the survivor reported the behaviour.
  3. To hear that others won’t be hurt by the perpetrator and that other survivors will get help.
  4. To hear an apology. Most survivors will accept it whenever it comes.
  5. To be advised that they should not go to congregational meetings in which the exploitation will be disclosed.
  6. To have justice for themselves, to know what happened was wrong.
  7. To be considered courageous, not a troublemaker.
  8. To heal.
  9. To be accepted within the community and know that they are loved by God.[[88]](#endnote-88)

Tick any of the above which were met after you experienced abuse.

*Reflect:* Have you ever been a member of a church that has tried to silence reports of abuse? How did it play out? Did the leaders act differently to church members? How did you react at the time?

An obvious point, to help understand systems abuse, is that people most loyal to an organisation are likely to be promoted into positions of authority and then have the greatest investment in its success. Therefore leadership is often the most resistant to change.

## Dimensions of systems abuse

There has always been a risk with leaders who are domineering, authoritarian and heavy-handed in the way they use their authority. Jesus warned of rulers of the Gentiles who lorded over them (Mark 10:42–43). There is a particular temptation for conservative Christians to believe that the purity of the pastor’s doctrines guarantees the pastor’s character.

Afonzo was a pastor of a university church. He found his role stressful and developed an Internet gambling addiction. The congregation was shocked when it was discovered that he had been embezzling church funds. A prominent lay leader defended him, ‘But Pastor Afronzo preaches a clear gospel message.’

It is not always easy to distinguish the message from the messenger. Jesus confronted the abuse of authority by religious leaders (see Matthew 23).

[Michael Kruger](https://www.booktopia.com.au/search?author=Michael+J+Kruger) in *The Bully Pulpit* noted: (a) abusers often have a track record of success; (b) abuse often happens for years, leaving broken relationships; (c) it often involves domineering, bullying behavior, leading the abused to fear consequences, especially if there are threats of church discipline; (d) reports of abuse rarely lead to accountability as friends defend the abuser and the board provides alternative explanations; and (e) survivors of abuse are typically forced out with allegations of being troublemakers. Bullies are part of the experience of most people and sadly they do not disappear when you leave school (or join a church!).

There is something of a celebrity pastor culture in megachurches. In 2014 Mark Driscoll, the senior pastor of Mars Hill Church in the USA, resigned. This was after 21 associate pastors complained about his abusive and intimidating conduct. Staff members are often vulnerable to such abuse.

Martin was on the church board and refused to be bullied by the senior pastor. The senior pastor would shout at people to get her way. Martin reminded the pastor of her responsibility to be respectful. Soon after this Martin was asked by the board to resign his role as secretary. He realised that everyone was intimidated, and the other board members lacked the courage to support him. He rightly understood that there was no safe way to make a stand.

There is always a chance that a narcissistic leader will create a monument to him or herself.[[89]](#endnote-89)

The spiritual abuser can take an aspect of church life that is inherently good such as preaching, reading the Bible or attending worship as an opportunity to inflict pain. Indeed, preaching can be weaponised, and the pulpit can be used to attack particular members of the congregation. So understandably, a person’s faith may be damaged.

Pastor Bill broke pastoral confidentiality and preached a sermon which targeted an influential couple in the church. All this was part of a power struggle in relation to the purchase of a new church organ. While he did not name the couple, the reference was obvious. This resulted in the family leaving the church ‘under a cloud’ and no longer being part of a worshipping community.

There are a variety of ways in which an organisation can victimise a follower:

1. *The false labelling* of an independent thinker as disobedient, rebellious, and/or spiritually immature. An even more extreme response would be to accuse such a person of being demon possessed or apostate.
2. *The abuse of power and control*. This can lead to isolating an person, as further explored below. There is also the possibility of being financially exploited.
3. *Some religious cults practice what has been called esotericism*, in which hidden agendas and requirements are revealed to followers as they proceed through various stages. This sets the stage for what might be termed ‘new revelation’.
4. *Physical abuse* may take the form of beatings, illegal confinement and even manslaughter in the belief that a child is possessed or that someone has practiced sorcery or witchcraft.

When an aberrant practice is widely tolerated in a religious organisation it can easily turn into systems abuse.

*Reflect*: Have you experienced authoritarian church leadership which made you feel uncomfortable? How did you respond? Can you see that this is different to Jesus’s servant model of leadership (Philippians 2:5–11)?

It is natural for people who are hurt in such a way to question their faith. Why did God allow this to happen in his church? How can the Spirit be active in the church? Doubts about God. Doubts about self.

Sometimes churches abuse their pastors. It is common for a pastor to have a punishing experience and leave the ministry. Sadly, some churches with decades of unresolved conflict can have a reputation for ending ministries.

## Aimee’s Story[[90]](#endnote-90)

In my twenties, I began a leadership role at church. The senior pastor, in his mid-sixties, offered to mentor me, and I accepted, eager to learn.

His office was down a long, quiet corridor. Our meetings became lengthy and increasingly personal. His words, ‘Just keep coming … you can tell me anything’ felt like care to someone who had rarely felt seen.

The physical contact began subtly. He would put his hand on my arm when I cried or hug me at the end of a meeting. At the time, I explained it away as pastoral care, but the physical contact gradually increased. One day, he said he was available to meet ‘anywhere, anytime,’ even suggesting he could come to my home. I felt uneasy but told myself it was just kindness.

He drew out old wounds without adequate counselling skills or containment, and I became increasingly unsure of myself. Over time, I lost confidence in my own judgement and felt less emotionally steady.

One day, his hand rested somewhere on my body that felt uncomfortable. I froze. Later, I wrote in my diary about ‘inappropriate touch in counselling’ and acknowledged the dependence I felt. But I tried to convince myself I was misinterpreting. He was older, married and a pastor.

Then I noticed a similar pattern with another woman, long isolated meetings, withdrawal from others, distress when interrupted. One day, I saw him get into her car.

I raised my concerns with him in private. His reaction was unsettling, he smiled, his eyes lit up as if he thought I was jealous of her. In that moment, I suddenly felt very unsafe being alone with him.

My husband and I met with him to raise our concerns, but he did not change his approach. We met with another pastor and his wife from the church. They did nothing.

When I saw a Christian counsellor, she framed it as an ‘emotional affair.’ This deepened my confusion and shame and prevented me from naming it for what it was: grooming, misuse of pastoral power, emotional manipulation and non-consensual physical contact in a counselling context.

Because my family was deeply involved at church, I stayed. I tried to keep my distance, but he repeatedly tried to draw me back into the dynamic.

Years later, with a new senior pastor in place, another woman came forward with similar concerns and clear boundary violations in counselling with the former pastor. I was encouraged to report my experience to corroborate hers. Though I feared it might be misinterpreted as an affair, the new pastor assured me of complete confidentiality in writing. I trusted him and submitted the report.

I never heard back from the denomination. There was no support, no follow-up, no reassurance of accountability, no indication that my experience had mattered.

I later saw that the new senior pastor was controlling in different ways. He could become suddenly defensive and angry. In one meeting, he stood above me in an intimidating stance and said, ‘You could do great damage to this church.’ On another occasion, he said, ‘I thought you were of Satan.’

Serving at church became destabilising. His warmth could abruptly shift to anger and control, harming relationships and my sense of safety. As I learned others had similar experiences, I raised my concerns with church leadership, but they defended him. I eventually decided to leave the church. It felt like losing my second family.

Soon after I left, the pastor angrily disclosed to a group that I had reported the previous pastor to the denomination, saying this had led to him losing his licence. He called me ‘untrustworthy’ and indicated he wanted ‘revenge’. This broke the confidentiality he had promised, and fearing further retaliation and rumours, I sought help from the denomination. Although they initially encouraged me to submit a formal complaint, I was later presented with a non-disclosure agreement that would have prevented me from speaking about the pastor to anyone. A denominational representative spent around two hours pressuring me to sign, and I remember sobbing and shaking afterwards. I refused to sign. The pastor was eventually found to have breached confidentiality and the code of conduct, but the outcome was publicly minimised by the church and framed in a way that elicited sympathy for him. I again felt betrayed.

The harm I experienced was traumatising and destabilising, made even more so by a system that protected the institution rather than caring for those harmed.

Healing meant leaving that system and finding a safer church community. I took time before trusting again, watching how pastors handled conflict and questions.

A key part of my healing has been releasing myself from the silence that was expected of me. I have the right to tell my story, and I am not responsible for protecting those who caused harm. I have learned to share it carefully, recognising that not everyone can hold experiences of spiritual abuse with understanding and care.

Hearing other survivors’ stories and learning about spiritual abuse has helped me understand I am not alone. It took me a long time to understand the impact of my relationship with the first pastor. It wasn’t until I learned about adult sexual grooming that I could see how he blurred boundaries under the guise of care. I felt complicit and doubted myself for years, and only when another person came forward could I name it as abuse.

As I have processed my story, the shame has lifted. In counselling, I came to see why I froze when boundaries were crossed and why I didn’t trust my instincts to leave earlier. Early life and misleading theology about headship had taught me to fawn and subjugate myself in the presence of power.

I have learned that while some systems protect themselves over people, safer churches do exist. I now pay attention to subtle signs of control and step away sooner. Some spiritual practices are still triggering, so I engage where it feels safe, trusting God’s grace to meet me there.

## The notorious example of the Children of God

Religious cults can exercise undue control over followers. It can be very difficult for a member to leave. This perversion of a faith community is systems abuse and can be a cause of spiritual trauma.

The Children of God is an American religious cult founded in 1968 by [David Brandt Berg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Brandt_Berg). Over the years the group has gone under a number of different names, most recently [The Family International](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Family_International) (TFI). A British court case found the group was an authoritarian [cult](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cult) which engaged in systematic [physical](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Physical_abuse) and [sexual abuse](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Child_sexual_abuse) of children, resulting in lasting trauma among survivors.

They practiced Flirty Fishing, a form of [evangelism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evangelism) offering sexual intimacy. Female members, ‘fisherwomen’, would present their sex appeal to ‘fish’—men from outside the cult (often, but not always, having sex)—using the occasion to proselytise and seek donations. This practice persisted from about 1974 to 1987.

Children of God have defended it as a way of ‘bearing witness’ for Jesus to people who would not otherwise be open. According to some sources, over 200,000 men were ‘fished’ and over 10,000 babies were born to cult women between 1971 and 2001. The practice was curtailed as [sexually transmitted diseases](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sexually_transmitted_infection) such as AIDS spread through the cult.

Witnessing and disciple winning were by no means the only focus of Flirty Fishing. Even before 1978, it had become a primary source of financial support and political protection. Many female disciples established long-term relationships with wealthy or influential men. These men often provided money, food, clothing, housing and other needs, including legal advice, help in immigration and protection against social and political repression. It was not uncommon for some women to spend considerable amounts of time with their ‘fish’, sometimes leaving their husbands and children for weeks or months at a time.

Critical ex-members of Children of God have pointed to Family publications from this period. A 1987 *Basic Training Handbook* offers ‘explicit advice on sex among prepubescent teens’. There was also something called ‘My Little Fish’ containing nude photographs of a young boy and an adult woman embracing.

The Children of God is an example of systems abuse involving both female members and children.

Cults and sects have a process of attracting new members which includes love-bombing (acceptance and attention); tension building (pressure to conform to group standards); explosion phase (threats and even violence to conform); and honeymoon phase (prioritising reconciliation).[[91]](#endnote-91) And the cycle repeats.

## The Magdalene Laundries in Ireland

The Magdalene Laundries provide an infamous example of spiritual systems abuse. These agencies were run by Catholic religious orders and operated from the 18th to the late 20th centuries (the last was closed in 1996). The purpose was to accommodate ‘fallen women’. It has been estimated that 30,000 women were confined in Ireland. They were like a prison in which inmates were required to work, primarily in laundries, since the facilities were self-supporting. The conditions were horrific and some women lost their lives.

Clearly the church does not always provide a ‘safe place’. Indeed, we need a more realistic picture of what it means to be church. The one undeniable fact is that all churches are full of fallible people whose most natural instincts are to sin and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23–24).

*Reflect:* An extreme form of systems abuse occurred in Rwanda when churches participated in the 1994 genocide. This is described in *Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda* by [Timothy Longman](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timothy_Longman" \o "Timothy Longman).[[92]](#endnote-92) The book described the involvement of the Christians in the [genocide](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rwandan_Genocide" \o "Rwandan Genocide).

Churches, with too few exceptions, went along with, facilitated or even propagated the genocide, specifically by teaching obedience to the state and creating divisions between the [Hutu](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hutu" \o "Hutu), [Tutsi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tutsi" \o "Tutsi), and [Twa](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twa" \o "Twa) ethnic groups.

## Shunning

Shunning is an act of social rejection. A decision is made by a denomination or a congregation to cease any interaction with a member under discipline. Generally this is a formal process which follows a set of rules. Historically the church has practised excommunication (at times), but this is a milder form of enforced separation, limiting access to the sacrament of Holy Communion.

Historically the Amish and other Anabaptist groups have practiced shunning. Apparently the Exclusive Brethren still practice it. The Jehovah’s Witnesses is one of the largest groups that still have a form of shunning, which is referred to as ‘disfellowshipping’. A group of elders determine whether a member has committed a serious sin and remains unrepentant. Elders may meet with the member a number of times to encourage repentance before deciding to remove the person from the congregation. The Church of Scientology asks members to cease communication with those who are seen to be disruptive. This is called disconnection. Sometimes families have been divided as a result. I believe that such acts are a form of spiritual systems abuse which can result in trauma.

*Reflect:* A common experience of LGBTIQA+ individuals is to be excluded from the church fellowship on the basis of sexual orientation. Do you consider this a form of shunning? Is it abuse?

*To do:* Make a list of ways that you think a church community can react to systems abuse? Do you think that there is an educational role for helping church members understand perpetrators? How they work? How they try to get away with it? And how organisations protect themselves?

Psychologist Jennifer Freyd has done considerable research on systems abuse. Her focus is broader than religious organisations. Google her Centre for Institutional Courage. She has also developed the Institutional Betrayal Questionnaire (IBQ).

*To do:* Read Thomas Boreham’s account of religious sunning.[[93]](#endnote-93)

## When a community faces trauma

It is a fact of community life that a group of people can suffer trauma. We are vulnerable. As John Donne said in his poem, ‘No man is an island.’ (1624)

In early 1992 I was serving as a minister in the Anglican diocese of Canberra and Goulburn. It was front-page news when our bishop, the Right Rev Owen Dowling, was charged with the minor sexual offence of soliciting. There were some embarrassing details. The incident involved an off-duty policeman at a time when same sex-relationships were not as socially accepted. And some commented on the location: a public toilet. Eventually he had to resign his role in the diocese and return to parish ministry in another state. It was a huge scandal, and for a time the diocese was traumatised. Naturally no one incident ever constitutes a life. I admired Bishop Owen greatly. He ordained me and I wrote his biography *Harmony and discord: The life of bishop Owen Dowling 1934-2008*.[[94]](#endnote-94)

No one could deny that Bishop Owen engaged in conduct unbecoming of a leader in the church, but like many gay people he had to supress and hide his sexuality. While Owen married twice, it seems likely that his primary attraction was to males. A number of people told me that Owen had been active in the gay scene for some time, and the encounter suggests that he had grown careless. At the time he was charged with the offence he admitted the substance of the allegation to the police. Eventually reason prevailed and the charges were dropped by the Victorian Director of Public Prosecutions. He noted that the allegations were trivial and victimless. And it was not deemed to be in the public interest given the probable effect on Owen’s health.

How did the people of the diocese respond? Owen was supported by the administration. In the minutes of Bishop-in-Council the incident was noted, ‘events in recent days relating to the Bishop and alleged incidents which have been given wide media attention.’[[95]](#endnote-95) The need to protect him from a legal point of view was noted and a motion was drafted to be read in parishes on the following Sunday. This included, ‘The Bishop-in-Council of the Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn met on Friday 10 April in Canberra. Members of Council express their unanimous and unqualified support, love and care for their Bishop and friend, Owen Dowling. Bishop Dowling is a man of great courage, integrity, wisdom and leadership. His work is greatly appreciated by all members of Council.’

The clergy of the diocese had a range of opinions on what their bishop should do. Should he resign? Should he step aside for a time? Should he continue? At least one of the rural deaneries did a straw poll with the result that a small majority favoured resignation. Bishop Owen was told of the vote, and it may have provided some impetus to his resignation.

There were some ugly incidents. One of the Evangelical clergy went to see Owen and, using the example of King David being exposed by Nathan the prophet, told him a parable and dramatically announced, ‘You are the man!’ (2 Samuel 12:1–5). While some might see this harsh condemnation as understandable, no compassion or understanding was evident. It has been observed that the church is an institution that ‘shoots its wounded’.

It was a difficult time. I was serving as Rector of Holy Covenant, Jamieson. We asked Bishop Owen to come to a Sunday service, and the parish presented him with a book of photographs and tributes to honour his ministry. A number of parishes did something similar. There was a farewell dinner attended by lay leaders in the diocese.

At the next Synod in August 1992, Owen declared his intention to retire at the end of the year. It was during that synod that the official farewell was included as part of the program. The archbishop of Sydney was present for the occasion. As Bishop Owen concluded his farewell speech almost all the synod members rose to applaud his ministry in the diocese. However, the Archbishop of Sydney remained seated. Owen laid his staff on the altar of the cathedral after nine years as Bishop of Canberra and Goulburn.

In retrospect it is obvious that the diocese was traumatised. There was considerable media attention. Much of it was highlighting the scandal, but a number of journalists were sympathetic, since Owen was considered progressive by promoting the ordination of women.

I think the diocese handled the trauma associated with Bishop Owen Dowling reasonably well. There was an open process in which the facts were acknowledged and there was no attempt to cover up. Responses were varied and openly discussed. Nothing was done in a hurry. There were sensitive attempts to care for Owen, who was deeply wounded. He appreciated spontaneous gestures of goodwill and support including that of the parish in which I served.

The diocese continued to function with *locum* or ‘fill-in’ bishops, until the next bishop could be in place. I think more could have been done to assist the grief process, perhaps appointing a consultant to facilitate with meetings to debrief.

David W. Peters gives an additional observation in his book, *Post-traumatic God: How the church cares for people who have been to hell and back.* The people of God have always been shaped by trauma. This is seen in the Old Testament with a time of slavery in Egypt, wandering in the wilderness, conflict with hostile nations and beautifully expressed in that by the psalmist in Babylonian exile:

By the waters of Babylon –

there we sat down and there we wept

when we remembered Zion.

On the willows there we hung up our harps.

For there our captors asked us for songs,

And our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,

‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’

But how could we sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land? (Psalm 37:1–4)

The New Testament church was a post-traumatic community, after the death of Jesus the founder and persecution as a minority sect of Judaism.

*Warning:* ‘Post-traumatic people expect more trauma. We form alliances to mitigate the effects of that trauma.’[[96]](#endnote-96) And wounded people are not always safe to be around.

In times of trauma there is an opportunity to reflect theologically on the nature of the church. Too often we believe the fantasy that the church is full of ‘perfect people’ and naturally we are disappointed. Instead, we need to acknowledge being flawed. We are never better than anyone else, but simply trying to follow Christ. What makes us unique? Only that we are forgiven.

## Intergenerational trauma

The spiritual abuse of a group of people can have consequences that last for generations. This includes the descendants of those who suffered in the Inquisition. Centuries later, we can still see the effects of crusades on Islamic people. There is a sense of intergenerational consequences in the Old Testament. In relation to the Lord giving the Ten Commandments, Exodus 20:5 noted ‘punishing children for the iniquity of parents to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the third generation of those who love me and keep commandments.’ Patterns of behaviour and consequences can persist over the generations.

*Reflect:* If you did a genogram of your family, can you identify traumatic incidents which have affected subsequent generations? Do you recognise maladaptive patterns of behaviour? Are there exceptions? Are there any family secrets?

A more recent example of intergenerational trauma is the practice of forced adoption. In Australia this occurred over two decades from the 1950s to the 1970s. This policy affected about 150,000 mothers who lost their children. Prime Minister Julia Gillard made the [National Apology for Forced Adoptions](https://www.ag.gov.au/families-and-marriage/national-apology-forced-adoptions) in the Great Hall at Parliament House, Canberra, on 21 March 2013. Numerous church agencies were involved in this policy and the Roman Catholic Church made a formal apology. There are similarities to what has been called the stolen generations, involving the removal of children born to indigenous parents.

Sarah is an adolescent grandchild of a woman who was forced to give up her child for adoption. She said, ‘I can’t forgive the church for what they did. It shattered my family and even now it is hard to find my relatives.’

Consider the impact on children of forced removal from natural parents. When we understand the role of church agencies, we can recognise a dimension of intergenerational spiritual trauma. While it is likely that many of those involved were well-meaning, it does not diminish the ill effects on children separated from birth parents and the severing of emotional attachments.

## Abuse does not remove the victim’s capacity to make choices

Abuse does not remove the victim’s capacity to make choices. The survivor of spiritual abuse has options. If the abuse was a criminal action, should a report be made to the police? I recommend this if it is an option. But be aware that it has emotional and psychological risks, since the legal system is not always sensitive to the emotional needs of survivors. However, there are advantages. Reporting has a protective function in limiting the opportunity for the perpetrator to abuse others. Some survivors feel empowered by a legal process, but needless to say a positive outcome is not guaranteed.

If the violation was in the realm of professional ethics, then should the church or institutional authorities be notified? Most churches now have a procedure to deal with complaints. The risks are similar to involving the legal system, since it is by no means guaranteed that church or institutional leaders will support reports of violations of trust. But if there is an ethical standards committee, this would probably the best place to begin.

Do you ask for a face-to-face meeting with the perpetrator? This is sometimes recommended by therapists. While it can be empowering,[[97]](#endnote-97) it is highly risky. Perpetrators are often defensive and may try to blame the survivor. The risk of secondary trauma is very high unless, paradoxically, nothing is expected of the offender.

*To do:* If you are considering a course of action, take your time and seek expert advice. The idea of pursuing justice must come from you, the victim, and not be a response to external pressure. If you want to confront the perpetrator, make sure you are in therapy for months prior to the encounter, and prepare for the encounter carefully. You can expect that the power imbalance will shift, but you should not expect good behaviour from the person who abused you.

The guiding principle is to be fully informed and then make your choices. Remember that the timing, the nature of disclosure and how much you disclose is your choice. And equally, doing nothing is an option.

Another question is whether to seek financial compensation? This will involve the legal system and possibly some financial outlay. Consult with an experienced lawyer with a good reputation. This can be costly. Most lawyers will require money up-front, which will be held in trust. Some may act on a ‘no win no fee’ basis, but usually this is only when the case is straightforward, the defendant has ‘deep pockets’ and a favourable outcome is assured. The process is likely to be slow and emotionally demanding if a court appearance is necessary. There is also the possibility of a legal defence which tries to blame and denigrate the survivor—or even to seek costs from the survivor by claiming that they have started the case vexatiously.

Careful consideration is necessary before any action is taken. You can consult with your pastor or your therapist and possibly get legal advice. You should be fully aware of the risks, because in my experience they are considerable.

## Conclusion

We long for safety, and there is a natural tendency to deny that problems, especially something evil, could inhabit the circles in which we dwell. But institutions can abuse their members. This chapter illustrates various ways this can happen. A systems problem requires an understanding of the dynamics of systems and a response that addresses systemic issues. A Christian community can suffer trauma. Intergenerational trauma is another possible source of trauma. And always remember that there are a number of possible choices for the survivor.

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# Chapter 8: A profile of the abuser?

Abuse happens for many different reasons. It is not only bad people who do bad things. In this chapter we will see something of the range of people and differing motivations leading to spiritual abuse.

## Growth challenge

Now I will ask you to do something quite challenging: change your perspective to better understand why the abuser acted to injure you. Why, you might wonder? This understanding will be helpful in your recovery and growth process. The default position is to see the abuser in black and white terms, typically as a monster. This is how perpetrators are portrayed in the media. But such a portrayal is too simplistic. And it makes the final step of forgiveness, if this is to be a goal, harder.

There is also a risk of idealising the perpetrator.

Klara was sexually abused by her parish priest when she was 13 years old. She believed they had a ‘special’ relationship. Even 20 years later she still believed that he was her ideal love. After six months of weekly therapy she came to recognise exploitation and that the priest’s motivations were anything but pure.

*Reflect:* Do you have any trace of idealising the perpetrator? Discuss this with someone you trust as a reality check.

It is also important to acknowledge that perpetrators of spiritual abuse rarely want to hurt others. They are not usually sadists. Usually they are naïve about the effect of their actions and genuinely believe that they are loving and even serving God.

Father William played ‘games’ with young children in his congregation. This resulted in sexual abuse. He believed, ‘I was offering them the love that they needed and lacked from their parents.’

Abusers are usually narcissistic or so focused on some great thing they are doing for God that they don’t notice the wounds they’re inflicting on their followers.[[98]](#endnote-98) So there are differing motivations and often a lack of insight.

## The Malka Leifer affair

This is an unusual case which involved sexual abuse perpetrated by a headmistress of the Adass Israel School in [Melbourne](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Melbourne), Australia. This is a Jewish ultra-Orthodox school. The former principal, Malka Leifer, faced trial on 29 sex offence charges. Leifer was sentenced in August 2023 to 15 years prison for sexually abusing two students in her care

In the Adass Israel Congregation children are raised without television, internet access or radio, but have access to Jewish newspapers and magazines. After the age of eight [boys and girls are kept entirely separate](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender_separation_in_Judaism) outside family homes, and the stories they are told never involve friendships between boys and girls. There is no sex education in schools of the community, but before marriage the bride and groom attend educational classes to discuss sex and other topics about marriage.

Leifer’s husband Rabbi Yaakov Yosef (Jacob) Leifer fled to Israel with his wife, but she was brought back to Australia to face multiple charges, which included rape, indecent assault, committing an indecent act with a child, and sexual penetration of a child. On 3 April 2023, Leifer was found guilty of the rape and indecent assault of Dassi Erlich and Elly Sapper.

There are many aspects of the Leifer case that make it hard to understand. She is a female offender, when most child sexual abuse is carried out by males. She comes from a minority community with strict religious standards. Nevertheless, she was found guilty of serious sexual crimes. To say she is a monster is to dismiss her as a person. The challenge is to look beyond surface features of her offending and appreciate dynamic features of her relationships growing up as a child and later as an adult. How was she shaped as a person? Though I don’t know any further details about her background, potentially her behaviour is more understandable.

Why do adults in positions of authority offend? In some cases spiritual leaders are unprepared for the power bestowed on them by institutions. Lord Acton in 1887 famously wrote, ‘Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.’ An English psychiatrist, Dr David Owen, proposed an acquired form of narcissism which he called the hubris syndrome. [[99]](#endnote-99) It is possible that an inability to handle authority may contribute to offending. But there are other possibilities.

Personality disorder may be a factor. Some people have impaired empathy. This is characteristic of the antisocial personality and the narcissistic personality. Problems with empathy stem from childhood and include an inability to appreciate the impact of actions on others.[[100]](#endnote-100) This may lower the barrier to offending.

It is important to make a distinction between people with a personality disorder, who have dysfunction woven into the fabric of who they are, and those who might be more broadly classified as distressed (or neurotic). A neurotic person is easier to understand, with difficulties in emotional stability, such as being vulnerable to stress, depression and anxiety. Of course, this can include those who offend, but the psychological dynamics are different.

Magnus was highly self-centered and expected everyone to admire him. His charismatic personality was highly attractive. People complained when he was overly flirtatious with females in the youth group. He said, ‘Girls appreciate the attention. What could be wrong with that?’

We can also appreciate that some people, mostly males but increasingly females, become highly skilled at compartmentalising. This enables them to carry out an effective ministry, and even see evidence of divine blessing, but hide away a part of their lives which is inconsistent with their own ideals.

*Reflect:* If you have suffered spiritual abuse, consider what you know about the perpetrator. Are you tempted to dismiss him or her as a monster? Any idealisation? Do you think that dysfunction was part of a life pattern of poor behavior or compartmentalised? Does this help you to see the person as a flawed individual?

*Checklist for personality disorder*:

* Lifelong pattern of seeing themselves and reacting to others in ways that cause problems
* Difficulty understanding emotions and tolerating distress
* Impulsivity
* Lack of a clear or stable self-image
* Struggle to form close, stable relationships with others
* Behaviour that causes problems across various areas of life[[101]](#endnote-101)

Tick any that might apply to someone you know.

## Perpetrators who were abused as children

There is evidence that people who commit sexual offences, especially against children, are *more likely* than other people to report having been sexually abused as children. But the relationship is complex. Studies that follow abused children forward (linking medical/forensic records to later criminal records) often find increased risk for many adverse outcomes and for some types of offending, including sexual offending. But the association is generally weaker and less consistent than retrospective self-report studies suggest.

In other words, prospective research supports *some* increased risk that a victim will become an abuser; but it does not support the simplistic notion that most abused children become sexual offenders. The link is stronger for survivors of sexual abuse than physical abuse. Indeed, the evidence indicates that most survivors of childhood sexual abuse do not go on to offend as adults.[[102]](#endnote-102)

Danielle was sexually abused by her Sunday school teacher. When the teacher was charged it came out that he himself had been abused as a child. She found it easier to understand the abuse when her therapist explained that sometimes people offend in the psychological hope of repeating and trying to master their original abuse.

This does not excuse the offences, but it helped Danielle to appreciate the psychological complexity underlying the abuse.

## Compulsive sexual behaviour

Another possible dynamic is compulsive sexual behaviour or hypersexual disorder—‘sexual addiction’. The person is obsessed with sexual thoughts and behaviours. Urges feel out of control and normal responsibilities are adversely affected.

Sexual addiction is characterised by a loss of control. There is a compulsion to engage in sexual activity even when desire is not present. Excessive time is spent watching pornography, seeking potential partners on-line and, typically, masturbating. As the grip of the addiction tightens normal responsibilities suffer. Arousal is dulled. More extreme or high-risk sexual activities are needed to achieve satisfaction or relief. Consequences soon add up: relationships deteriorate, there are financial difficulties and possible legal charges. Emotions are on a ‘roller coaster’, including shame and guilt. Gradually sex becomes *all* that the person thinks about. They experience overwhelming urges or cravings, and typically there are withdrawal symptoms when activity ceases. Naturally most indications of sexual addiction are hidden until a scandal occurs.

Carlosa was an elder in his church. He would see sex workers at least once a week. He could not break his pornography habit. Finally, his wife issued an ultimatum and he began sessions with a pastoral counsellor.

## Paedophilia

The classic paedophile is sexually attracted to prepubescent children. Some psychologists understand this to be a developmental disorder in the area of sexuality, but it could be deviant attraction.

The diagnostic criteria in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) for paedophilic disorder requires:

* Recurrent, intense sexually arousing fantasies, urges or behaviours involving sexual activity with a prepubescent child or children (generally age 13 or younger) over a period of at least six months.
* The person must be at least 16 years old and at least five years older than the child or children involved.
* The person has acted on these sexual urges, or the sexual urges or fantasies cause marked distress or interpersonal difficulty. It is important to note that the presence of these attractions alone does not constitute a disorder unless they lead to distress, interpersonal difficulties, or actions involving a child.[[103]](#endnote-103)

While paedophilia refers to a person’s sexual attraction to children, it is not the same as child sexual abuse. Not everyone acts on their urges, and not all child sexual abuse is perpetrated by people with deviant sexual attraction. Some offenders may engage sexually with children due to factors such as substance abuse or ease of access.

Alan worked in a church-sponsored day care for children of missionaries. His normal attraction was to young adult females, as evidenced by his choice of pornography and sexual fantasies. However, he had gained a lot of weight and, being socially anxious, he found it difficult to date. He began to molest a number of the children in his care.

Research indicates that people with peedophilic disorder tend to have the following:

* 1. a history of childhood sexual abuse
  2. mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, or personality disorders
  3. distorted thoughts that justify or minimise the harm of their thoughts or behaviours on children
  4. social difficulties, such as preferring the company of children over adults.

In my psychology practice I treated a number of paedophile offenders. Most of them struggled with their own illicit attraction, often seeing it as a personal curse.

Felipe offended against many children over a period of about eight years. He was jailed at least three times. He hated his aberrant sexual attraction, which at times he found almost impossible to control. He would cut himself with a razor to express his self-hate. He tried a number of strategies to lessen his libido, including ‘chemical castration’. The impact of his offending was huge on himself and his family.

*Reflect:*If you have suffered spiritual abuse, how hard do you find it to understand what motivated the perpetrator? As a journal exercise, after you have written about the abuse from your perspective, can you write, in a separate section, what you imagine the abuser said to him or herself? This shift in perspective is an attempt at empathy for the perpetrator. It can help you make emotional progress. If possible, can you appreciate the universal truth that a person is more than their mistakes?

Hopkins underlined a paradox: clergy who are most likely to use their power and offend sexually when they feel most powerless. Inappropriate crossing of sexual boundaries by spiritual leaders is nearly always precipitated by feelings of extreme neediness and entitlement.[[104]](#endnote-104) However, not all abuses of power are sexual: for example, angry verbal outbursts, misuse or theft of church funds, and threatening excommunication are also abusive. Substance abuse is frequently part of the picture and carries with it a problematic set of dynamics.

## Coercive control

It is a sad fact that in some cases control can last for years. And, tragically, some Christians apply verses such as Paul’s admonition, ‘Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord.’ (Ephesians 5:22) in unhealthy ways.

Recently the notion of coercive control has developed to describe patterns of behaviour that restrict a person’s freedom and autonomy. It is a form of emotional abuse that can involve financial, social, sexual and physical elements. It can be reinforced by the threat of violence. Some indicators of coercive and controlling behaviour:

Behaviour

* monitoring or dictating where someone goes, who they see, what they wear, or how they act
* restricting access to phone, internet, or transport
* forcing compliance through intimidation or threats

Emotional manipulation

* gaslighting: making the person doubt their memory or sanity
* blaming the survivor for problems or for the abuser’s actions (‘If you didn’t do this, I wouldn’t get so angry.’)
* sudden mood changes used to control or instil fear.

Financial control

* controlling all monetary resources and financial decisions.
* preventing the victim from working or accessing bank accounts
* giving a strict allowance and requiring receipts for every purchase.

Psychological

* isolating the victim from friends, family and social networks
* using guilt, shame or fear to manipulate behaviour
* creating dependency by undermining self-esteem or confidence.

Intimidation

* threatening to harm the victim, children, pets or themselves if not obeyed
* threats of legal action, deportation or exposure
* destruction of property to show power or provoke fear.

Sexual control

* coercing unwanted sexual acts
* using sex as a tool of manipulation or punishment
* withholding affection to punish or control.

Legal abuse

* misusing the law to harass or control (for example repeated lawsuits, custody threats)
* using false accusations to damage credibility or cause legal trouble.

Subtle but consistent patterns

* there is no physical violence
* the abuser may appear loving or protective to outsiders
* abuse escalates over time as the victim’s autonomy erodes.

Arun was in a same-sex relationship with Tony. He felt pressured to perform sexual acts portrayed in online pornography. Tony also asked Arun to open their relationship to others.

I have some concerns over the potential for the label coercive control to be overused, especially following a relationship breakdown. A person will commonly feel controlled in a deteriorating marriage, when it can indicate a heightened sensitivity or reflect negative incidents. However, this is a dynamic that can lead to spiritual trauma and reveals much about the perpetrator.

## The psychopath

Psychopathy originally just meant what would today be called mental disorder.

We have popular images of antisocial people. All include some notion of deviance from accepted social behaviour. I think of Alex with his ‘ultra-violence’ in Stanley Kubrick’s 1971 film *Clockwork Orange*. We can also recall evil dictators who have wreaked havoc in the 20th century: Stalin, Hitler, Pol Pot, Idi Amin, Saddam Hussein and many more. And mass murderers convicted of horrendous crimes, such as Martin Bryant in Port Arthur (1996), in Tasmania a state of Australia. Examples in the USA with relaxed gun laws are too numerous to mention.

How do we make sense of all this? It is a question at many levels. There is considerable overlap between the psychological notion of psychopathy and a theological understanding of evil. Sadly, there is something very wrong with social reality as we know it, which has evoked various explanations, none totally adequate. It is not rare—indeed it is somewhat common.

Psychiatrists and clinical psychologists can make a diagnosis of antisocial personality disorder from DSM-5. The psychopath is considered a more extreme form of the antisocial personality, though ‘psychopathy’ is not a formal diagnosis in DSM-5. It has been estimated that approximately half of people who are in prison would meet the criteria for antisocial personality disorder and about half of this group would be likely to have psychopathy.

The features of antisocial personality disorder are: (DSM-5, page 659)

1. A pervasive pattern of disregard for and in violation of the rights of others, occurring since age 15 years, as indicated by three (or more) of the following:

* Failure to conform to social norms with respect to lawful behaviours, as indicated by repeatedly performing acts that are grounds for arrest.
* Deceitfulness, as indicated by repeated lying, use of aliases, or conning others for personal profit or pleasure.
* Reckless disregard for the safety of self or others. Consistent irresponsibility, as indicated by repeated failure to sustain consistent work behaviour or honour financial obligations.
* Lack of remorse, as indicated by being indifferent to or rationalising having hurt, mistreated, or stolen from another.

1. The individual is at least 18 years old.
2. There is evidence of conduct disorder with onset before age 15 years.
3. The occurrence of antisocial behaviour is not exclusively during the course of schizophrenia or bipolar disorder.

The Canadian psychologist Robert D Hare developed the *Psychopathy Checklist* now revised (PCL-R). It is widely used in prisons and high security psychiatric units. This is considered the most reliable way of making a diagnosis and is commonly used in risk measures to evaluate who is likely to reoffend. Some items on the PCL-R reflect such traits as: superficial charm, grandiosity, lying, being manipulative, lack of a sense of guilt, lack of empathy, limited emotional expression, parasitic lifestyle such as being a pimp, being easily angered, promiscuity, behaviour problems as a child, history of criminal behaviour and a lack of realistic goals.[[105]](#endnote-105)

In my view psychopathy is the result of a developmental failure to have empathy for others. This is foundational to developing a conscience. There is also, I think, an early decision that is lived out: ‘I will get you before you get me.’ It is abundantly clear that most psychopaths do not feel emotional pain but cause it in others.

## A new kind of injury

The offence is not the end of the story for the abuser. Surprisingly, trauma can cut two ways. The guilt of a perpetrator can be understood as a moral injury to their conscience.

The treatment of soldiers following a period of war has led to advances in understanding trauma. After World War 2 it was observed that many soldiers had lasting symptoms. This led to an understanding of what was later called post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and effective ways to treat trauma. Eventually an understanding developed of the effects on the soldier of inflicting injury on others—even though this was legal and generally sanctioned by the role of a soldier in a war zone. Essentially this was an injury to conscience and called moral injury.

Three decades ago I treated a Vietnam veteran distressed about what he had done in the war. He was a professional soldier, ‘not one of the draftees’ and this was part of his identity. However, the person I saw was deeply troubled, ‘I had no idea of what I was capable of doing.’ He described killing a Vietcong soldier with his bare hands. He was in a battle rage in which he felt he had powers verging on the supernatural.

An example of moral injury in the Bible is Peter’s threefold denial of Christ and his immediate remorse.

Allow me to take a detour which will enable us to return with better understanding of perpetrators of spiritual abuse.

Consider the following case example:

Barnett saw a Christian counsellor after he returned from serving in Afghanistan. He was troubled after he shot a woman at a check-point. He said, ‘Essentially, I reacted. We were warned to expect a female suicide bomber. She was in a head-to-toe Islamic gear, a burka. I panicked and shot first. Later we found that she was not wired up with explosives. Lucky she lived, but shooting her is what I remember.’

Barnett had numerous assumptions relevant to how he felt:

1. There is an absolute code of human conduct, ‘Thou shalt not kill.’
2. We are held accountable to such standards.
3. Nothing justifies shooting an innocent person. This act is unforgiveable.
4. Men are responsible to protect women, not hurt them.
5. This violates any claim I have to being human.
6. I have lost my innocence.
7. I am a Christian and more is expected of me.
8. I cannot now associate with normal people. This breaks any tie of human belonging. No normal person could understand my action, since it is beyond my comprehension.

Moral injury was first identified by Marine veteran Camillo ‘Mac’ Bica in his journals from Vietnam (Nakashima-Brock & Lettini, 2012).[[106]](#endnote-106) He recognised, first in himself, the impact of doing things that violated a sense of common humanity. Trauma is more obvious for survivors, but it may also be present for perpetrators.

Moral injury has been defined by Litz as the enduring consequences of ‘perpetrating, failing to prevent, bearing witness to, or learning about acts that transgress deeply help moral beliefs and expectations.’[[107]](#endnote-107) Other possible signs include behavioural problems, spiritual and existential issues such as a loss of faith, and psychological problems such as fatalism and self-depreciation.

Yury was the headmaster of the Christian school. One of the teachers under his supervision sexually abused some children in his class. Yury felt guilty for his lack of oversight. ‘If only I had known, I could have done something.’

The result of such trauma is not fear but guilt and shame. Once acknowledged, moral injury is a term which ‘loosens the noose a bit around the necks of veterans’.[[108]](#endnote-108)

Clarissa is an organisational psychologist who was involved in psychological operations in the military. She advised on how to break captured enemy soldiers. She said in supervision a few years later, ‘What I did was unethical. I used my expertise to point out where there was psychological vulnerability. The interrogators then used it against the prisoners.’

If moral injury hurts ‘the best in a person’, then a spiritual component must be somewhere in the equation.

I have spent thousands of hours treating offenders. A few were incapable of feeling guilt and remorse due to personality characteristics (such as a lack of empathy). But most offenders feel intense guilt and remorse. They have also injured themselves by their actions. They need to integrate and come to terms with their own offending without a complete destruction of self-image. I think that a recovery from moral injury is an appropriate way to describe this process.

*To do:* Visit Soul Repair Center’s website: [www.brite.edu/soulrepair](http://www.brite.edu/soulrepair)

## Towards recovery from moral injury

We might consider the implications for the person who is perpetrating spiritual abuse. Often there is a context of biblical or theological understanding, which is betrayed in the act.

Diego was ordained an Anglican priest. He was sent to a rural parish and established a lively youth group. His marriage of five years broke down and his wife left him to return to her family in the city. In his loneliness and despair he sexually offended with a 14 year old youth group member, ‘She had a crush on me. And I took advantage of it.’ Diego was incarcerated for 18 months and lost his license as a minister.

Diego presented for counselling after his release. He felt intense guilt over what had happened. He drew on his theological training and identified the following assumptions:

1. God created humans.
2. God gave moral laws which govern human conduct.
3. I have committed the ‘unforgiveable sin’ in sexually abusing an innocent person.
4. There is no appeal, no forgiveness, no grace—nothing can repair what was done.
5. I am beyond any hope of redemption.
6. God will send me to hell.

While it is easy to think of ways to challenge such beliefs, these are unique to a person. The specific beliefs reflect lived experience.

Diego is a decent person and has an active faith which he continues to practice. His conscience condemns him, possibly in an exaggerated way, but he will need to come to terms with what he did. The violation is to his own moral code as well as being criminal.

There is also an unconscious dimension from childhood spiritual learning. All this feels rigid and cannot be easily changed. Long accepted. Always believed. Diego assumes they are eternally true for him and that his action, being a perpetrator of sexual assault, renders him in conflict with the moral order of the universe. The very foundation of being human is at stake for him. No wonder it feels rigid and resists any appeal to reason.

Diego did eventually forgive himself, but it was a long and difficult journey.

I offer his example and the concept of moral injury to help survivors of spiritual abuse to appreciate the diversity of people who perpetrate spiritual abuse. Perhaps such an understanding can make the next step, which follows, easier to make.

*Reflect:* I hope that some perpetrators have found their way to reading this book. I would encourage you to prioritise your recovery.

*To do:* The following steps might be helpful: write out a full account of your actions, what you felt at the time and the nature of your self-justification. Re-read the section on self-compassion and consider how you can apply the principles to yourself. Acknowledge that you are imperfect (this should be easy!); but this does not mean that you are beyond redemption. Think about telling your story to a trusted friend, spiritual leader or therapist. If what you did was criminal, consult a lawyer.

Can you make an apology to the person you abused? Check first if the person is willing to receive it. Can you find ways to make amends through volunteer work, advocacy, or financial restitution? Persist until you regain a sense of purpose. Can you ‘reframe’ the abuse into a larger story rather than identify yourself with the abuse alone? Most people have to come to terms with an understanding of life as morally complex.

*To do:* You might also consider a formal act of making a confession to a Roman Catholic or Anglican priest. Or do you have something similar in another tradition? In the New Testament James encouraged believers to ‘confess your sins to one another.’ (5:16) A religious ritual is helpful to deal with guilt and shame.

It is possible that the church as a whole struggles with moral injury. We have been through a profound crisis after revelations of institutional sexual abuse. We have tolerated perpetrators, covered up abuse and failed to adequately protect, believe, or adequately compensate survivors of sexual abuse. Everything that I have said about moral injury applies to us who believe and belong to the church. Especially to those who are in leadership roles—a group in which I include myself!

## Is forgiveness possible?

Change is an uncertain process. Initially you may feel off balance - worse if things are falling apart. It is hard to see ‘around the corner’ and to embrace what is coming. But it is a time of opportunity and potential. There may be feelings of trepidation and excitement during a transformational process.[[109]](#endnote-109)

The issue of forgiveness is always relevant to the process of recovery. It is not a substitute for justice, but that is another discussion.

*Growth Challenge:* Christians are often encouraged to forgive. Rightly. Jesus responded to the question of how often a follower should forgive, ‘not seven times, but, I tell you, 77 times.’ (Matthew 18:22) This would suggest a habitual pattern of forgiveness. It makes sense, when we consider the grace God offers every believer in Christ, in the words of the popular song ‘our debt he paid on the cross’.

But timing is another matter. Often forgiveness is attempted too early in the process of recovery. A few things must happen before genuine forgiveness is possible.

The full impact of the injury and its spiritual consequences need to be felt. Otherwise, what is let go?

Monte joined a strict religious cult in his teenage years. He left after ten years. He said, ‘I feel like I wasted those years. I cut myself off from my family and friends. I’d hoped to go to university and gain a profession, but now I have to start again. I was celibate and I feel completely unprepared for the dating game, but this is a necessary step if I want to have a wife and family. I feel sick at the thought of going to a normal worship service.’

*To do:* Make a list of each area in your life that has been adversely affected by abuse that you have suffered: relationships, ability to trust, participation in a faith community, and image of God. When you feel that you can forgive the perpetrator(s), tick each one off. Remember that forgiveness is an action. You make a choice; feelings follow later.

Forgiving a perpetrator does not mean that what happened to you was acceptable. Forgiving is not the same as forgetting. It is more about you than the perpetrator. As Schwartz said, ‘Forgiveness is an inside job.’[[110]](#endnote-110)

*Affirmation:* I cannot change the past, but I can inhabit a better future.

Forgiveness must be unconditional.

Clarissa was raped by a Salvation Army officer. He went to jail and continued to maintain his innocence. There was no apology or any apparent remorse, which was noted by the judge in sentencing. Eventually Clarissa was able to forgive, recognising, ‘Forgiveness was mine to give. Nothing depended on him. It took me quite a while to realise that I had no need to hear an apology from him. That set me free.’

Abuse is usually an act of power-over; forgiveness is a retaking of power to act. Indeed, forgiveness is a final ‘letting go’. That is the benefit. It is also a release from any lasting connection to the abuser. Forgiving means discarding resentment and bitterness, which can linger like a poison.

Clarissa added, ‘I’ve let him go. He is mostly out of my head. Eventually I will evict him completely. It is just a matter of time. Forgiveness is the way to go.’

There are so many benefits from forgiveness. I think it is helpful to consider it a gift at many levels. As Christians we believe that God has forgiven us. We receive it, even though we don’t deserve it. That is the meaning of grace. As we give it, we can become more Christ-like with his words from the cross, ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.’ (Luke 23:34) We can see the gift of forgiveness as healing in relationships. And finally, with a step that for many is very difficult, we can extend forgiveness to ourselves.

[Eila](https://www.momjunction.com/baby-names/eila/) found it a challenge to eventually forgive herself. She said to her pastor, ‘For a long time I just felt stupid. Why didn’t I suspect something? Why did I let him get away with it for so long? But I can now see that when you are vulnerable it is hard to recognise when you are being groomed for abuse.’

There has been extensive research on the value of forgiveness for improved mental health. The benefits include a reduction in stress, more space in life for positive emotions such as joy and peace, a rise in self-esteem, reduced conflict in relationships, and an increase in resilience. Indeed, it is good for personal and spiritual growth because people are more optimistic about the future, and more ready to learn from the past and develop emotional maturity.

Beth’s husband was senior in diocesan administration. He was not ordained but he was subject to the ethical standards of his church. He was dismissed after having an affair with a colleague. In the weeks that followed Beth lost her husband, his income and, effectively, the father of their children. After a time in counselling with a grief therapist she was able to come to a place of forgiveness. She said, ‘I feel lighter, as if I don’t have to carry the burden of all that I lost.’

*To do:* Write a forgiveness letter to the person who injured you. Writing it is not the same as sending it. That is a later choice which may or may not be in your best interests. Include something of your feelings after the trauma, your understanding of the person and their motivation, and finally a statement that you intend to forgive. For example, ‘I am letting go.’

*Reflect:* Do you think you might need to forgive God for allowing you to go through trauma?

## Conclusion

Abusers are not a homogeneous group. There is a diversity of people, psychological profiles and motivations to offend. For some there is a backlash of conscience, which has been called moral injury.

Forgivenessis a milestone on the road to recovery. You have walked the journey and these mark your progress. Well done! And now to the next challenge—growth.

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# GROWTH

A broken ceramic can be repaired. Iron staples. Superglue. Perhaps ‘quick and easy’. It may even return to some functionality. But it is no better than it was before. In contrast, kintsugi is a careful and time-consuming process. This reminds us of the value of the process of recovery, growth and ultimately transformation.

Both breakage and repair are natural aspects of the history of an object. But we are not concerned only about utility. Post-traumatic growth and post-traumatic spiritual growth go beyond what was previously thought possible: they create beauty from brokenness.

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# Chapter 9: Growth after Trauma

Trauma does not have the last word. Some people not only recover from trauma but flourish in new ways. This unexpected gain has been called post-traumatic growth.[[111]](#endnote-112) The idea of resilience is more limited, since it describes a return to previous functioning. But the problem with ‘returning to normal’ is that the cracks remain and any gains can be brittle. Post-traumatic growth describes a transformation.

We can define post-traumatic growth as ‘the experience of positive change that the individual experiences as a result of the struggle with a traumatic event’.[[112]](#endnote-113) It has been found that adversity compels people to become more true to themselves, take on new challenges and see things from a different perspective. This is a truth that has been enshrined in various spiritual traditions: ‘suffering produces … character’ (Romans 5:3–4); ancient Greek philosophy; and more recently in the existential therapy of Holocaust survivor Dr Viktor Frankl.

Post-traumatic growth challenges the widely held assumption that psychological health is defined solely by the absence of emotional suffering. Instead there is a contribution made by the positive psychology movement.[[113]](#endnote-114)

*To do*: Decide on five adjectives to describe yourself before the traumatic experience. Five words to describe yourself immediately after your negative experience. Five adjectives that apply to you now. What changes can you identify? Are any positive?

## Key aspects of post-traumatic growth

Trauma has been likened to an earthquake.[[114]](#endnote-115) But it is not all devastation. There are five areas where people can experience psychological growth after a tragic life event: [[115]](#endnote-116)

1. *Appreciation for Life*. A deeper sense of gratitude and valuing life. Everyday routines can be embraced, but what is important changes. You can appreciate what you have—thankfully, what remains. Values and priorities change.
2. *Improved Relationships*. Emotional connections with loved ones can be strengthened with increased empathy and with a greater sense of family and community. There is more capacity for intimacy, sometimes because you can accept expressions of care, though this can be challenging for some individuals. More time is made for family and friends.
3. *New Possibilities*. The experience of trauma often closes the door on what was previously possible. In its place, there is an increased openness to new possibilities through life goals, career changes and personal development. Helping others may become a high priority. Compassion may be felt for those who have suffered in a similar way.
4. *Personal Strength*. Often individuals find a way to cope in the face of adversity. This can be surprising to all involved. Surviving an extreme experience results in an awareness of inner strength and resilience. A new confidence and greater self-reliance may become evident. Post-traumatic stress, when it is not too overwhelming and handled well, empowers post-traumatic growth.
5. *Spiritual Growth and Existential Meaning*. The trauma may lead to greater spiritual understanding, including an appreciation of life’s meaning and purpose. Often there is a shift away from assumptions common in Western culture about individualism, personal control and self-reliance. Old beliefs are questioned. This includes the natural expectation that the world is benevolent and good things will happen to those who are deserving. Such beliefs can remain unexamined until the experience of trauma. This area will be more fully explored under the heading of post-traumatic spiritual growth (PTSG).

*Reflect:* Do you think that a belief in God is absolutely necessary for post-traumatic growth? Can an atheist can achieve post-traumatic growth by asking questions about meaning in life?[[116]](#endnote-117)

Post traumatic growth is not wishful thinking or ‘always looking on the bright side’. No one willingly chooses trauma for whatever benefits may result. However, adversity is a fact of life and potentially there are better ways to handle it.

Veronica was viciously assaulted while serving as a teacher in a mission school. Her physical injuries needed months of rehabilitation. Later she was interviewed by a Christian radio station and was able to say, ‘It was a horrible time in my life. I felt so alone through it all, but I survived. I know I am stronger in my faith.’

*To do:* Have you noticed changes in the five areas above? Can you rank them from what has changed most to the least?

Do you think differently about life? What did you previously assume? How do you finish this part sentence: ‘I must always …’

## A paradox

There is a paradox that underlies all these domains: out of loss there is gain.[[117]](#endnote-118) For example, the person who suffers religious doubt after a trauma may gain a deeper faith through post-traumatic growth.

There are seeming contradictions. Post-traumatic growth may occur without therapy, since it is a natural growth process. But it is not always straightforward. A survivor may not suddenly get over trauma and grow emotionally; usually it is mixed with some overlapping of progress and relapse. Both often happen simultaneously. Post-traumatic growth will not end suffering, but it may make it more endurable. It is life, which is not static but ever-changing. Full of potential …

Stephen Joseph identified three existential themes which he argued are at the core of post-traumatic growth. These are:

1. The recognition that life is uncertain and that things change. There is more tolerance for uncertainty.
2. Psychological mindfulness, which reflects self-awareness and understanding of one’s thoughts, emotions and behaviours, as well as a flexible approach to personal change.
3. The acknowledgement of personal agency which has a sense of responsibility for the choices we make in life; and acknowledgement that choices have consequences.[[118]](#endnote-119)

Marshall was serving as a builder in Thailand with a mission agency. He got a nasty parasite with negative health effects, both short and long term. He reflected on his experience, ‘I put myself at risk, but it was my choice to serve God in that way. Sometimes ‘bad things happen to good people’. I have learned to be more accepting. And that is a good thing.’

Post-traumatic growth is natural—if allowed to happen. Post-traumatic stress is the engine of post-traumatic growth.[[119]](#endnote-120) But not everyone experiences growth. Some people avoid positive change through alcohol and addictions. There are also unhealthy strategies to reduce tension, such as self injury, gambling, binging and purging. It may be tempting to retreat into resentment and bitterness about how life is unfair. Such defence mechanisms can last a lifetime.

Stephen Joseph contrasted two methods of coping: (a) *approach-oriented* coping, in which a person will concentrate their efforts on either changing the situation or managing their emotions; and (b) *avoidance-oriented* coping, in which a person will ignore the situation or their emotions. Brief avoidance can be momentarily helpful, but it easily becomes a dysfunctional pattern.[[120]](#endnote-121) In approach-oriented coping you can either focus on a needed task or be emotion-focused to manage the emotional distress. This can be achieved through physical exercise, relaxation and talking it through with friends or family.

Marshall is a good example of approach-oriented coping. He focused on what he could control: his attitudes to life and himself. He accepted the implications for his health and did not use spiritual cliches such as ‘God knows what is best for me.’

Post-traumatic growth does not always look the same for everyone. People vary and experiences are different. And it does not happen automatically; it requires time and an active engagement at all levels, including the emotional legacy. There is an active restructuring of meaning, including a new understanding of the trauma in terms of a life lived. What emerges is a new version of the self.

## Some practical tips for post-traumatic growth

*To Do:* Use your journal to do the following:

1. *Cognitive:* Ask yourself why the trauma occurred. Do you blame yourself? What helps you to make sense of it? Traumatic events tend to be poorly encoded in the brain. This includes the memory system, but creating a story brings greater coherence to the narrative. Can you develop a story in which the trauma is part of your overall life story? Write it out.
2. *Emotiontal:* Review the section on mindfulness. Can you use some of these techniques to reduce your reactivity? It is important to recognise that post-traumatic growth does not necessarily enable people to feel less pain from the tragedies they have experienced, nor does it necessarily lead to an increase in positive emotions. Have you had professional assistance to reduce the physical symptoms of trauma?
3. *Social Support:* Have you shared your experience with close friends and family? You might consider joining a group in which you are allowed to tell your story and receive emotional support from others. Make sure you note any life changes after the trauma (especially the positive!).
4. *Shift in perspective.* Can you re-author your life story from suffering the trauma to it becoming a source of learning and growth? Do not rush this stage of the process, since it can take quite a long time.

Jing looked back on her process of recovery after a breakdown after being bullied as a receptionist in a large Chinese church. She said, ‘For months, maybe a year or two, I felt stuck in pain. But then I found a good pastoral counsellor and made some progress. The counsellor explained how I had to face my difficult emotions and to act in a way that is opposite to how I feel. She called this opposite action and quoted Jesus, ‘If anyone forces you to go one mile, go the extra mile’ (Matthew 5:41). I began to manage my rollercoaster of emotions. Gradually I went back to full-time work in a doctor’s surgery. The last couple of years I have felt that I have grown and the abuse no longer dominates my life story. I believe that my experience has made me more empathic to others.’ She was recently asked to serve as an elder in her church. She also found that there were cultural factors in her Chinese community which made progress to autonomy more difficult because of expected subservience to authority figures.

*(e)Acting on values.* Goals can be extrinsic, that is set by others, which we ‘buy into’. Or they can be intrinsic when we listen to our ‘inner voice’. Intrinsic values are better. Values are not goals. They give direction, whereas goals can be achieved. Traumatic experience can reshape values, give different priorities and provide new goals. Values provide motivation and help you feel alive. This is fundamental to why we do things and the difference we can make in life.

*To do*: There are many values questionnaires on the Internet. Fill one out and reflect on your values. One example is the Valued Living Questionnaire (VLQ). How would you have filled out the questionnaire before the trauma? Can you identify areas in which your values have shifted?

Values are like a compass, since they guide you to grow in a desired direction. It is what you stand for and what you want your life to be about. If there is a large gap between your values and how you live your life, then you will experience frustration and dissatisfaction.[[121]](#endnote-122)

*To do:* A vision statement which is an expression of your Christian values.

*Exercise:* Identify three goals you would like to achieve. List these at the top of a large sheet of paper. Draw a ladder underneath each goal, with five to six rungs. Start from where you are now and identify what needs to be done at each rung to achieve your goals.

## How you think

Post-traumatic growth can lead to greater cognitive sophistication. An example is dialectical thinking, which enables a person to incorporate contradictions into a structure of meaning.

Edward reflected on his journey after a bad experience on the mission field. He said, ‘I used to just believe what I was told. Things were black and white. I would choose either to believe in free will or predestination, as an example. I now find I can hold the two sides in tension. In fact I believe both even though it seems contradictory. And I’m okay with that.’

This is clearly a step beyond binary thinking of right or wrong, good or bad, light or darkness.There should be some space left for uncertainty.

Culture can make recovery a more complicated process. For example, collectivist values versus individual values.

Li found the emphasis on self-growth clashed with her Chinese culture, which emphasised family. She said, ‘I needed time to make changes, but it felt selfish. Eventually I saw that it was necessary if I was to make any contribution to family life.’

In this example Li was able to think in terms of the big picture.

Recovery from trauma can lead to a release of creativity. It is a ‘getting in touch’ with the self at a deeper level. This can be expressed in art, music, creative writing, drama, poetry, dance, painting and photography.

Nicole was treated for PTSD. She took up choreography, which was expressed through a local dance group. She said, ‘It has been a challenge, but I feel so alive.’

*Reflect:* Have you taken up any of the many crafts? What appeals to you?

## Growth challenge: wisdom

One aspect of post-traumatic growth is an increase in wisdom. This happens when trauma is processed, understood and integrated into your life.

The experience of trauma deeply engages a person at the emotional level. It leads to a new acquaintance with the self.

Rajib said, ‘Now, I think I know myself better. I have experienced something worse than I could have imagined and I can see who I am in new light.’

After trauma self-reflection happens at a deeper level.

Wisdom also includes a deeper understanding of others through the mechanism of empathy. More aspects of the human experience can be embraced and ultimately better understood. You can think about this as an increase in emotional intelligence. Compassion comes more easily when the experiences of others can be appreciated at a deeper level.

After a traumatic experience life seems unpredictable. And it is! A wise person understands this and takes it into account. They accept the unknown with grace.

A wise person asks deeper questions and moves more easily in the spiritual realm. It becomes possible to offer spiritual guidance and leadership. This goes beyond knowing religious doctrines or understanding theological concepts. It is about the nature of the person and is reflected in character.

While trauma itself doesn’t guarantee wisdom, the way a person chooses to process and integrate their experiences can lead to profound personal growth and insight. The result? Wisdom.

*Reflect*: Can you identify the wisest person you know? What is it about them that you admire? What characteristics do you think qualify them to be a wise person? As you reflect on yourself, do you share any of these qualities? Especially since your trauma.

## Encouraging post-traumatic growth

Most of the practical exercises in this book will facilitate post-traumatic growth. Journalling is especially important and has been repeatedly emphasised.

*To do:* Consider gratitude as an exercise:

Mia separated from her clergy husband after an abusive relationship. She received considerable support from the denomination, including a house rent free for two years while she adjusted with her two young children. She said to her counsellor, ‘Yes, I have been through a really difficult time in my life, but I have the support of friends. Most days I think about how much I have to be thankful. Family had been supportive, the church has been helpful, and I have enough to get by. I believe that God is looking after me. I feel secure in God’s love.’

*Affirmation:* There is always a way forward.

Sometimes a survivor of trauma will re-engage with a church. This can provide a valuable social network and spiritual support. There are also opportunities for service.

*To do:* There is an ancient Christian practice of lament. This acknowledges and honors the pain you have suffered. You can use various psalms (see Psalms 13, 22 and 86 for individual lament and Psalms 12 and 44 for community). Read these aloud, with reference to God, and see if you feel some resonance.Note that complaining to God is ‘allowed’.

You might also see the partaking of Holy Communion as sharing your trauma with Jesus and what he experienced. It is a ‘container’ in which trauma can be remembered, held and transformed. You are sustained by the Christian community.

In the Bible we see the Jewish people going up to the temple in Jerusalem (Psalms of Ascent Psalms 120–136). This is part of the ancient practice of pilgrimage, and it can be a helpful healing mechanism. It was widely practiced in the Middle Ages as a journey to a God (as described in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*)*.* There is a current revival of interest in making a spiritual journey. A number of my friends have walked the Camino de Santiago. A pilgrimage is an opportunity to face reality at many levels: physical pain, temporary absence of friends and community support, and spiritual isolation.

Sakura suffered violence from her husband. Initially she would walk a labyrinth in a meditative style but her spiritual director advised her to think about going on a pilgrimage. She walked some distance to visit a memorial to survivors of domestic violence. She said, ‘I have honored my experience by my action. It feels tangible. Out there. I can deal with it.’

*Reflect:* Is there a meaningful place associated with your trauma that you might visit? If you did, what would it represent? If it is near you might consider walking there.

Unexamined assumptions are often the scaffolding of our lives. Usually we make minor adjustments, such as ‘I won’t lend $20 to Bill again; he forgot to repay what he last borrowed.’ Trauma tends to challenge what we assume and demands a rethinking of expectations. A potential benefit is a more realistic engagement with the world as it is, but this is not guaranteed.

New goals for growth can be set. Consider the following:

Matthew came out as non-binary. He was rejected by his university fellowship group, including a Bible study which included many of his closest friends. He said, ‘I’m doing my honours degree in mathematics and I hope to do postgraduate actuarial studies next year. But I wanted to do something completely different. I have enrolled in a 10 week horticultural course. I think it will help me appreciate nature and get out of my head.’

And thinking about spiritual growth as well:

Matthew began to ask some of his new friends about where they went to church. He said, ‘I began to realise that the church of Jesus Christ is larger than my evangelical Bible study group. There are places I can tell my story and it will be respected.’ Matthew also reflected on what was working for him, including physical, emotional, relational and spiritual dimensions. He added, ‘I thought about the changes in my life. It is like a plant being pruned: maybe it is painful for a while but something will grow and potentially bloom in its place.’

Post-traumatic growth is common, but it is not universal. A survivor can remain ‘stuck’ for years and avoid feeling pain in various unhealthy ways. There is always the option to retreat from the world.

*Reflect:* Do you agree with this statement, ‘It is important to clarify to trauma survivors that it is not the trauma itself that is responsible for change, but how they respond to it.’[[122]](#endnote-123) Discuss this with someone you trust.

*Affirmation:* I can grow in God. There is no limit.

## Post-traumatic spiritual growth

What is normal? You eat breakfast, walk the dog, go to work, have a sandwich for lunch, see friends for coffee, enjoy dinner and watch TV. Your weekends might have a different rhythm. You might sleep in on Saturday. You go to church the next day. Everything fits into your unfolding story. It is how life is lived.

In contrast, a traumatic experience is shattering. It disrupts. Your meaning-making capacity is overwhelmed.

Adebayo lost her daughter in a tragic car accident. The church youth group were going to a retreat centre, but the car driven by the youth pastor skidded off the road and overturned. While others were injured, Adebayo’s daughter’s neck was broken and she died at the scene. Adebayo said to her pastor, ‘It just doesn’t make sense. How could God allow this to happen?’

Trauma can distort a person’s image of God. David Peters returned from serving as a chaplain in the Iraq war with classic symptoms of PTSD. It is common for people who are exposed to trauma to be left with a sense of being forsaken by God. Peter’s image of God changed from the fundamentalism in which he was raised. He adopted a more liberal perspective informed by theologian Paul Tillich’s idea of God as the ‘ground of Being’. This author illustrates how the identity of the person, the relationship to him or herself and to God can change radically through experiencing trauma.

## No safe place?

Trauma reminds us how vulnerable we are. Bad things happen. And the time we have to make a difference is brief.

Dennis was a journalist for a popular Christian magazine. He had a terrible experience while following a story in a war-torn country. He later reflected, ‘I was caught up in a riot. I was terrified, naturally. Coming that close to death, I saw that I had to live life to the full and make every moment count for eternity.’ He also found that he was on a journey of changing his core beliefs to incorporate random events.

For many, indeed for most secular people, death provides a limit to life. In trauma death can be near, felt, almost overwhelmingly present. The experience of trauma insists that we look beyond appearances. For the Christian believer there is the hope of eternal life. The apostle Paul asked, ‘O death, where is your victory?’ (1 Corinthians 15:55). But this may or may not become powerfully relevant.

Often trauma shatters what we assume about life. What is stable, dependable and desirable? An individual’s first thought might be denial: ‘I can’t believe this happened to me.’ This shakeup or even violation of meaning is even more intense when the context is spiritual or religious, especially for the believer. Where are the safe places? Are there no sanctuaries? Why did God not protect me? Does God save anyone? But after the experience of trauma a person can become more open to new ideas.

There is an eventual capacity for deeper meaning. New possibilities emerge. The shattering of old assumptions almost compels a person to restructure how the world is understood, his or her future, and ultimately God.

A year or two later Adebayo explained to a friend, ‘I can now see that random things simply happen. Christians experience bad things, along with everybody else. I appreciate that it is part of the freedom of God in facing the future. I have shared this thought with others, but they don’t seem to get it. I guess you have to live it first.’

Old structures of meaning may no longer work in the post-trauma life. Our assumptions include identity, the future, the kind of world we live in and what is expected of other people.

*Reflect:* What do you think of Peter’s observation that an experience of war can create prophets? [[123]](#endnote-124)

One aspect of traumatic injury is disturbance in memory. Vivid images ‘gatecrash’ the mind. The persistence of symptoms of trauma remind the person that something *has* to change. This sets the agenda of growth: ‘I must deal with this!’ While the focus of some survivors is to recover, it is possible to go further—to not stop until you have achieved significant spiritual growth.

Aarav had been raped by a church elder from his ethnic congregation. He had nightmares from which he would wake, often sweating and unable to return to sleep. His memories were vivid. He recalled, ‘I would get up after having a nightmare, write out the dream and later think about its meaning. Eventually I got a sense of a ministry that God was calling me to. I was determined that the abuse would not have the final say in my life, but I would open a door to a different and better future.’

## Beliefs

Some unhealthy religious beliefs can become entangled in thoughts and lead to psychological disorders such as depression.

Georgios thought that he had committed an unforgivable sin after he was sexually abused by a Greek Orthodox priest, ‘God is rejecting me. It is his punishment that I was abused.’

It is best to have a process of discernment and possible advice by a respected religious elder.

*Reflect:* Trauma provides an opportunity to ‘pick up the pieces’ and in the process do a religious audit of what you believe. How healthy is it to believe this or that doctrine?

After a traumatic experience there is considerable potential for psychological and spiritual growth. [[124]](#endnote-125) It is useful to consider the evidence of change. Include both the positive and negative. Changes in beliefs are important, especially those that lead to greater resilience. This will allow the survivor to navigate the future with a new sense of understanding and perspective. No relearning is necessary.

Emotional reactivity is likely to continue. Hopefully it will be better managed, but don’t expect the intensity to be dulled. While uncomfortable, intensity can be useful because its emotional power can be an employed to go deeper with cognitive and emotional processing.

Daniel had his life turned ‘upside down’ when his fiancée, a youth worker with the Presbyterian Church, had an affair. Months later he would find himself in tears and unable to control his drop in mood. He said, ‘I decided it was time to do some tertiary study in theology. I need to be more informed if I am to live the Christian life.’

Sometimes a person will discover a need to depend more on God. Paradoxically, when life becomes unpredictable and even threatening, the still point can be found in God. This is not wishful thinking, but the experience of countless believers.

Trauma is real. It is like a physical injury, when we see blood. It cuts deep into what is most real. Our body. Our mind. Our spirit. We can wake up from the slumber of wishful thinking, denial, and Pollyanna-like hopeful delusions. This may include unnecessary suffering, but it can be a step closer to appreciating ultimate reality. Trauma can be reframed. It takes a leap of imagination to put it into a different format. Many people who experience PTSD change their understanding of what kind of life is desirable.[[125]](#endnote-126)

Barbara Orlowski’s qualitative research involved a survey of 100 people who left a church. She asked about changes in beliefs after their negative experiences. Most reported positive changes. The following is an example of the sort of changes people experience:

‘Light-years and 180 degrees from there, I’m less dogmatic than before, less confident that I have things figured out, more cynical and less trusting of others, fearful of intimacy. All this translates into a rollercoaster ride of faith, but I’m still on the train with my hands in the air.’[[126]](#endnote-127)

*Note:* Sitting in a church does not necessarily make you close to God. You might feel more attuned being in nature. It is not a matter of what you ‘should’ feel or be; simply accept where and when you feel most alive.

Sometimes trauma stimulates creativity. Trauma engages a person at emotional depth. Many novels have been written as a form of self-therapy, helping the author to make sense of their experiences. This leads to a change in focus, making them more introspective or attuned to human suffering. Empathy is enhanced.

Albert, a Congregational Church pastor, found that his preaching changed after his son committed suicide. He said, ‘I experienced the depth of grief, almost a universal sadness, and yet a spark of hope. I try to convey that through what I say in the pulpit.’

A good indication of post-traumatic spiritual growth is the capacity to find purpose and an avenue to serve others. It is natural to focus on personal needs, but ministry involves putting the needs of others first—when you arrive at a place where this is possible.

In Celtic mythology there are places where the barrier between this world and the spiritual is thinner and more permeable.[[127]](#endnote-128) These have been called *thin places*. You can think about such thin places as portals to ultimate reality—which is of course God.

## The early church

The New Testament church was born out of trauma. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ was formative and foundational to the experience of the faith community. In this way the church from its beginnings was a post-traumatic community.

*Reflect*: How would you expect a religious faith to be different if it was founded on the death of a martyr?

The various religious traditions all raise a possibility that suffering can lead to somewhere significant. In the Old Testament the book of Job portrays an innocent man whose suffering was transformed by a vision of God. Islam suggests that suffering is something to be welcomed because it can be instrumental in the purposes of God. Buddhism encourages people to approach suffering rather than to avoid pain. The Four Noble Truths of Buddhism are a guide in this process. In the New Testament, the ultimate example of post-traumatic growth is Jesus Christ.

## Claire McAuliffe’s story of escaping a cult

Claire McAuliffe was brought up in a traditional Catholic sect, the Society of Saint Pius X, which was a breakaway from the Catholic Church. At 18 she married an older man who held ‘end of the world’ beliefs.

She explained, ‘The sect was a breakaway from the Catholic Church … We were dressed basically like Amish people and for my particular family, we were home-schooled, we didn’t have any television or outside media. We didn’t know anything that was going on in the outside world and we had been taught that the outside world needed converting. It was very awkward for us. It was very difficult to make any friendships because we were so different.’

A few years after marriage, Claire’s husband moved the family to a global doomsday cult lead by William Kamm, who called himself ‘the Little Pebble’. He believed he could speak to God and the Virgin Mary. Upon joining the Order of St Charbel on the South Coast of New South Wales, Australia, Claire said that she was forced to take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, attend prayers three times a day and live under strict rules. It was concern for the safety of her eight young children that eventually saw her flee from the cult.

The Order of St Charbel was led by William Kamm, who was convicted of the rape and assault of a teenager in 2007. Claire told the Today Show that it was only when she challenged Kamm on his leadership within the cult that he organised for her to be evicted from the community. She said, ‘I ended up by challenging Kamm’s authority by a series of letters about him ordaining married men as priests and bishops, because that was against the rules of the Catholic church.’ There were additional consequences: ‘Because he was paying the mortgage on the house that we were in, he funnelled that money into his court case, thereby getting rid of a problem—that was me—and we got evicted by the local sheriff.’

One year after Claire left the cult, Kamm was found guilty and imprisoned over the sexual and indecent assault of a 15-year-old. But after breaking away from the religious group in 2006, Claire felt lost, ‘It kind of smacked me in the face, it was really hard for me. I didn’t know who Claire was. There was Claire as the person and then mum. I still had all of these kids and went on to be a solo mum for eight years. Trying to bring up those kids correctly and then trying to find out who I was, was always a real balancing act.’ She continued, ‘Ultimately, my kids and I caught up together on fashion, movies, music and world events and everything else in between. It was a long journey and I’ve grown a lot.’

Claire relocated to Brisbane with her children. She said, ‘I share my story to be able to help other women, and men too, who are trapped in these groups, because they have no one to hold their hand and hold their heart.’

Claire graduated in 2025 with a Bachelor of Arts, majoring in Studies in Religion and Sociology, and in 2021 she was the recipient of the Robertson Family Scholarship, which was established in 2013 to assist an exceptional student pursuing Studies in Religion later in life.

Claire McAuliffe has experienced post-traumatic growth, ‘Despite living a negative religious experience in my early years, I have come to see and understand how rich and unique that experience was. I want to deepen my knowledge of that part of my life so that others may learn from it.’ She added, ‘The legacy I want to leave is that through sharing of my story and academic work, people will have a deeper understanding of those who leave high-demand religions. And for those that leave, they will know they are not alone, and their experience will be better understood by those around them.’

## Conclusion

In this chapter we explored the idea of post-traumatic growth. Five characteristics were proposed by the academics who first used the term. Achieving post-traumatic growth is a challenge at so many levels. As you make progress on the path to recovery, post-traumatic growth brings a possibility of new and unique growth. Wisdom was proposed as an overarching indicator of post-traumatic growth. The chapter proposes various exercises and practical strategies. These will help your post-traumatic growth. Think about what attracts you. Try one or two and see what difference it makes.

Post-traumatic stress and spiritual growth are not opposites. They can coexist at the same time. This is especially evident when the experience of stress becomes the stimulus for spiritual growth. The possibilities are endless. And the gains eternal!

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# Chapter 10: The Image of God

Yahweh, the unseen God of the Hebrew people, banned any representative image (Exodus 20:4–5). However, unhealthy images of God are not so easily dismissed. Or changed. Generally, our concern today is not with idols, but with erroneous beliefs about God.

The usual assumption in the church is that reading the Bible, listening to sermons or Christian teaching will ensure a healthy understanding of God. The difficulty is that we are selective in what we absorb.

Celia was chronically depressed. Her image of God was almost totally negative. She said, ‘God sees all my sins. He is holy and rightly judges me. I deserve to go to hell.’ Over the years she heard countless sermons that affirmed that God is love. She said, ‘I find it easy to believe that God loves other people, just not me.’

This can be a reason for not believing in God.

Jose said, ‘I was raised in a hellfire and brimstone family. I can’t believe in a God that would torture anyone, even Hitler, for eternity.’

## A theological perspective

There is a close connection between a person’s image of God and their theology. The two are bound together like conjoined twins.

The experience of trauma can provide an opportunity to rethink your theology. For example, Jurgen Moltmann, a leading theologian in the 20th Century, was a German soldier in World War 2 and became a prisoner-of-war, interned near Nottingham, England. He was 19 years old at the time. He was given a Bible and found comfort reading the Psalms. Eventually he wrote some of the most influential books in 20th Century theology, including the *Theology of Hope* (1967) and the *Crucified God* (1974). The experience of war had a formative impact on his theology.

Shelly Rambo has been very influential in exploring a theology of trauma. There is a long tradition of interest in suffering, arguably since Job in the Old Testament. But theology has mainly focused on the question of how a good God allows the innocent to suffer. For the trauma survivor suffering is not a riddle to be solved, but a challenge to understand—preferably in an ‘experience near’ way. Life is seen through pain. Rambo makes the point that platitudes like ‘God is testing me’ or ‘It is God’s will’ or ‘This is my cross to bear’ are unhelpful. Theology is rejected as a ‘fixer’ or provider of solutions.[[128]](#endnote-129)

Rambo draws three lessons from trauma:

(a) The past is not in the past. The Christian community remembers through liturgy and supports worshippers in the experience of trauma.

(b) The body remembers. Our theology tends to be word-based, but trauma resides in the body, as we have seen. New Testament theology is embodied. In John’s gospel the disciples recognised the resurrected Jesus through his scars (John 20:20). And the original understanding of the Spirit of God was breath.

(c) The wounds from trauma do not simply go away. There is no neat and tidy package. It allows for contradictions. A post-traumatic theology focuses on the regulation of the body, constructions of narratives and reconnection to society.[[129]](#endnote-130)

*Reflect*: In what ways has trauma effected your thinking about God?

While I have experienced disappointments in life, there is nothing I would classify as traumatic (including being diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease, which is an incurable degenerative disease). But I have thought about theological themes relevant to trauma. In my time as an academic, I wrote an essay which was published as ‘The Invasion of Memory: A Psychological Perspective on Trauma in the Experience of God.’ [[130]](#endnote-131) The initial focus in the paper was on the experience of Jesus in his death by crucifixion. This was not an efficient execution but an extended torture leading to death. Jesus, in his humanity, faced the full impact of trauma.

Some central beliefs of orthodox Christianity are relevant at this point. Jesus was not simply another martyr, but was fully human and fully divine. A unique spiritual being. He died on Good Friday but had a conscious existence on Holy Saturday, the next day. I do not think it is too great a stretch to see Jesus in his humanity as impacted by symptoms of severe trauma. He was conscious. Peter recorded that after his death ‘Jesus was made alive in the Spirit, in which he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison’ (1 Peter 3:18-19). Additionally, the gospel was ‘proclaimed even to the dead’ (1 Peter 4:6).

The descent of Jesus into hell has been variously interpreted by theologians, but many if not most would argue for some kind of conscious experience after death for both Jesus and us.

The Apostles’ Creed says, in part, ‘he was crucified, died and was buried; he descended into hell; on the third day he rose again from the dead.’ In this fundamental statement of the faith of the church, Jesus was conscious after death and before his resurrection. In his humanity he would have suffered trauma on what we remember as Good Friday. This would have included the obvious physical suffering but also a spiritual dimension, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (Matthew 27:46) And there will be an after-effect, at the very least in memory and possibly in some kind of suffering through distressing symptoms. In this way not everything was finished (John 19:30). I think it is likely that the resurrection, his Easter experience, would have transformed any intrusive memories, including that of trauma, but the in-between period is significant.

This is tied to our understanding of the incarnation. God became vulnerable in Christ. God did not become less-than-God, but assumed human limitations (Philippians 2:5–8). Fundamentally, I believe that through Christ God experienced trauma. God was changed in the intersection of divinity and humanity; so too was the experience of Jesus incorporated into the self-understanding of God. Moltmann argued that the death of Christ introduced death into the Trinity.[[131]](#endnote-132) All this contributes to our understanding of the post-traumatic God.

The risen Jesus challenged the doubting Thomas: ‘Put your finger here, and see my hands, and put out your hand, and place it in my side.’ (John 20:27). Clearly Jesus carried scars. Is it too much to suggest that the scars included, in some way, the memory of his trauma? I have tried to follow Moltmann’s advice to see God through ‘the passion of Christ, and to discover the passion of Christ in God.’[[132]](#endnote-133)

*Reflect:* How do you react to the idea that Jesus, and through him God, experienced trauma? Is it possible that the post-traumatic God understands your experience? Do you feel less alone?

*Affirmation:* God understands everything I went through.

I have argued that God experienced trauma first-hand. Christ experienced a loss of control, humiliation, extremes of pain and ultimately death. In Christ God inverts the power dynamics of abuse and oppression.[[133]](#endnote-134) I believe that God experienced post-traumatic growth and has an unlimited capacity to empathise with those who suffer trauma.

## Deep dive: unconscious spiritual learning

In chapter 5 we explored unconscious learning. As we have seen, not everything is above the ‘waterline’ of awareness. Often significant beliefs—including negative beliefs—can be submerged in the unconscious realm.[[134]](#endnote-135)

Now we will return to the idea of unconscious spiritual learning. Sentence stems can be used to explore religious beliefs. Complete the following:

* God is …
* The most important thing I learned about God is …
* If I am in the presence of God, I must …
* If I change a religious belief, the result will be …
* What I never question spiritually is …

Be playful with this. I know such learning is ‘serious,’ but insights cannot be forced. Once you have an insight about your unconscious spiritual learning, reflect on how valid it is for you now. This introduces the challenge of testing our early and post-trauma learning.

When I did the sentence stem ‘God is …,’ my answer was ‘over there’; that is, ‘not here.’ Again, this reflects some distance in my relationship with God (of course, one of my making). I hold this in tension with my certainty that God is somewhere. Hence, what I never question is the existence of God.

*To Do:* A journal exercise. You may find that you have an inner critic who constantly berates you for falling short of your ideals. In your journal write from the ‘loudest’ voice. Allow full expression of the inner critic’s negative attitudes. Then shift to a kind and compassionate voice. Express counterarguments and affirm God’s love for you. If you have a loving view of Jesus, allow him to defend you. Or think of a support figure whom you trust and allow them to speak through the dialogue in your journal. Go backwards and forwards until you feel you have exhausted the debate. Do you find it easier to accept God’s love?

## Mary Jo Noworyta’s story: hope and healing after clergy abuse

In 2010, I was abused by my pastor. He is married and has seven children. I am married and have two children. It took six years for him to break down the walls of self-protection I held high. Being abused by my pastor was extra devastating due to the spiritual aspect involved. A person who was called to protect me, instead chose to satisfy his own desires and hurt me, a child of God’s.

With most abuse there comes a previous experience of being abused and this holds true with me. I was kidnapped at age ten by a stranger and sexually assaulted for hours. Not knowing if I was going to be killed by this man, it was terrifying. But the aftermath was worse than the kidnapping. I was told not to tell anyone what happened, especially my friends because they would laugh at me. I kept this a secret into my late 20s. I was alone in dealing with the trauma. I went for counselling here and there as an adult and found some help, but residual effects lingered. After accepting Jesus into my life as my Saviour and Lord, healing began, but not enough to stand up to a so-called man of God who was out to pursue me.

In 2004, a new pastor arrived at our church. From the moment we met, he stated that God was calling him to help me, that he knew I was hurting and he was going to be the one to bring healing. My self-protective wall was high and his goal, he said, was to break it down. There were many red flags that I noticed but ignored because he was ‘called by God’ as the church claimed. He was arrogant and manipulative. He said he was my pastor, my counsellor, my big brother and was to be my friend as well. I found out later that dual relationships are not healthy. I was confused. I was attracted to his position of authority and enjoyed feeling close to the pastor. My dad was a good man, but did not show a lot of affection and I was still hurting from my childhood trauma. I knew the pastor wasn’t a good person but I doubted my thoughts because of his spiritual position. We had many confrontations of me telling him he is manipulative or wrong in ways he handled church affairs, then I would apologise. After six years, I finally gave in and decided to stop fighting with my pastor and do whatever I could to help him. That wasn’t my role. He was the leader and should have led me away from this dependency.

We eventually ended up in a physical relationship that lasted a few months. His wife found out and we immediately stopped seeing each other and stopped talking. After telling my husband, he forgave me and our relationship was being restored. We decided the elder board needed to know so they decided to fire him. My husband and I could not attend that church anymore due to the shame. Our children went for a few weeks then decided they couldn’t go there anymore. Our son stopped going to church and our daughter found another place to go. We tried to attend church but the shame was overwhelming.

After a few months, I did a search on clergy sexual affairs and found The Hope of Survivors (THOS). I reached out to THOS and was connected with a peer counsellor, who helped me see what really happened. Thankfully, because God is so good, there is hope and healing.

For me, the most important thing I learned is that it was not really an affair. The reason it is so important to say that is that the truth sets us free. It was more painful to admit that my pastor did not care about me at all than to say it was an affair. It is not an affair because of the imbalance of power between spiritual leaders and the congregation. My pastor counselled me for years. He did this to get to know me, to know my strengths and weaknesses and then went in for the kill. It was his responsibility to keep healthy boundaries between us. Knowing this truth helped me move forward.

Even though I knew in my head that it was not an affair, the shame was still heavy. Shame follows abuse. Being in a church again after being abused was difficult in that my trust in clergy has gone down. We must be aware that there are wolves in sheep’s clothing within the church and there should never be blind trust. My husband and I are finally in a church we enjoy and joined a life group. We never thought that would happen. Discernment comes from God. I believe God warned me two times that my pastor was not a good person. However, because the church was so adamant about him being a man of God, I did not trust what God was telling me. Since then, God has given me discernment regarding a handful of people. I no longer question when that happens. This has brought healing and will protect me from people who claim to be followers of Jesus but are not. We are growing spiritually through the pastor’s sermons and through our life group’s discussions.

Healing cannot occur without forgiveness. I cannot accept God’s forgiveness and not forgive others. The extent God went through and the pain and rejection Jesus endured cannot be overlooked. I forgave my pastor and I forgave the man who kidnapped me. Forgiveness is necessary to move forward in the healing journey.

One more way I found healing is in not blaming God. I needed to realise that God is not the cause of my abuse, that He never wanted me to be abused, and that He hurts with me. If I blame Him, it will hinder any growth because He is the One able and willing to bring healing.

I believe healing is a lifetime process and we will one day be fully healed! But until then, Jesus came to give life and to its fullest. Joy can be lived while working through the pain. There is always hope.[[135]](#endnote-136)

## Conclusion

Unhealthy images of God are widely held. How can such distortions be corrected? We have discussed this at both a conscious and unconscious level. We have also considered: our theology, image of God and experience of trauma. There was a reflection on the possible impact of trauma on Jesus and the Trinitarian God. There is a sense in which the divine empathy has been shaped by Jesus’s experiences, including trauma, death and resurrection. This introduces a potential difference in how we understand God and recognise a shared experience of trauma.

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# Chapter 11: When a congregation faces trauma

A stone breaks the surface of water. Ripples, in varying strength, go to the edge of the pond. With this image, a distinction can be made between a primary victim, the person subject to abuse—where the stone pierces the water—and secondary victims. If, say, a pastor sexually offends with a member of the congregation, everyone in the church suffers some ‘ripple effect’. And it is helpful to consider secondary victims, since their trust has been betrayed.

## Process of disclosure

If there has been clergy abuse, some kind of report of events is almost always warranted. For example, it may be necessary to explain the sudden departure of a clergyperson or leader in the congregation. Arguably the only legitimate reason for not giving relevant facts is when the survivor is easily identifiable and wishes not to be known.[[136]](#endnote-137) There might be some risk of secondary trauma for the victim.

*Principle:* It is best to focus on the facts in communicating with the congregation. Speculation can be unhelpful. Remember that there are many vulnerable people. If possible, a multidisciplinary team should be present at a congregational meeting in which abuse is disclosed. The team should include a mental health professional with experience in treating trauma.

A disclosure can open the floodgates.

A priest in the Catholic church was accused of sexually assaulting boys in youth group. In the next couple of months there were more disclosures from a previous parish where he served. The church treasurer found irregularities in the finances and suspected embezzlement.

Disclosure can initiate a healing process, but it is not a healing process by itself. Usually a senior administrative official is present at such a meeting. He or she should do everything possible to create a safe environment and to facilitate a grief process. Parishioners face many losses, including an idealised view of ministry. There can be mixed feelings about the removal of a pastor who may have been loved and appreciated. Sometimes it’s not possible to say a personal goodbye.

*Reflect:* If a disclosure were to be made to your congregation, what kind of healing ritual do you think would be most helpful?

After a disclosure there is often a loyal group who will deny that anything wrong has taken place. It is likely that this group of people will find it hard to let go of the offending pastor and his or her ministry.

It may be necessary to remind the congregation that the current difficulty was caused by the transgression of the leader and not by the person making a report.

## Common difficulties

Offending clergy can continue to be a problem for a congregation. Many will be caught up in denial and see their relationship with the victim(s) as positive, even ‘beautiful’. The perpetrator may withdraw into a self-righteous impenetrable shell. Even if the perpetrator accepts responsibility, confessions can be problematic, especially if they are lengthy and contain manipulative statements.[[137]](#endnote-138)

Even darker, perpetrators will commonly make threats in an attempt to maintain secrecy. Threats must be confronted for a safe process to take place. Consider how this might be done.

It has been suggested that there could be some benefit in having input from a recovered offender. He or she can demonstrate what recovery looks like and provide a model for the congregation. However, I do not advise this because there are too many additional risks.

## Anger

Often people feel considerable frustration and anger. This is likely to be displaced.

The diocesan archdeacon came out to St Peter’s Anglican Church after news broke that the rector had had sexual relationships with a number of women in his congregation. Most of the fury of the congregation was directed at the bishop and the administration of the diocese: ‘You sent him to us!’

Other indicators of displaced anger include scapegoating, withholding financial contributions, ignoring the survivor, demanding dependency, and an overall sense of helplessness and depression in the congregation. Parishioners may present an artificial mask of being ‘nice’.

There is a huge risk in not openly dealing with negative feelings and engaging in the healing process. Chilton Knudsen talks about ‘clergy killer congregations’ in which there are repeated short ministries, with clergy leaving feeling wounded and possibly ending their ministry.[[138]](#endnote-139)

Not everyone will be equally caught up in the process. Predictably, some in the congregation will remain somewhat blasé. They prefer not to listen to the endless accounts of pain and the upset feelings of those who are more hurt.

The story the church or community tells about itself begins to have gaps, especially if there is secrecy around the abuse. There is no coherent story. The next pastor’s ability to inspire will be impaired.[[139]](#endnote-140)

*Reflect:* How do you understand power in a church setting? Think about this in the case of a sexual exploitation. In most organisations there are imbalances in power associated with roles, gender, socio-economic status, and reputation.

A recovering congregation will need to take responsibility for its own role in the process. Did the people ask too much of clergy? It is a good indication of progress if the congregation is able to acknowledge their own mistakes without blaming others.

*To do:* Think about who needs to make an apology. Obviously the perpetrator. If the congregation has assumed some responsibility, should they make an apology to the survivor(s)?

Sadly, not every congregation will want to face the process of healing. Not every member will want change, certainly not at the same time or in the same way.[[140]](#endnote-141) There needs to be a will to heal and an acceptance of diverse responses.

*Issue to consider:* Exposure in the media can add a dimension of embarrassment and shame. If possible, a good relationship with local media should be encouraged as this can lead to a sympathetic treatment of the crisis.

*Reflect:* There may be a need to cleanse and rededicate sacred spaces after abuse has happened.

When I was a graduate student in the USA I served the congregation of St Paul’s, Millis, Massachusetts. I came after an interim minister who had had an affair with a church organist. At the time it seemed to be ‘background noise’. As I think back, I did not adequately address this issue, and to some extent there was a lack of trust from the congregation. I had the sense that they were waiting for me to do something wrong.

## Opportunity

A major crisis leads to a unique opportunity. Post-traumatic growth can apply to congregations as well as people. Congregational life and relationships can be examined. Individuals can trace issues in their own family background and potentially confront abusive situations they may have faced in the past. The process of healing can encompass more than the presenting issue.[[141]](#endnote-142) The congregation’s stance towards the local community can become more open and accepting.

There is also an opportunity to rethink how we understand church. To state the obvious: only Jesus was sinless; ministers are human. We might have ideals, but the reality is that we are profoundly flawed. It is also an opportunity to emphasise clergy self-care and the need to take holidays and sabbaticals and have pastoral supervision.[[142]](#endnote-143)

How does the congregation become stronger than before? Sometimes this will involve a shift from a closed system to an open system. Nancy Hopkins outlined some characteristics of open congregations. They are tolerant of differences in theology and worship, but members are willing to engage hard issues. There is a mixture of class, race and types of family structures. There is a moderate amount of socialisation among members outside the church. Cooperation occurs with other denominations represented locally. Clergy stay for a reasonable period, that is not too short (under five years) or too long (over ten years). Power is spread evenly among lay leadership. There is a plan to attract and incorporate new members. Healthy boundaries are evident. There are no important secrets in relation to congregational life. There is an openness about problems and willingness to work through them. Loyalty to members and clergy is held in balance with the need to hold others accountable.[[143]](#endnote-144)

At St Bede’s there had been a financial scandal in the ministry of the last ordained pastor. St Bede’s eventually closed the doors, but that did not stop people meeting for prayer, Bible study and fellowship. The group of dedicated laypeople began to lead house groups. Their hospitality was extended to people of low socio-economic status, some of whom were sleeping rough.

*Affirmation:* Trauma provides an opportunity to build a more healthy church.

## Conclusion

Congregations are vulnerable to experiences of trauma. Individual members will react in a variety of ways. Although it is difficult, it is an opportunity for post-traumatic growth at a congregational level.

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# Chapter 12: Re-author a new story

To be human is to tell stories. This is how human experience becomes meaningful.[[144]](#endnote-145) Trauma is a story, with both a before and after, but the natural question is, what kind of story? It can be part of a narrative of post-traumatic spiritual growth, since a story can be told of ‘a journey to *more* life not less.’[[145]](#endnote-146)

## The new story

Post-traumatic growth, including spiritual growth, can be actualised through a new story. One that recognises positive changes in the aftermath of the trauma. The account can begin as spoken, but it becomes more objective if it is written. While this may be challenging for some people who don’t themselves as writers, it is an extension of the storytelling that is natural to all of us.

*Reflect:* What stories do you tell your friends when you catch up over coffee?

The story should include the pre-trauma, with a full account of the trauma and the consequent journey. Think in terms of a timeline, since this is the usual way an autobiography is structured. I have found this useful as a way of charting my progress through life and re-engaging with crucial life decisions that have altered the directions I have taken.

*To do:* If you have difficulty beginning to write, take a blank piece of paper and write any thought that comes into your head for ten minutes. This will get you started. You can be more focused later.

*Reflect:* Do you agree that any story can bind you or free you depending on how it is told?

This is, of course, a challenge if your story includes significant trauma. There may be some difficulty in forming a coherent story. The initial account can be fragmentary due to gaps in memory.

Cindy’s husband Dimitrios was in pastoral ministry. Everything changed after he had an affair. He was terminated from his position with the church, and he left his family, who became financially destitute. Cindy took quite a while to come to terms with what happened and to eventually rebuild her life. She said, ‘I felt shattered at every level. But I grew through the experience and now I have a stable relationship with Barry, a wonderful Christian husband.’

It is through telling redemptive stories that we can rebuild a sense of self. In this way hope becomes present tense.

*To Do:* In writing your story it might be helpful to use some of the following prompts:

* I was prepared to deal with the trauma in the following ways…
* What I had to give up was…
* The biggest challenge was…
* Who helped me the most…
* I learned that I had the following strengths…
* What I believe about myself now…
* I have gained so much…
* My spiritual insights include…

## Consider the metaphors we use

What metaphors do you find yourself using? Can you assess whether they are positive (‘I am a bird taking flight’), neutral (‘I am on a rollercoaster’) or negative (‘I am in quicksand’)? What difference does this make?

*Reflect*: Are your metaphors positive? Negative? Or neutral? In metaphors we can see how we construct meaning.

Sakura noticed, in talking to her pastoral counsellor, that she would often use the word ‘prison’ or talk about feeling like a prisoner. As she became conscious of this, she made an effort to change her metaphor from being trapped to set free.

*Reflect:* Your story uses language. It is important. Would your story, that you have written, be any different if every time you refer to yourself, you use the word ‘victim’? Would it change if you use the word ‘survivor’? Is it possible to think in terms of the self as flourishing? What difference would this make?[[146]](#endnote-147)

Another thought is to keep a diary about the positives in your life. Sometimes we forget what is going well. It is helpful to be reminded on a daily basis. This contributes to the gratitude exercise in which we list things that we are grateful for in our life.

With God there is always a new and better story. St Paul wrote, ‘If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away, see, everything has become new.’ (2 Corinthians 5:17). With God there is always new possibility. And endless potential for change in the Spirit. Post-traumatic spiritual growth is an ever-present reality. And our hope in Jesus is that our story will have no end. Eternity has the last word.

## Take a deep dive

Your life story can be a deep story. Narrative competence helps this to develop. Such competence is defined by Rita Charon as:

a set of skills required to recognise, absorb, interpret and be moved by the stories one hears and reads. This competence requires a combination of textual skills (identifying the story’s structure, adopting its multiple perspectives, recognising metaphors and allusions), creative skills (imagining many interpretations, building curiosity, inventing multiple endings), and affective skills (tolerating uncertainty as a story unfolds, entering the story’s mood).[[147]](#endnote-148)

In my book *The Storied Self: A Narrative Approach to the Spiritual Care of the Aged[[148]](#endnote-149)*I argued that we are multi-storied, and each story contributes depth to a more nuanced yet integrated and comprehensive life story. Each, like a facet on a cut diamond, brings sparkle to the deep story. This leads to a new and exciting potential to re-author our life story.

What makes a story deep? We all start with a surface story. The following actions will give a story depth:

1. *Discover:* This refers to the ‘early chapters’ in which we learn without words. The first challenge is for hidden or implicit learning to come into awareness. Then it can be given ‘voice’. I have explored this in the ‘deep dive’ sections of this book. This awareness will result in the telling of what was previously unconscious learning.

2. *Test:* A discovered story might not be true. Assumptions can be wrong. Testing brings a reasoned evaluation through a rational process of comparing emergent learning with wider life experience. This testing will determine ‘what is true for me’. Testing leads to a more authentic story.

3. *Integrate:* Both discovery and testing lead to an inclusive story with a more coherent sense of self. It is not easy to find a place in the story for what might have been traumatic events in life.

4. *Re-author:* The challenge is to create new possibilities for your life story. This will include using spiritual resources such as mindfulness, prayer, reading sacred texts, and worship.

5. *Perform:* Living the new story is essentially a performance. The spiritual challenge is to do this in a way that serves God and benefits others.

In these five challenges the ideas become reality. It is possible to shape a personal narrative of a life lived more deeply.

Frederick Buechner expressed the insight that:

The voyage into the self is long and dark and full of peril, but I believe it is a voyage that all of us will have to make before we are through. Either we climb down into the abyss willingly with our eyes open, or we risk falling into it with our eyes closed.[[149]](#endnote-150)

It is obvious when a person has grown through a traumatic experience. The signs can include being more open-minded, creative, trustworthy, responsible and value driven.

It is never too late to consider how you might re-author your life-story.

Valentina met her husband while in missionary service. He died from a preventable illness when medical resources were not available in the African country where they served. She felt considerable resentment even years later when she entered aged care. Valentina, with the encouragement of a chaplain, wrote the story of her life. Gradually it became a deep story with insights that were painful to acknowledge, ‘I discovered that I was very angry. Even angry with God. I felt God had let me down. But I was supposed to be a ‘nice’ Christian.’

She joined a group raising funds for homeless youth, ‘I can bake cakes to sell.’ She also took over in the collection and sorting of postage stamps for bulk sale, ‘We’ve raised a few hundred dollars so far this year. I guess I’m not useless after all!’

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy challenges us to be guided by our values and for this to lead to committed action. This fits easily into a Christian view of what is important.

*To Do:* Write a personal manifesto. This is a statement of your values, beliefs and intentions in the future. It is like a personal mission statement. I found it valuable; have a go![[150]](#endnote-151)

*Affirmation:* I can be a new story!

## Conclusion

The changes in your emotional recovery and spiritual growth need to be integrated into a coherent story. You can re-author your story and embrace new possibilities. Give yourself permission to rewrite your story until you are 100 per cent happy with the result. Then live out the new story.

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# Epilogue

As I have written this book, I have reflected back on the five decades since my conversion to Christianity. For almost all these years I was ordained and served in the church. I am amazed at how many immoral and criminal actions have occurred around me. I hope that my experience is unusual, but I suspect it is common.

I am reminded of Jesus’ harsh words to the Pharisees:

‘You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and of the plate, so that the outside also may become clean.’ (Matthew 23:26)

There is a terrible legacy of spiritual abuse and trauma in the church. Do we become pharisees or do we take responsibility? That is a question most relevant to us in leadership.

There is no question that most Christians live good lives. Many have inspired me to be more morally accountable and in rare moments become Christ-like. But some Christians trying to be angels become devils. Many of you, the readers of this book, have suffered in their hands.

*A final practical tip:* Cultivate beauty in your life. When I was a full-time psychologist, seeing more than thirty patients a week, I made sure that the first thing I did everyday was read a few poems (beauty in words), look through an art book (beauty in images) and read from a classic text, sometimes but not always theological (beauty of ideas). I felt that this balanced the trauma I saw in my clinical practice and it was good self-care. I have maintained this practice.

In a word from St Paul, ‘For in Christ everyone of God’s promises is a “yes”. For this reason it is through him that we say the “Amen” to the glory of God.’ (2 Corinthians 1:20)

Kintsugi has many truths. Broken pieces, once separate and disconnected, are valued and brought together into a renewed whole. It is a lesson in unity and harmony.

Beauty from brokenness? Kintsugi shows that this is possible. May you find gold in your cracks and beauty where you least expect it. Indeed, beauty is found in authenticity and our unique journey through life. Repair and growth? Yes to both![[151]](#endnote-152)

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1. As you recover it may be important to limit your involvement in the exercises. Do not attempt to do anything that you do not feel you will be able to manage (yet!). It is important that you retain personal control over the recovery process. You may also find that some material might trigger you emotionally, which can be uncomfortable. Usually it is not dangerous to have an emotional reaction, but exercise caution and look after yourself by taking a break when needed. There is not a single right way to do this book. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. This can include coercion and threats, intimidation, emotional abuse, isolation, denying and blaming, patriarchal privilege, and economic abuse. Laura E. Anderson, *When Religion Hurts You: Healing from Religious Trauma and the Impact of High-control Religion* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2023), 41–42. Please note that I reference using footnotes more than is usual in a personal development book. This is to enable the interested reader to follow up on sources for further information (and to avoid plagiarising). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Bessel A. van der Kolk, Alexander C. McFarlane, and Lars Weisaeth (eds), *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society* (New York: Guilford Press, 1996),7. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. David Johnson and Jeff Van Vonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse* (Bethany House Publishers, 1991). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Wade Mullen, *Something’s Not Right: Decoding the Hidden Tactics of Abuse and Freeing Yourself from its Power* (Carol Stream, Illinois: Momentum, 2020). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Please note that all examples not actually cited, are constructed from my general clinical and pastoral experience. They are composites and do not directly relate to any individual person. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. F. Remy Diederich, *Broken Trust: A Practical Guide to Identify and Recover from Toxic Faith, Toxic Church and Spiritual Abuse* (Quezon City, Metro Manila: Life Change Publishing, 2017), 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Barbara M. Orlowski, *Spiritual Abuse Recovery: Dynamic Research on Finding a Place of Wholeness* (Eugene, Oregon: WIPF and Stock, 2010), 149f. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Lisa Oakley and Justin Humphreys, *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse: Creating Healthy Christian Cultures* (London: SPCK, 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Oakley and Humphreys, *Escaping the Maze*, 31. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. See Oakley and Humphreys, *Escaping the Maze*, 26–27. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. van der Kolk, *Traumatic Stress*, 86. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. [Michael J. Kruger](https://www.booktopia.com.au/search?author=Michael+J+Kruger), *Bully Pulpit: Confronting the Problem of Spiritual Abuse in the Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2023). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Diane Langberg, *Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church,* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2020), x. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Diane Langberg, *When the Church Harms God’s People* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2024), 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Note that the book describes her spiritual journey from abusive fundamentalism to ‘de-conversion’ with a loss of faith. Some readers with a Christian commitment may find this difficult to accept, which is sad because I recommend this book as one of the best in the area. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. See ‘Spiritual Abuse’, Reviewed by [Smitha Bhandari, MD](https://www.webmd.com/bio/smitha-bhandari), on September 17, 2024. Written by [WebMD Editorial Contributor](https://www.webmd.com/bio/webmd-editorial-contributors)s. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Grant Sinnamon, Chapter 16 ‘The psychology of adult sexual grooming: Sinnamon’s seven stage model of adult sexual grooming’, in *The Psychology of Criminal and Antisocial Behavior: Victim and Offender Perspectives,* edited by Wayne Petherick and Grant Sinnamon (London: Academic Press, 2017), 459–487. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Landberg, *When the Church Harms God’s People*, 41–42. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. A pseudonym for a doctoral level psychologist. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Arielle Schwartz, *The Post-Traumatic Guidebook* (Eau Claire, WI: PESI Publishing, 2020), xvii. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Allegations cited on the Internet, see Wikipedia on ‘Jean Vanier’. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. LGBTIQA+ these letters represent: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer or Questioning, and Asexual or Ally. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Christopher B. Hays and Richard B. Hays, *The Widening of God’s Mercy: Sexuality within the Biblical Story* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Julie Rodgers, *Outlove: A queer Christian Survival Story* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2021). [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Anderson, *When Religion Hurts You*, 55. This of course assumes that women do not have sexual desires and that men are somehow unable to control themselves and ultimately are not responsible or held accountable for their actions. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Richard G. Tedeschi and Bret A. Moore, *The Post-traumatic Workbook* (Oakland CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2016), 107f. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Nils Friberg, ‘Wounded Congregations’ in *Restoring the Soul of a Church: Healing Congregations Wounded by Clergy Sexual Misconduct,* edited byNancy M. Hopkins and Mark Laaser, (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1995), see 55–56. Sexually offending pastors are seen in terms of incestuous fathers. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Friberg, *Restoring the Soul of a Church*, 58. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Mark Stibbe wrote the forward to the book *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse: Creating Healthy Christian Cultures*, by Lisa Oakley and Justin Humphreys (London: SPCK, 2019), xi-xviii. Quotes are taken from his account and an interview on Channel 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Tedeschi and Moore, *The Post-traumatic Workbook,*13. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. van der Kolk, *Traumatic Stress*, 219. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (London: Pandora 1992). [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. A. Matsakis, *I Can't Get Over It: A Handbook for Trauma Survivors* (Oakland, California: New Harbinger, 1996), xvi. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition* (DSM-5), (Washington DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2013), 271–280. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. See Lisa Aronson Fontes, *Interviewing Clients across Cultures: A Practitioner’s Guide* (New York: Guilford Press, 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Langberg, *Redeeming Power*, 112. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Taken from ChatGTP, but reflects criteria of DSM 5, 291-298. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Complex trauma has some similar features to borderline personality disorder. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. van der Kolk, *Traumatic Stress*, 201–202. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. John Briere and Catherine Scott, *Principles of Trauma Therapy* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2006), 34. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. van der Kolk, *Traumatic Stress*, 400–401. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. See Elizabeth Loftus and Katherine Ketcham, [*The Myth of Repressed Memory: False Memories and Allegations of Sexual Abuse*](https://books.google.com/books?id=8cbgWg8LxgQC). (New York: St. Martin's Publishing Group, 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Anderson, *When Religion Hurts You*, 158, 167. She argues that a purity culture is a form of sexual abuse, ‘since it seeks to undermine a person’s inherent nature, vilify it, disconnect them from it, and out-source their decision-making to others.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. For a discussion on memory and trauma, see van der Kolk, *Traumatic Stress*, 280–287. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Anderson, *When Religion Hurts You*, has a good discussion on embodiment and stabilising the nervous system. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Kristin D. Neff, ‘Self-compassion: Theory, Method, Research and Intervention’, *Annual Review of Psychology*, 74, (2023): 193–218. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Kristin Neff, *Self-compassion: Stop Beating Yourself Up and Leave Insecurity Behind* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. James Alison, *On Being Liked* (London: DLT, 2003), 15. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Briere and Scott, *Principles of Trauma Therapy*, 186–229. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Tedeschi and Moore, *The Post-traumatic Workbook,* 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. van der Kolk, *Traumatic Stress*, 542–545. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Ann Hackman, James Bennett-Levy and Emily A. Holmes, *Imagery in Cognitive Therapy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Schwartz, *The Post-Traumatic Guidebook*, 34-35. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. I suspect unconscious learning is what is learnt in the right brain. See psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and his Emissary* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Bruce Ecker, Robyn Ticic, and Laurel Hulley, *Unlocking the Emotional Brain: Eliminating Symptoms at their Roots Using Memory Reconsolidation* (New York: Routledge, 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. Bruce Ecker and Laurel Hulley, *Depth Oriented Brief Therapy*: *How to be Brief When You Were Trained to Be Deep and Vice Versa* (San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996) 127–201. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Anderson, *When Religion Hurts You*, 207–209. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Her model has not yet been published. She can be contacted through [http://solidrockpsychology.com.au](http://solidrockpsychology.com.au/) [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. See Richard L. Bednar, M. Gawain Wells and Scott R. Peterson, *Self-esteem: Paradoxes and Innovations in Clinical Theory and Practice* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 1989). [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Schwartz, *The Post-Traumatic Guidebook*, 99. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. See Daniel Siegel, *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are* (New York: Guilford Press, 1999). [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. Schwartz, *The Post-Traumatic Guidebook*, 108. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. Bessel A. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Viking, 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. Schwartz, *The Post-Traumatic Guidebook*, 131. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. Pat Ogden, Kekuni Minton, and Clare Pain, *Trauma and the Body* (New York: WW Norton and Company, 2006), 166. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. Jacob Denhollander and Rachael Denhollander, ‘Justice: The Foundation of the Christian Approach to Abuse’, *Fathom* (published online 19 November 2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. Anderson, *When Religion Hurts You*, 87–88. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (London: Virago, 2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. See ‘Rupnik’s victim, a former religious sister, speaks out’,by Federica Tourn, at [www.bishopaccountability.org](http://www.bishopaccountability.org) [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. Mark Karris, *The Diabolical Trinity: Healing Religious Trauma Due to Believing in a Wrathful God, Tormenting Hell, and a Sinful Self* (Grasmere, ID: SacraSage Press, 2023). [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
74. In his poem ‘Coming back on a Winter Evening’, *The Night Stair* (Sydney, NSW: Pitt St Poetry, 2025), 54. [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
75. Tara Westover, *Educated* (London: Penguin, 2022, first published 2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
76. Yvonne Davis-Weir labelled this style of preaching spiritual abuse; see *Spiritual Abuse: Learning and Overcoming Spiritual Abuse in the Church and Home* (Bloomington, Indiana: Westbow Press, 2015), 18. [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
77. See ‘The Dark Side of Prayer for Healing: Toward a Theology of Well-being”, *Pneuma* 36 (2014): 204–225 [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
78. The book by Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *Boundaries* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2017) has been very influential in understanding this area. [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
79. Anderson, *When Religion Hurts You*, 127. [↑](#endnote-ref-79)
80. See Susan Scott, *Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success at Work and in Life, One Conversation at a Time* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2002). [↑](#endnote-ref-80)
81. Stephen Joseph, *What Doesn’t Kill Us: The New Psychology of Post-traumatic Growth* (New York: Basic Books. 2011), 191. [↑](#endnote-ref-81)
82. Natalie Rose has her blog, ‘Little Cabin Life,’ at: [www.littlecabinlife.com](http://www.littlecabinlife.com) [↑](#endnote-ref-82)
83. Mullen, *Something’s Not Right*, cited literature relating to impression management (11f). [↑](#endnote-ref-83)
84. For a good discussion of all systems abuse, see Langberg, *Redeeming Power*, 61–90. [↑](#endnote-ref-84)
85. To be human is to have a voice; Langberg, *Redeeming Power*, 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-85)
86. Anderson, *When Religion Hurts You*, 44. [↑](#endnote-ref-86)
87. In December 2017, after five years of hearings, the Royal Commission released its *Report into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse* (17 volumes). [↑](#endnote-ref-87)
88. Phyllis A. Willerscheidt, ‘Healing for Victims’, (23–32) in Hopkins and Laaser, *Restoring the Soul of a Church*, 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-88)
89. Mullen, *Something’s Not Right*, 27. [↑](#endnote-ref-89)
90. Aimee is a pseudonym. [↑](#endnote-ref-90)
91. Anderson, *Religious Trauma*, 45–49. [↑](#endnote-ref-91)
92. [Timothy Longman](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timothy_Longman), *Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda* (Cambridge: [Cambridge University Press](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cambridge_University_Press), 2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-92)
93. The account of shunning appeared on the website: [stopmandatedshunning.org](https://stopmandatedshunning.org/contact) This appears to have been presented to a formal inquiry. [↑](#endnote-ref-93)
94. Bruce A. Stevens, *Harmony and Discord: The Life of Bishop Owen Dowling 1934–2008* (Bayswater, Vic: Coventry Press, 2023). [↑](#endnote-ref-94)
95. Page 240. [↑](#endnote-ref-95)
96. David W. Peters. *Post-traumatic God: How the Church Cares for People Who Have Been to Hell and Back* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2016), 104. [↑](#endnote-ref-96)
97. Margo Maris, ‘… that which is hidden will be revealed’ (Luke 12:2), (3–22), Hopkins and Laaser, *Restoring the Soul of a Church*. [↑](#endnote-ref-97)
98. Ken Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse: How to Break Free from Bad Church Experiences* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 1993), 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-98)
99. David Owen and Jonathan Davidson. ‘Hubris Syndrome: An Acquired Personality Disorder? A Study of US Presidents and UK Prime Ministers over the last 100 Years’, *Brain,* 132/5, (2009), 1396–1406. doi:10.1093/brain/awp008 [↑](#endnote-ref-99)
100. Studies in neurology indicate a role for mirror neurones in empathy. It is possible that some personality disordered individuals have deficits in this area. [↑](#endnote-ref-100)
101. Mayo Clinic [https://www.mayoclinic.org](https://www.mayoclinic.org )  [↑](#endnote-ref-101)
102. See [Ashley F. Jespersen](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/?term=Jespersen+AF&cauthor_id=19327831), [Martin L. Lalumière](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/?term=Lalumi%C3%A8re+ML&cauthor_id=19327831), and [Michael C. Seto](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/?term=Seto+MC&cauthor_id=19327831), ‘Sexual Abuse History among Adult Sex Offenders and Non-sex Offenders: A Meta-analysis’, *Child Abuse and Neglect* 33(3), (2009 Mar): 179–92 [↑](#endnote-ref-102)
103. DSM-5, 2013, 697–700. [↑](#endnote-ref-103)
104. Nancy Hopkins, ‘Living through the crisis’ (201–231) in Hopkins and Laaser, *Restoring the Soul of a Church*, 220. [↑](#endnote-ref-104)
105. The average or normal person would be expected to score 3 to 6 on the scale; average criminal but not psychopathic 22 to 26; non-criminal psychopath 30 to 34; criminal psychopath 30 to 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-105)
106. Rita Nakashima-Brock and Gabriella Lettini, *Soul Repair: Recovering From Moral Injury After War.* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-106)
107. Brett T. Litz, Nathan Stein, Eileen Delaney, William Nash, Caroline Silva and Shia Maquen, ‘Moral Injury and Moral Repair in War Veterans: A Preliminary Model and Intervention Strategy’, *Clinical Psychology Review,* 29/8, (2009): 695-706; see 700. [↑](#endnote-ref-107)
108. Nakashima-Brock & Lettini, *Soul Repair*, 113. [↑](#endnote-ref-108)
109. Schwartz, *The Post-Traumatic Guidebook*, 31. [↑](#endnote-ref-109)
110. Schwartz, *The Post-Traumatic Guidebook*, 194. [↑](#endnote-ref-110)
111. The term post-traumatic growth was first used by Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence G. Calhoun, ‘The Post-traumatic Growth Inventory: Managing the Positive Legacy of Trauma’, *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 9, (1996): 455–471. [↑](#endnote-ref-112)
112. Lawrence G. Calhoun and Richard G. Tedeschi, *Post-traumatic Growth in Clinical Practice* (East Sussex: Rutledge, 2013) 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-113)
113. Martin Seligman, *Learned Optimism* (Sydney: Random House, 1992). [↑](#endnote-ref-114)
114. Tedeschi and Moore, *The Post-traumatic Workbook*, 27. [↑](#endnote-ref-115)
115. Richard G. Tedeschi and Lawrence G. Calhoun, ‘Posttraumatic Growth: Conceptual Foundations and Empirical Evidence’, *Psychological Inquiry* 15/1, (January 2004): 1–18. DOI:[10.1207/s15327965pli1501\_01](http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/s15327965pli1501_01) [↑](#endnote-ref-116)
116. About 60% of people who have experienced trauma report post-traumatic growth: Lawrence G. Calhoun and Richard G. Tedeschi, Eds. *Handbook of Post-traumatic Growth: Research and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-117)
117. Tedeschi and Calhoun, *‘Posttraumatic Growth’*, 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-118)
118. Joseph, *What Doesn’t Kill Us,* 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-119)
119. Joseph, *What Doesn’t Kill Us,*, 140. [↑](#endnote-ref-120)
120. Joseph, *What Doesn’t Kill Us,*, 117-118. [↑](#endnote-ref-121)
121. Schwartz, *The Post-Traumatic Guidebook*, 155. [↑](#endnote-ref-122)
122. Calhoun and Tedeschi, *Post-traumatic Growth in Clinical Practice*, 98. [↑](#endnote-ref-123)
123. Page 15. [↑](#endnote-ref-124)
124. Tedeschi and Moore, *The Post-traumatic Workbook*, 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-125)
125. Calhoon and Tedeschi, *Post-traumatic Growth in Clinical Practice*, 47. [↑](#endnote-ref-126)
126. Orlowski, *Spiritual Abuse Recovery*, 191. [↑](#endnote-ref-127)
127. Calhoon and Tedeschi, *Post-traumatic Growth in Clinical Practice*, 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-128)
128. Shelly Rambo, ‘How Christian Theology and Practice are Being Shaped by Trauma Studies’ *Christian Century,* 136/24 (2019). Also Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining,* (Westminster: John Knox, 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-129)
129. A good overall perspective is provided by Karen O’Donnell (2023), ‘Trauma theology’ in the *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*. This is an open access online encyclopedia. [↑](#endnote-ref-130)
130. Bruce A. Stevens, ‘The Invasion of Memory: A Psychological Perspective on Trauma in the Experience of God.’ In *Resurrection to Return* edited by The Rt Rev. Dr S. Pickard (Hindmarsh, SA: AFT Press, 2007), 172–184. [↑](#endnote-ref-131)
131. Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, translated by R. Wilson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 200f. [↑](#endnote-ref-132)
132. Jurgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, translated by M. Kohl, (London: SCM, 1981), 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-133)
133. See the paper of Jacob and Rachael Denhollander, ‘Justice: The Foundation of the Christian Approach to Abuse’ *Fathom*, (published online 19 November 2018). They argue that the substitutionary atonement takes sin seriously and is a proper basis for divine justice. [↑](#endnote-ref-134)
134. To explore this further, see my book Bruce A. Stevens, *Before Belief: Discovering First Spiritual Awareness* (Maryland: Lexington Press, 2020). [↑](#endnote-ref-135)
135. Mary Jo has written on The Hope of Survivors (THOS) website. [↑](#endnote-ref-136)
136. Hopkins and Laaser, *Restoring the Soul of a Church*, 217. [↑](#endnote-ref-137)
137. Friberg, *Restoring the Soul of a church*, 65. [↑](#endnote-ref-138)
138. Kundsen, ‘Understanding congregational dynamics’ (75–101) in Nancy M. Hopkins and Mark Laaser (eds) *Restoring the Soul of a Church: Healing Congregations Wounded by clergy Sexual Misconduct* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1995). [↑](#endnote-ref-139)
139. Knudsen, *Restoring the Soul of a Church*, 92. [↑](#endnote-ref-140)
140. Mark Laaser, ‘Long-term healing’ in Hopkins and Laaser, *Restoring the Soul of a Church*, 232–250. [↑](#endnote-ref-141)
141. Nancy Hopkins, ‘Living through the crisis’ in Hopkins and Laasar, *Restoring the Soul of a church*, 201. [↑](#endnote-ref-142)
142. This is required in the Uniting Church of Australia. It is part of our ethical code. [↑](#endnote-ref-143)
143. Hopkins, *Restoring the Soul of a Church*, 203–205. [↑](#endnote-ref-144)
144. Edmund Sherman, *Reminiscence and the Self in Old Age* (New York: Springer, 1991), 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-145)
145. Gary Kenyon, ‘On Suffering, Loss and the Journey to Life: Tai Chi as Narrative Care,’ in Gary Kenyon, Ernst Bohlmeijer and William L. Randall (eds) *Storying Later Life: Issues, Investigations and Interventions in Narrative Gerontology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 239. [↑](#endnote-ref-146)
146. Joseph, *What Doesn’t Kill Us*, 194. [↑](#endnote-ref-147)
147. Rita Charon, ‘Narrative and Medicine,’ *New England Journal of Medicine*, 350 (2004): 862. [↑](#endnote-ref-148)
148. Bruce A. Stevens, *The Storied Self: A Narrative Approach to the Spiritual Care of the Aged* (Lanham, Maryland: Fortress Academic, 2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-149)
149. Frederick Buechner, *The Hungering Dark* (San Francisco, California: Harper and Row, 1969), 23. [↑](#endnote-ref-150)
150. Schwartz, *The Post-traumatic Guidebook*, xxvi. [↑](#endnote-ref-151)
151. In the sections on kintsugi I drew on the blog by Alfred Guinaroan, The deep meaning of Kintsugi: Its emotional and spiritual teaching andInfographic: Spiritual Meanings of Kintsugi.See: [www.whatspiritual.com](http://www.whatspiritual.com)

     [↑](#endnote-ref-152)