
The Spiritual Impact of Child Abuse and Exploitation: What Research Tells Us

Amy Russell, MEd, JD, NCC¹

*“He healeth the broken in heart, and bindeth up their wounds.”
~ Psalm 147:3 (KJV)*

Introduction

While the percentage of adults in the United States who say they believe in G-d² appears to be declining, there is still a significant number of individuals who are more likely to turn to clergy for mental health issues than to a licensed mental health professional,³ including victims of abuse, exploitation and violence. Some friends or family members of those abused may also be more likely to turn to a spiritual leader for guidance before reporting suspected abuse or neglect to law enforcement or child protective services. When children experience abuse and trauma, there is an impact on their psychological development as well as their spiritual growth. Consequently, it is important that clergy and other religious leaders understand the impact child abuse has on individuals. To this end, this article provides an overview of research on the spiritual development of children and how violence may interrupt or impair spirituality.

Religious and spiritual development in children

Children undergo spiritual development in concert with their development of individual identity, autonomy, and self-awareness.⁴ As children seek understanding of their relationships and sense of

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belonging with others, they similarly seek meaning and purpose from their faith.⁵ Interactions with their primary caregivers provide guidance for children as they relate to others and the world around them. Primary caregivers also provide a foundation for religiosity and spirituality for children, and this foundation enables children to formulate their own worldview.⁶ It is upon these worldviews that children develop their personal understanding of love, justice, and truth.

Reinert and Edwards⁷ summarized research that suggests the attachments individuals have with G-d later in life are analogous to the attachments they have as children to their parents or caregivers. For example, if children have secure attachments with their parents, their relationship with G-d will correspond to that of their parents. Religious customs will likewise be mirrored, in that the child will likely have similar religious values and practices as their parents. For children with insecure attachments to parents who are not religious, Reinert and Edwards explain that children may compensate for these deficits in their attachment to G-d in later life. Children with insecure parental attachments may turn away from religion if their parents were very religious, or may seek out religion if their parents were not religious.⁸ Research also suggests

1. Amy Russell is a licensed attorney and a nationally certified counselor. She serves as the executive director of a children's advocacy center in the Pacific Northwest, and is the principle trainer and consultant for Russell Consulting Specialists, LLC. Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to the author at 305 SE Chkalov Dr. #111-143, Vancouver, WA 98683. E-mail: amy.russell@russellconsulting.net.

2. Note: Throughout this article, the author follows Messianic Jewish and Jewish traditions to avoid the erasure or defacement of the Name of G-d, based in Deut 12:3-4. The Name of G-d should be treated with respect, and in this article, the Name is not written to avoid disrespect, defacing or erasing the Name.

3. Jennifer L. Farrell and Deborah A. Goebert, "Collaboration between Psychiatrists and Clergy in Recognizing and Treating Serious Mental Illness." *Psychiatric Services* 59 (2008): 437-440.

4. Thema Bryant-Davis, et al., "Religiosity, Spirituality, and Trauma Recovery in the Lives of Children and Adolescents." *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* 43:4 (2012): 307.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Duane F. Reinert and Carla E. Edwards, "Attachment Theory, Childhood Mistreatment, and Religiosity." *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 1:1 (2009): 25-34.

8. Ibid.

that abuse occurring at younger ages is more likely to disrupt spiritual development.⁹ Older youth, who developed a stronger attachment to G-d and perceived G-d as benevolent, are more likely to turn to G-d for spiritual support following victimization.¹⁰

Research demonstrates that religion and spirituality serve as protective factors for youth in general, and more specifically, help provide resilience to violence and abuse witnessed or experienced in childhood.¹¹ Religion additionally serves as a protective factor against other forms of risky behaviors in youth, including drug and alcohol use, early sexual activities and engagement with deviant peer groups.¹² There is also a positive correlation between religiosity and positive school outcomes, including reduced incidences of school behavior problems, higher academic achievement and lower incidences of stress for youth in general.¹³ Affiliation with religion or spirituality provides youth with hope and optimism, and affords youth social approval and a sense of community.¹⁴

Religion and spirituality may also prove helpful to children and youth who experience abuse or trauma.¹⁵ The sense of belonging that comes with religious group identification can help mitigate feelings of isolation victimization can bring, and belief in a higher power or something greater than oneself may help promote optimism and a sense of hope following traumatic events.¹⁶ Spirituality also may assist victims of abuse to find meaning in their experiences, and help allay feelings of shame and culpability.¹⁷

Lessons children learn from violence, abuse, and exploitation

As youth, our faith or spirituality frequently starts with common beliefs, which include assumptions that the world is a fair place, and that bad things happen for a reason. We believe that the world generally is a safe place to be, and that our family and our G-d will protect us from harm; that bad things will not happen to us. We also believe that when people do bad things, bad things will happen to them. Whether referenced in this way or not, and regardless of religion, people frequently believe in the adage,

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“You reap what you sow” (derived from Gal 6:5, 7).¹⁸ Youth also frequently believe—and often explicitly are taught—that G-d is loving, benevolent and just. These foundational beliefs allow us to trust in the goodness of others and keep us from being paralyzed by fear of harm as we move through our lives. Unfortunately, when children witness or experience violence, abuse, and exploitation, these foundational beliefs may be annihilated, especially when victimized at the hand of someone they love and upon whom they rely for basic needs and protection.

The overwhelming and devastating lessons that children learn from these traumatic experiences are: “(1) ‘I do not have control over my own body,’ (2) ‘The world is not a safe place for me,’ [and] (3) ... ‘[G-d], the Almighty One, did not step in to prevent it.’”¹⁹ After experiencing abuse, most children struggle to reconcile the reality of their victimization with previously learned values, beliefs, and assumptions about people and the world around them. They are left to comprehend how their abuser—more often than not a parent, relative, or family acquaintance—could betray their trust in such an unimaginable way.²⁰ Victims struggle with what implications their abuse has on them in their personal lives and on their sense of self; in their relationships with others; and in their relationship with and understandings and beliefs regarding their G-d, religious beliefs, or spirituality.²¹

It is important to remember that not all children or youth experience abuse in the same way, and how children react when victimized may vary widely. However, research has found some commonality in the dynamics children experience when abused. Schmutzer describes three realms of personhood that are impacted

9. Terry Lynn Gall, “Spirituality and Coping with Life Stress among Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse.” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 30(2006): 829–844.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Bryant-Davis et al., 2012, 308–309.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.; Gall, 2006; Terry Lynn Gall et al., “Spirituality and the Current Adjustment of Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 46:1(2007): 103.

15. Donald F. Walker et al., “Understanding and Responding to Changes in Spirituality and Religion after Traumatic Events” in Donald F. Walker et al., eds., *Spiritually Oriented Psychotherapy For Trauma* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2015), 150–151.

16. Bryant-Davis et al., 2012, 308–309; Gall, 2006, 839.

17. Donald F. Walker et al., “Changes in Personal Religion/Spirituality During and After Childhood Abuse: A Review and Synthesis.” *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* 1(2009): 138–140; Walker et al., 2015, 150–153.

18. “For every man shall bear his own burden.” Gal 6:5 (KJV); “Be not deceived; G-d is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.” Gal 6:7 (KJV).

19. Andrew J. Schmutzer, “Spiritual Formation and Sexual Abuse: Embodiment, Community, and Healing.” *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 2:1(2009): 67.

20. Schmutzer, 2009, 67–86.

21. Kenneth I. Pargament, Nichole A. Murray-Swank and Annette Mahoney, “Problem and Solution: The Spiritual Dimension of Clergy Sexual Abuse and Its Impact on Survivors.” *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 17:3–4(2008): 397–420; Schmutzer, 2009; Walker et al., 2009, 130–145.

by sexual victimization. These three realms—those of *Self*, *Community*, and *G-d*—are both segregated and interconnected parts of the unity of an individual, and each realm may be damaged by abuse, leaving the personhood fractured.²² Child victims of other forms of maltreatment, or witnesses to violence, may experience similar abuse dynamics.²³

The personal or physical *Self* experiences abuse on the offender's terms, and may result in somatic complaints, disrupted emotions, and psychological challenges. The individual learns that they have lost control of their bodies and normative sexual development is disrupted.²⁴ Victims of sexual abuse may despise their bodies or perceive sex as reprehensible or frightening.²⁵ Children may experience difficulties with sleep, develop eating disorders or express physical complaints following victimization.²⁶ Self-esteem may be negatively impacted, as they may perceive there is something wrong within themselves that caused them to be abused, or that they are unworthy of G-d's love and protection.²⁷ They may blame themselves for their victimization, and experience shame and embarrassment as a result of their experiences.²⁸

These feelings may be reinforced by reactions from others, who out of lack of knowledge or understanding, may respond inappropriately. Children frequently delay reporting abuse experiences out of a multitude of fears.²⁹ When asked, "Why didn't

22. Schmutzer, 2009, 70; see also Pargament et al., 2008.

23. Bette L. Bottoms, Michael Nielsen, Rebecca Murray and Henrietta Filipas, "Religion-related Child Physical Abuse: Characteristics and Psychological Outcomes." *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 8:1-2(2003), 87-114; Gail Hornor, "Child Neglect: Assessment and Intervention." *Journal of Pediatric Health Care* 28:2(2014), 186-192; Jo Ann Unger and Rayleen V. De Luca, "The Relationship Between Childhood Physical Abuse and Adult Attachment Styles." *Journal of Family Violence* 29(2014): 223-234.

24. David Finkelhor and Angela Browne. "The Traumatic Impact of Child Sexual Abuse: A Conceptualization." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 55:4(1985), 530-541; Gemma McKibbin, Cathy Humphreys, and Bridget Hamilton. "'Talking About Child Sexual Abuse Would Have Helped Me': Young People Who Sexually Abused Reflect On Preventing Harmful Sexual Behavior." *Child Abuse & Neglect* 70(2017): 210-221; Schmutzer, 2009, 71-73.

25. Pargament et al., 2008, 402-403.

26. Schmutzer, 2009, 71-73.

27. Bryant-Davis et al., 2012, 309.

28. Marion Bilich, Susan Bonfiglio, and Steven Carlson. *Shared Grace: Therapists and Clergy Working Together*. (New York: Haworth Pastoral Press, 2000); Delphine Collin-Vézina, Mireille De La Sablonnière-Griffin, Andrea M. Palmer, and Lise Milne, "A Preliminary Mapping of Individual, Relational, and Social Factors That Impede Disclosure of Childhood Sexual Abuse." *Child Abuse & Neglect* 43(2015): 125, 128; Finkelhor & Browne, 1985, 532-533, 535; David Katzenstein and Lisa Aronson Fontes, "Twice Silenced: The Underreporting of Child Sexual Abuse in Orthodox Jewish Communities." *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 26:6(2017): 753, 756, 758-759, 762-763; Amy C. Tishelman and Lisa A. Fontes, "Religion in Child Sexual Abuse Forensic Interviews." *Child Abuse & Neglect* 63(2017): 120-130.

29. Rosaleen McElvaney, Sheila Greene, and Diane Hogan, "To Tell or Not To Tell? Factors Influencing Young People's Informal Disclosures of Child Sexual Abuse." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 29:5 (2014): 928-947; Paula Schaeffer, John M. Leventhal, and Andrea Gottsegen Asnes, "Children's Disclosures of Sexual Abuse: Learning

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you tell sooner?", children may take that to mean that they did something wrong by not immediately reporting their abuse, or that any abuse that occurred after the first incidence is their own fault for not immediately telling someone. Questions about what children were wearing, why they were with certain people or in certain areas and how they interacted with the offender might also imply culpability.

Within church communities, these dynamics are often magnified. One of the factors causing children to delay in reporting abuse is the social norm to not talk about sex or sexual parts with others.³⁰ In religious communities, these topics are even more taboo, and individuals who engage in sexual activities outside of marriage are denounced. This conspiracy of silence mutes child victims and emboldens offenders. Children may implicitly or explicitly be taught that they are "damaged goods" or that they are forever unclean or unlovable as a result of their victimization. On more than one occasion, girls have expressed to this author that they will be unable to marry or be condemned to hell because they are no longer virgins.³¹ This author is also aware of multiple instances of abuse in church communities where both the offender and the victim were prayed over for forgiveness of the sins they both committed: "For this is the will of G-d, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication..."³²

When children begin to see themselves as culpable or unclean, or when they believe that they deserved the abuse they experienced, they may engage in risk-taking behaviors, such as running away, interacting with inappropriate peer groups or using drugs or al-

from Direct Inquiry." *Child Abuse & Neglect* 35(2011): 343-352.

30. Collin-Vézina et al., 2015, 131; Tishelman and Fontes, 2017, 124-126.

31. "If she be a wall, we will build upon her a palace of silver: and if she be a door, we will inclose her with boards of cedar." Song Sol 8:9 (KJV); "Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers G-d will judge." Heb 13:4 (KJV).

32. 1 Thess 4:3 (KJV).

cohol.³³ Children who have been victimized may also experience ongoing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, fear, anxiety, depression or aggression toward others. They may also engage in self-mutilation and suicidal ideation or attempts.³⁴ Youth with weaker attachments to their caretakers, or to G-d, may demonstrate more of these behaviors.³⁵

When someone experiences trauma or abuse, the social or relational *Community* may become isolated from others.³⁶ The very experience an individual has may make them feel alienated from friends and family. When offenders tell victims not to report their experiences, children are isolated from their support systems. The violence suffered reveals to the victims that the world around them is not safe. Trust has been destroyed, and the support they may have felt prior to their abuse is no longer available to them. When children are taught that G-d is a parental figure, and subsequently experience abuse at the hands of a parent or caregiver, their image of G-d may become distorted.³⁷

Generally speaking, we are all social animals, who seek companionship and affinity with others. Our relationships with our friends, our family and our G-d help define us; however, individuals who are victimized often feel ostracized from their community and rejected by their G-d.³⁸ Interpersonal issues may be negatively impacted by victimization. When trust is violated by abuse, victims may attribute feelings and expectations they had for the offender to new relationships they develop with others, resulting in difficulty maintaining appropriate relationships.³⁹ This may further serve to isolate and stigmatize victims of abuse.

Additionally, victims may feel isolated from assistance and support available outside of their religious community based on the responses they receive from their spiritual or religious leaders. Some religions, sects, or congregations rely upon the “two-witness rule” rooted in Deut 19:15.⁴⁰ As most victimization occurs with only the victim and the perpetrator present, this rule effectively muzzles victims from being believed or finding justice in their religious communities. Offenders may also use their position of authority in religious institutions to manipulate and coerce children into compliance, or to intimidate and coerce them into silence.⁴¹

33. Gall, 2006, 830; Roland C. Summit, “The Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome.” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 7(1983): 185–186.

34. Bilich et al., 2000.

35. Bryant-Davis et al., 2012, 311; Gall, 2006, 838, 840.

36. Schmutzer, 2009, 73–75.

37. Bilich et al., 2000; Reinert & Edwards, 2009, 26–27; Schmutzer, 2009, 73–75; Walker et al., 2015, 148–150.

38. Schmutzer, 2009, 73–75.

39. Bilich et al., 2000; Gall, 2006, 838; Schmutzer, 2009, 73–75.

40. “One witness shall not rise up against a man for any iniquity, or for any sin, in any sin that he sinneth: at the mouth of two witnesses, or at the mouth of three witnesses, shall the matter be established.” Deut 19:15 (KJV).

41. Bette L. Bottoms et al., “Religion-Related Child Maltreatment: A Profile of Cases Encountered by Legal and Social Service Agencies.” *Behavioral Sciences and the Law* 33 (2015): 561–579; Katzenstein and Fontes, 2017, 759–761; Tishelman and Fontes, 2017, 123.

Multiple religious institutions have been found complicit in covering up abuse occurring in their purview.⁴² In one case example, when law enforcement officers attempted to conduct interviews with alleged child victims of abuse, ages ranging from three to seventeen years, each child refused to talk about what they had allegedly experienced or witnessed, stating by rote, “What G-d has forgiven has been forgotten.”

Victims who go against the teachings of their religious community may find themselves excommunicated from membership or shunned by their families, who rely upon 1 Cor 5:13.⁴³ When abuse is at the hands of an offender of the same sex as the victim, particularly abuse of and by a male, the topic is even more proscribed. Offenders of same-sex victimization may themselves use scripture to coerce silence from the victim, quoting Lev 20:13 (KJV): “If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them.”

Schmutzer explains that the realm of *G-d*, identified as the religious or transcendent part of personhood, is similarly negatively impacted when an individual experiences abuse or trauma. Victims who previously perceived G-d as just may interpret that they were being punished or condemned to abuse by G-d for some misdeed they committed, or that noncompliance may result in “going to hell.”⁴⁴ Those who identify with G-d as a father- or parent-figure may experience spiritual or religious conflict if they were abused by someone in a paternal or caregiving role.⁴⁵ Individuals abused by religious leaders, who serve as a link to G-d and offer hope and redemption, may interpret that G-d himself was the offender.⁴⁶

Children who had previously perceived G-d as prescient, benevolent, and omnipotent may begin to question why they were targeted for abuse or how a loving G-d would allow them

42. David A. Wolfe, Peter G. Jaffe, Jennifer L. Jetté, and Samantha E. Poisson, “The Impact of Child Abuse in Community Institutions and Organizations: Advancing Professional and Scientific Understanding.” *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice* 10:2(2003): 179–191; see, e.g., “Victims ‘told not to report’ Jehovah’s Witness child abuse.” (2017, November 20). Retrieved from www.bbcnews.com; Monk, J. (2017, October 13). “Lawsuit accuses Columbia’s First Baptist Church of history of covering up child sex abuse.” *The State*. Retrieved from www.thestate.com; Park, M. (2017, June 29). “Timeline: A look at the Catholic Church’s sex abuse scandals.” Retrieved from www.cnn.com; Boone, R. (2017, May 1). “Men file sex abuse lawsuit against Boy Scouts, LDS Church.” Retrieved from www.news.hjnews.com; Browne, R. (2017, March 27). “Survivors have waited too long: 4000 institutions named in sex abuse inquiry.” *The Queanbeyan Age Chronicle*. Retrieved from www.queanbeyanagechronical.com.au; Smith, R. (2017, March 16). “Jehovah’s Witnesses refuse to change two-witness rule because ‘that’s our stand.’” Retrieved from www.news.com.au; Wolfson, E. (2016, March 3). “Child abuse allegations plague the Hasidic community.” *Newsweek*. Retrieved from www.newsweek.com.

43. “But them that are without G-d judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person.” 1 Cor 5:13 (KJV).

44. Schmutzer, 2009, 73–75.

45. Gall et al., 2007, 109; Pargament et al., 2008, 403; Walker et al., 2009, 132.

46. Bottoms et al., 2015, 563–565; Pargament et al., 2008, 403.

to experience such trauma.⁴⁷ Following abuse, they may perceive G-d as controlling, vengeful, and distant.⁴⁸ Victims who receive messages such as, “It’s all in G-d’s plan” or “Everything happens for a reason” before, or even after, they have fully processed their abuse may feel disaffected and withdraw from the church community, which may be their strongest—or only—existing support network. Spiritual leaders who proffer verses such as Jer 29:11 in attempts to help victims find meaning in their abuse or move victims toward an understanding of G-d’s plan for them may only serve to frustrate, confuse, and alienate them.⁴⁹

Children are often taught metaphors about G-d as a father-figure and a protector: “Be strong and of a good courage, fear not, nor be afraid of them: for the L-rd thy G-d, He it is that doth go with thee; He will not fail thee, nor forsake thee.”⁵⁰ When victimized, this analogy is obfuscated when victims believe that G-d was absent when they needed protection, or was present but didn’t care. Victims may feel abandoned in their time of need, and may even begin to doubt G-d’s existence, turning away from religion, which otherwise may have served as a positive coping strategy.⁵¹

It is not uncommon for offenders to use religion in the context of their abuse of children, or to rationalize or explain their behaviors, adulterating biblical teachings for their own illicit purposes.⁵² Relying upon the verse, “So G-d created man in His own image, in the image of G-d created He him; male and female created He them,”⁵³ an offender justified his victimization of his daughter saying that his actions were sanctioned by G-d because he was “made in G-d’s image.”⁵⁴ A child who is repeatedly raped after nightly prayers to keep her and her family safe is indoctrinated by her abuser, who tells her that if G-d didn’t want the abuse to occur, G-d would have stopped the offender and kept the child safe. In the alternative, a child is told that the abuse he endures is punishment for wrong-doing.⁵⁵ Children are also condemned for disobedience of an abusive parent, with offenders relying upon verses such as Deut 27:16.⁵⁶

Clearly, the spiritual impact victims may suffer is profound and enduring. Interventions should seek to address not only the mental health implications victimization bears, but spiritual ones as well. Collaborations between spiritual or religious leaders and

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mental health providers may result in the best outcomes for victims suffering spiritual injuries as a result of abuse.⁵⁷

A word about forgiveness

When working with individuals who have experienced abuse and exploitation, it is important not only to understand how victimization impacts them, but also how forgiveness is addressed. “The unrealistic expectation for children to put the abuse behind them and remember it no more or for the [offender] to repent and sin no more also has devastating consequences for the traumatized victims.”⁵⁸ As discussed previously, it is common for victims to experience feelings of anger and betrayal about their victimization. It is imperative that those who have been victimized are not pushed to forgive their offenders before they are ready. If forgiveness is offered, it must be on the timetable of the individual victimized, and victims should be granted as much time as they need to arrive at that point. To do otherwise is to delegitimize their feelings and their personal recovery process.⁵⁹ Forcing a victim to prematurely forgive may be interpreted as another instance of controlling the victim, and may serve to re-traumatize him or her. Furthermore, a victim should not be pushed to pray for forgiveness for any “sins” she or he committed as part of the victimization, as the offender alone is responsible for the abuse.

Family, friends, and spiritual leaders can all assist in the recovery process after victimization.⁶⁰ This includes helping victims move toward forgiveness of their perpetrator if possible; however, forgiveness should be approached as a process, not an immediate obligation.⁶¹ It is widely recognized that holding on to anger toward another has detrimental effects on an individual, including depression and anxiety.⁶² While forgiveness will ultimately look

47. Bilich et al., 2000.

48. Pargament et al., 2008, 405; Reinert and Edwards, 2009, 27, 29–31.

49. “For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the L-rd, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end” Jer 29:11 (KJV).

50. Deut 31:6 (KJV).

51. Bilich et al., 2000; Bryant-Davis et al., 2012, 310–311; Gall, 2006; Schmutzer, 2009, 75–77.

52. See, e.g., Katzenstein and Fontes, 2017; Tishelman and Fontes, 2017; Wolfe et al., 2003.

53. Gen 1:27 (KJV).

54. Examples are based on actual child abuse cases.

55. “The L-rd preserveth the strangers; He relieveth the fatherless and widow: but the way of the wicked He turneth upside down.” Ps 146:9 (KJV).

56. “Cursed be he that setteth light by his father or his mother. And all the people shall say, Amen.” Deut. 27:16 (KJV).

57. See Singer article in this issue for more information; see also Bilich et al., 2000.

58. Bryant-Davis et al., 2012, 311, citing T. Doyle, “The Spiritual Trauma Experienced by Victims of Sexual Abuse by Catholic Clergy.” *Pastoral Psychology* 58 (2009): 239–260.

59. Bilich et al., 2000.

60. “Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Chr-st.” Gal 6:2 (KJV).

61. Bilich et al., 2000; Bryant-Davis et al., 2012, 310–311; Pargament et al., 2008, 412–413.

62. Sharon Lamb, “Forgiveness Therapy: The Context and Conflict.” *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology* 25:1(2005), 61–80.

different for different people, forgiveness of an offender can be reframed for victims as a healing benefit for themselves, and not as religious obligation or gift to the offender.⁶³

Many point to scripture as a means to motivate victims to forgive their offenders.⁶⁴ However, pressure from others to extend forgiveness before the victim is ready to do so may leave the victim feeling guilty and ashamed for not wanting to do so or not being ready to do so, and may lead the victim to resent those who prematurely push for forgiveness.⁶⁵ Furthermore, pressure to forgive too soon may drive the victim away from his or her church community, particularly when feeling pressured with the victim's own salvation: "For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."⁶⁶ When victims perceive that their G-d has already forsaken them by allowing the abuse to occur, or believe that they were somehow at fault for their own victimization, verses such as this serve to further alienate the victim from G-d and their religious communities.

Forgiveness of the offender should be reframed as a progressive, healing step from anger to peace, and from pain to happiness.⁶⁷ This reframing should also serve to educate the victim that forgiveness does not exculpate the offender from his or her actions. The offender is still accountable for the abuse inflicted. Additionally, forgiveness does not require the victim to forget that the abuse occurred.⁶⁸ In fact, when considering legal implications in abuse cases, if a parent who was abused as a child allows her child to have unsupervised contact with the parent's abuser, this could be considered negligent parenting and result in child welfare interventions. Similarly, there may be criminal or civil consequences for a parent who allows an offender to continue to have contact with a child victim. Prayer and forgiveness should not replace formal interventions of child victimization.⁶⁹ Furthermore, just because someone forgives his or her offender, reconciliation with that individual should not be considered mandatory, especially if the perpetrator is not truly repentant for his or her offenses.⁷⁰

As part of the forgiveness and recovery process, it is also important that spiritual leaders reframe for victims the distortions in religious beliefs that may have occurred as a result of the victimiza-

Overcoming spiritual and cognitive distortions forged by the hands of another is a difficult, but not impossible, task. Finding meaning and making sense of victimization is possible through positive religious and spiritual coping mechanisms.

tion, including those that were perverted by the offender in the context of the abuse itself.⁷¹ Victims may need spiritual guidance in understanding that regardless of whether they are able to extend forgiveness, they are not responsible for the salvation of the offender. Here, some have turned to Jewish law for guidance in *Maimonides' Code, Laws of Repentance 2:9*. Forgiveness for offenses between individuals requires sincere *teshuvah*, or repentance, for past transgressions of the victim by the offender. This atonement is for the offender's sin against another individual; the offender still must atone for sins committed against G-d.

Conclusion

Victims often feel culpable, ashamed, and isolated as a result of their abuse experiences. They not only suffer from the physical and psychological impact of their victimization, but also the spiritual repercussions. Overcoming spiritual and cognitive distortions forged by the hands of another is a difficult, but not impossible, task. Finding meaning and making sense of victimization is possible through positive religious and spiritual coping mechanisms. Individuals victimized as a child need to know that the abuse wasn't their fault and their abuse was not a condemnation by G-d, but the wrongful and illegal act of another human being. Understanding the various ways victims experience their abuse is critical for effective interventions by religious and mental health professionals.

63. There is some research noting a correlation between forgiveness and reduced characteristics associated with trauma. Katie G. Reinhert, Jacquelyn C. Campbell, Karen Bandeen-Roche, Jerry W. Less, and Sarah Szanton, "The Role of Religious Involvement in the Relationship Between Early Trauma and Health Outcomes Among Adult Survivors," *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma* 9 (2016): 231–241.

64. e.g., "And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as G-d for Chr-st's sake hath forgiven you." Eph 4:32 (KJV).

65. Bilich et al., 2000; Bryant-Davis et al., 2012, 310–311; Pargament et al., 2008, 412–413.

66. Matt 6:14–15 (KJV).

67. Pargament et al., 2008, 412–413.

68. Bilich et al., 2000; Bryant-Davis et al., 2012, 310–311; Pargament et al., 2008, 412–413.

69. Tishelman and Fontes, 2017, 124–125.

70. Bilich et al., 2000.

71. Ibid.