

When Faith Hurts: Overcoming Spirituality-Based Blocks and Problems Before, During, and After the Forensic Interview

Victor I. Vieth¹

“You can make sense of sexual abuse and no God, or God and no sexual abuse. But how do you tolerate the two realities together?”—Diane Langberg, PhD²

A great deal has been written about the short and long term impact of child abuse on the victim’s mind and body.³ Unfortunately, the impact of abuse on a child’s spirituality is a topic often avoided in professional literature or child abuse conferences. This silence inhibits our ability to interview and to otherwise work with children competently. This is because, for many children, the damage done to their spirituality is the overriding block that prevents them from disclosing or otherwise accessing needed services.

The impact of child abuse on spirituality

There are a number of studies documenting the impact of abuse on spirituality. For example, a study of 527 victims of child abuse (physical, sexual or emotional) found a significant “spiritual injury” such as feelings of guilt, anger, grief, despair, doubt, fear of death, and belief that God is unfair.⁴ The same study, though, found that survivors of childhood abuse report praying more frequently and having a “spiritual experience.”⁵

When the perpetrator is a member of the clergy, the impact on the victim’s spirituality may be even more pronounced. Clergy abusers often use their religion to justify or excuse their sexual abuse of children. According to one study, clergy in treatment for sexually abusing children believed that God would particularly look after the children they had victimized and otherwise keep them from harm.⁶ Through their religious role, these offenders also engaged in “compensatory behavior” and believed that their good works in the community would result in God excusing their moral lapses with children.⁷

The religious cover used by clergy abusers is often communicated to the victims in a manner that irreparably damages their spirituality. Specifically, church attendance of these survivors decreases, they are less likely to trust God, and their relationship with God often ceases to grow.⁸

The role of spirituality in coping with abuse

Some researchers have found that a victim’s “spiritual coping behavior” may play either a positive or negative role in the survivor’s ability to cope with the abuse and with life in general.⁹ Victims of severe abuse may remain “stuck” in their spiritual development such as remaining angry with God. Children abused at younger ages are “less likely to turn to God and others for spiritual support.”¹⁰ Nonetheless, even victims describing a difficult relationship with God “still rely on their spirituality for healing.” Victims who experience

“greater resolution” of their childhood abuse are able to “actively turn to their spirituality to cope...rather than attempt to cope on their own.”¹¹

Spirituality-Based Blocks

The spiritual harm resulting from child abuse may pose several blocks inhibiting the child from disclosing the abuse during a forensic interview.

Perpetrator induced. The perpetrator may manipulate a child’s faith in such a way as to convince the child that he or she is sinful. If a child has been taught that sexual conduct, even sexual thoughts are sinful,¹² the perpetrator may cite a child’s biological reaction as proof the child is just as sinful, if not more so, than the perpetrator. A child growing up in a church teaching that homosexual conduct is sinful¹³ may be told by the perpetrator “you see how your pee gets big when I touch it? You’re gay. The pastor will condemn you if you ever talk about it.”

A child’s emotional reactions to maltreatment can also be manipulated. In one case, for example, a child recounted how she taught herself to initiate sexual contact with her father as a means of “getting it over with.” Manipulated by her father, the child came to believe that her initiation of sexual conduct was sinful and that, even worse, she was *causing* her father to sin.¹⁴

Child induced. Even if a perpetrator does not manipulate a child’s faith as a means of keeping the secret, the child’s own analysis of church doctrine may result in a block preventing disclosure. I once worked with a 13 year old victim who was abused for several years by a man in the neighborhood. The child told me that the reason she didn’t disclose the abuse for years is because, in her faith tradition, all sexual contact outside of marriage is sinful. Accordingly, she was convinced her parents and her church leaders would condemn her to the same extent as the perpetrator. In another case, a seven year old child asked the forensic interviewer “Am I still a virgin in God’s eyes?”¹⁵

Doctrinal induced. In many instances a child may correctly understand a church doctrine and that doctrine makes it difficult to disclose. An adult survivor once told me he was sure he was doomed to hell because he could not forgive his father. The survivor cited scriptural references of the need to forgive even horrendous wrongs¹⁶ and said that, try as he might, he simply could not forgive the torture he endured at the hands of his father.

Institution induced. Sadly, many institutions of faith are more interested in addressing the spiritual needs of perpetrators than they are victims of abuse. If a popular member of a congregation is accused of molesting a child, it is predictable that many members of the congregation will support the perpetrator.¹⁷ Even if a perpetrator confesses to the crime, many faith leaders will urge reconciliation between the perpetrator and the child.¹⁸ Indeed, many perpetrators count on the church’s support. In the words of one child molester:

I considered church people easy to fool...they have a trust that comes from being Christians...They tend to be better folks all around. And they seem to want to believe in the good that exists in all people...I think they want to believe in people. And because of that, you can easily convince, with or without convincing words.¹⁹

The church's subtle, or not so subtle support of perpetrators may prevent children from disclosing or even cause children who have disclosed to recant. A child victim, noting that both of her pastors and all of the church elders were supporting the father she accused of molesting her, asked me boldly, "does this mean God is against me, too?"²⁰

Religious leader induced. Numerous studies document that, when a faith leader is the perpetrator of abuse, the damage to the victim's psyche is particularly pronounced.²¹

Interviewer induced. Sometimes, the forensic interviewer's lack of comfort with a child's spirituality may cause a block. We once had a case called into our Center involving an 11 year old boy who was going to participate in a religious ceremony in which he drank poison and picked up venomous snakes. This family, including the child, took literally the verse from scripture that those with a strong faith can drink poison or be bitten by poisonous snakes without being harmed.²² An interviewer offended by this practice who communicates this feeling to the child may unwittingly cause the child to shut down during the interview.

In overcoming spiritual blocks, the interviewer and the multi-disciplinary team may wish to consider the following suggestions for addressing this issue before, during, and after the forensic interview.

Before the forensic interview

Look for clues

Prior to conducting a forensic interview, the investigative team should closely scrutinize the report triggering the investigation and/or interview. In scrutinizing the report, look for clues suggesting there may be a spirituality-based block. For example, the child's initial disclosure may reflect his or her spirituality through statements such as "I think God is mad at me."

In addition to the child's previous statements, examine the setting the alleged abuse took place as well as any indication of a possible perpetrator. If the setting was inside a religious institution or the possible perpetrator is a member of the clergy or is otherwise associated with a religious institution, the chances for a spirituality based block are greater.

Even if the alleged perpetrator is not associated with the faith community and the abuse did not take place inside a religious institution, there may be other clues in the initial report suggesting the possibility of a spirituality based block. For example, if the child

attends a school associated with a faith tradition it is likely that prayer and other religious practices are a significant part of the child's daily experience. Many times, particularly in small communities²³, the investigative team may know something of the child's religious practices. The team, for example, may know if a given child attends a particular church or participates in other religious activities.

Select an appropriate setting for the interview

If at all possible, the child should be interviewed in a children's advocacy center²⁴ or another child friendly facility. In some jurisdictions, it may be necessary to conduct an emergency or preliminary interview at a child's school, day care or home. Be cognizant, though, that if the child has a spirituality based block, and the setting for the interview is rooted in a faith tradition, overcoming the block may be more difficult. For example, a child believing God is angry with her over the abuse may have a more difficult time disclosing abuse in a church-affiliated school or even a home filled with religious symbols.

To illustrate this concern, consider this statement from a young victim: "When daddy does sex to me I feel sad...My Mister Jesus he just watched and he didn't make it stop."²⁵ For a child with this potential block, that is, concerned that Jesus "watched" the abuse and failed to intervene, it may be particularly difficult to be interviewed in a class room or home with a picture of Jesus prominently displayed. Such an image may remind the child that Jesus failed to protect the child in the past—and may fail to protect her in the future. For the same reason, it may be wise for the interviewer to avoid wearing a cross necklace or other religious ornament during the interview.

Research uncommon religious practices

If the report pertains to an uncommon religious practice, such as a ritual where a child may consume poison or be bitten by poisonous snakes²⁶, the interviewer may want to conduct some preliminary research or otherwise find out as much as possible about this practice prior to the interview. In this way, the interviewer is less likely to act shocked at potential revelations during the interview or to otherwise signal his/her ignorance of a practice that, to the child, is likely quite normal.

During the interview

Be alert for signs of a spiritual block

In some instances, the child may boldly say or do something in the forensic interview that reveals a potential spiritual block to disclosure. In one interview, for example, a young girl boldly asked the interviewer "Am I still a virgin in God's eyes?"²⁷

In other instances, the dynamics of the abuse itself may alert the interviewer to the potentiality of a spiritual block. Consider, for example, the plight of a young girl who was molested repeatedly after being required to recite her bedtime prayers. To such a girl, the

feeling that God could not, or would not protect her from harm was particularly pronounced.²⁸ To this feeling was added shame when her father inquired “Why are you such a whore that you make me do this after we have prayed?”²⁹

Be liberal in offering reassurance

One of the block removing techniques taught in the CornerHouse and Finding Words forensic interviewing courses³⁰ is to offer a child “reassurance.” This can be as simple as reminding the child “you’re not in any trouble with *me*”, “this is a safe place”, or perhaps to go as far as saying “you know, I talk to lots of boys (or girls). No matter what happened, it’s not your fault.”

Avoid minimizing the importance of spirituality

Given the importance of spiritual healing to many child abuse victims,³¹ it is imperative that the interviewer avoid minimizing the importance of the child’s spirituality. If an interviewer is uncomfortable with a child’s religious practices or expressions of faith and in some way communicates these feelings to the child, the child may shut down.

Though it is unlikely that interviewers would intentionally demean a child’s spirituality, this may be done unwittingly. In one case, for example, the interviewer was closing the interview by giving the child some personal safety messages. Specifically, the child was asked who she could tell if she was touched inappropriately. The child responded “I can tell Jesus.” The interviewer then asked “who can you tell on *earth*?” The child became frustrated and replied that Jesus is still on the earth. After all, the Bible specifically promises that “where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am with them.”³² A better response would simply be to ask “who else can you tell?”

Assure the child that someone will help him/her address spiritual questions

If a child asks the forensic interviewer a religious question (i.e. “Am I still a virgin in God’s eyes?”), the interviewer must in some way acknowledge the question. Until the child’s question is acknowledged, if not fully addressed, it may be difficult to continue the interview.

At the same time, it is important not to delve too deeply when responding to a child’s spiritual question. Though well meaning, an interviewer may not fully appreciate important nuances in a child’s question. A better approach is to ask the question back to the child (i.e. “what makes you wonder about being a virgin in God’s eyes?”) and thus obtain more information as to the source of this block. When asked the question back, the child may disclose that her father explained that her biological reaction during the abuse meant she “enjoyed” the encounter and thus would be condemned in the church for having lost her virginity. Perhaps the child is worried about a Sunday School lesson impressing upon her the command to remain a virgin until married. Obtaining details of the source of the block will assist the interviewer, and the team, in addressing the child’s concern.

If the child insists on an answer, the interviewer may want to inform the child that she has asked an important question and that he will make sure someone sits down with the child and fully answers the question. Again, an interviewer attempting to answer difficult spiritual questions may unwittingly offend the child by failing to understand nuances of her faith tradition. Moreover, many spiritual questions are also mental health issues that need to be explored in greater depth by a well-trained mental health professional.

After the interview

Once the interview is complete, the forensic interviewer must bring to the attention of the multi-disciplinary team the spiritual questions, concerns or blocks raised during the interview. The team must develop a plan to address the child's spiritual injury just as the team would develop a plan to address the physical and emotional damage done to the child. When selecting a therapist, for example, seek a therapist with specific knowledge and experience in counseling child abuse victims *and* who shares the child's faith tradition or is otherwise familiar enough with the child's faith tradition to be sensitive in addressing the child's spiritual needs.³³ It may also be helpful to have one or more members of the faith community on the multi-disciplinary team who can recommend spiritual resources that may assist the child.³⁴

The team should also consider the value of spirituality in helping the child cope with the rigors of testifying or of separation from family. As mentioned earlier, many victims rebel against the authority of the church, but nonetheless pray regularly or report having spiritual experiences.³⁵ If the child has a positive relationship with a pastor or some other member of the faith tradition, the team may want to consider utilizing this individual as a support person for the child at trial and to assist the child in praying or otherwise accessing God as part of her recovery.

Conclusion

Spirituality is deeply rooted in many, if not most aspects of our society.³⁶ It is, therefore, not surprising that child abuse often causes lasting damage to a child's sense of spirituality. Unfortunately, the child protection community has largely focused on addressing only the child's physical and emotional damage—leaving many victims to struggle alone with the reality of God, and the reality of their abuse.

For these children, and for our profession, we can do better.

¹ Director, NDAA's Child Abuse Programs (National Center for Prosecution of Child Abuse and National Child Protection Training Center at Winona State University). The author thanks Kerri Trom, paralegal student from Winona State University, for her research assistance.

² DIANE LANGBERG, PH.D, ON THE THRESHOLD OF HOPE 131 (1999).

³ *See generally*, ROBIN KARR-MORSE & MEREDITH S. WILEY, GHOSTS FROM THE NURSERY: TRACING THE ROOTS OF VIOLENCE (1997).

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- ⁴ Lawson, Drebing, Berg, Vincelle, & Penk, *The Long Term Impact of Child Abuse on Religious Behavior and Spirituality in Men*, 22(5) CHILD ABUSE & NEGLECT 369, 376-377 (1998).
- ⁵ *Id.*
- ⁶ Adam Saradjian & Dany Nobus, *Cognitive Distortions of Religious Professionals Who Sexually Abuse Children*, 18 J. OF INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE 905, 918 (2003).
- ⁷ *Id.*
- ⁸ Barbara R. McLaughlin, *Devastated Spirituality: The Impact of Clergy Sexual Abuse on the Survivor's Relationship with God*, 1(2) SEXUAL ADDICTION & COMPULSIVITY (1994).
- ⁹ Terry Lynn Gall, *Spirituality and Coping with Life Stress Among Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse*, 30 CHILD ABUSE & NEGLECT 829 (2006).
- ¹⁰ *Id.* at 838.
- ¹¹ *Id.* at 839.
- ¹² Jesus told his followers: "But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Matthew 5:28 (NIV).
- ¹³ See generally, Anonymous, *The Road to Healing*, CHRISTIANITY TODAY (April 2007) 56 (author is a married man who details his sexual attraction to men and the difficulties he has had in receiving counseling from conservative churches). There is research suggesting that, for male child sexual abuse survivors, "confusion about sexual orientation is a frequently reported and major negative consequence of their sexual history" and that "most men who have been sexually abused fear they are homosexual, and homosexual men wonder if the abuse made them gay." Maryam Kia-Keating, Frances K. Grossman, Lynn Sorsoli, *Containing and Resisting Masculinity: Narratives of Renegotiation Among Resilient Male Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse*, 6(3) PSYCHOLOGY OF MEN & MASCULINITY 169, 179 (2005).
- ¹⁴ This is an account an adult survivor related to me.
- ¹⁵ This example is drawn from a case called into the National Center for Prosecution of Child Abuse.
- ¹⁶ Jesus warned his followers "if you do not forgive men their sins your father will not forgive your sins." Matthew 6:15 (NIV).
- ¹⁷ Victor Vieth, *Keeping the Faith: A Call for Collaboration Between the Faith and Child Protection Communities*, 947, 949 in COOPER, ESTES, GIARDINO, KELLOGG, & VIETH, MEDICAL, LEGAL, & SOCIAL SCIENCE ASPECTS OF CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION (2005)
- ¹⁸ *Id.* at 949-950.
- ¹⁹ ANNA C. SALTER, PH.D, PREDATORS 29 (2003).
- ²⁰ This was a case I handled as a prosecutor.
- ²¹ See notes 6-8, *supra* and accompanying text.
- ²² Mark 16:17-18 (NIV): "In my name they will drive out demons, they will speak in new tongues, they will pick up snakes with their hands, and when they drink deadly poison it will not hurt them at all..."
- ²³ For an overview of conducting an MDT investigation in small communities, see Victor I. Vieth, *In My Neighbor's House*, 22 HAMLINE LAW REVIEW 143 (1998).
- ²⁴ For an excellent overview of the history of Children's Advocacy Centers and the strong research supporting this model, see Nancy Chandler, *Children's Advocacy Centers: Making a Difference One Child at a Time*, 28 HAMLINE JOURNAL OF PUBLIC LAW & POLICY 315 (2006).
- ²⁵ DIANE MANDT LANGBERG, PH.D, ON THE THRESHOLD OF HOPE 131 (1999).
- ²⁶ Some years ago, the National Center for Prosecution of Child Abuse provided technical assistance to a child protection team responding to a report that an 11 year old boy was scheduled to participate in a "snake handling" religious service in which the child would drink strychnine poison and be bitten by water moccasins.
- ²⁷ This is a case that was called into our National Center for Prosecution of Child Abuse.
- ²⁸ Diane Langberg, *The Spiritual Impact of Abuse*, available in the "articles" section of the following web site: <http://www.netgrace.org>
- ²⁹ *Id.*
- ³⁰ For an overview of the CornerHouse and Finding Words interviewing programs, see Victor I. Vieth, *Unto the Third Generation: A Call to End Child Abuse in the United States Within 120 Years (Revised and Expanded)*, 28 HAMLINE JOURNAL OF PUBLIC LAW & POLICY 1, 21-29 (2006).
- ³¹ See generally, LANGBERG, note 2, and DIANE MANDT LANGBERG, PH.D, COUNSELING SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL ABUSE (2003).

³² Matthew 18:20 (NIV).

³³ For suggestions on selecting a counselor that may assist in addressing the child's spiritual injury, *see* DIANE MANDT LANGBERT, PH.D., ON THE THRESHOLD OF HOPE 191-196 (1999).

³⁴ *See generally*, GERARD J. MCGLONE, ET. AL, CREATING SAFE AND SACRED PLACES: IDENTIFYING, PREVENTING, AND HEALING SEXUAL ABUSE (2003).

³⁵ *See* Terry Lynn Gall, *Spirituality and Coping with Life Stress Among Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse*, 30 CHILD ABUSE & NEGLECT 829 (2006). *See also*, Lawson, Drebing, Berg, Vincelle, & Penk, *The Long Term Impact of Child Abuse on Religious Behavior and Spirituality in Men*, 22(5) CHILD ABUSE & NEGLECT 369, 376-377 (1998).

³⁶ *See generally*, JON MEACHAM, AMERICAN GOSPEL: GOD, THE FOUNDING FATHERS, AND THE MAKING OF A NATION (2006).