

Safeguarding & Spiritual Abuse

Understanding, preventing & responding to Spiritual Abuse



1

Motivation for joining



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Why this matters

Abuse that harms twice: Through the abuse itself and loss of faith's protective strength.



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Victim-Survivor Voice:

“

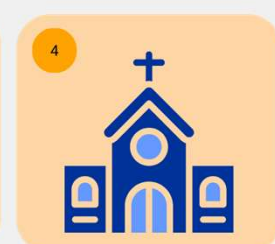
At first, it was amazing, we were welcomed and there was no judgement about my Dad's problems.

”

5

Choose your framing

Spiritual abuse scenarios

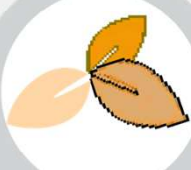


6

Learning journey:



The
Harm



The
Distortion



The
Ambiguity



The
Practice

7

Module 1



The
Harm

- Abuse
- Power
- Vulnerability

8

Existing knowledge?

What is abuse?

What is emotional/psychological abuse*?

What is spiritual abuse?



9

Spiritual abuse

Def: a persistent pattern of

- Emotional / psychological abuse
 ...characterised by...
- Coercive and controlling behaviour
 ...in a...
- Religious context or rationale

(Oakley, L. 2023)

10

Occurrence and Co-occurrence

Occurs widely. Co-occurs often.

More visible/broadly understood abuse makes support easier to access.



11

Victim-Survivor:

“

‘God is pleased with you for doing it’. But he was quite sure that what they were doing was wrong.

”

12

How spiritual abuse commonly shows up

1 Harm

- Spiritual identity impacted
- Physical indicators
- Blame
- Difficulty trusting

2 Coercive control

- Manipulation / exploitation
- Enforced accountability
- Demanding silence
- Pressure to conform

3 Spiritual / religious

- Sacred texts to justify harm
- Religious teaching for personal gain
- Threat of divine consequences

13

Case Scenario

1. Elements of coercive control?
2. Elements of harm?
3. Spiritual/religious elements?

What would safer/healthy version of this situation look like?



14

Scenario 1 – Alex

- Alex instructed to keep team ‘in alignment’
- Raises concerns, excluded from meetings
- Increasing isolation and lack of transparency

15



16

5:00

17

Role of power

What kinds of power might we hold?

How can power be used well?

What is an 'abuse of power'? How does this sit with spiritual abuse?



18

Power in spiritual abuse

- Recognise power – who and how?
- A hallmark of healthy power
- A hallmark of unhealthy power

Power doesn't need to be consciously held to have an impact.



19

What makes someone 'vulnerable'?



20

Neutral vulnerability

Vulnerability doesn't create harm.

The misuse of power does.



21

Community narratives

How harm becomes possible.

- 'Oh, that's just... *[person's name]*'



22

Victim-Survivor:

“

Oh, how I wish to stop hearing these excuses for their actions. It makes the bystanders feel better about not taking a stand against abuse, but it isolates me more and more and makes me question reality.

Victim-survivor, Tears of Eden

”

23

Responding well

- Be calm
- Listen carefully
- Allow time and space
- Active listening
- Show acceptance
- Clarify understanding
- Reassure
- Next steps & choice



24

Framing questions: The harm



From your framing scenario:

- Who had power?
- Who had been vulnerable?
- What community narratives made harm possible?

25

Module 2



- Faith as protective factor
- Coercive control / religious context
- Safer spiritual spaces

26

Spirituality as protective factors



27

Pause and consider:

If you're a person of faith, has your faith acted as a support or protective factor at some time in your life?



28



29

5:00

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Spirituality when distorted

Spiritual Abuse *definition*:

a persistent pattern of

emotional / psychological abuse

...characterised by...

coercive and controlling behaviours

...in a...

religious context or rationale

31

Coercive and controlling behaviour

- Use of pressure / fear / threat
- Unable to make decisions freely
- Controlling their daily behaviour and spiritual life

32

Case Scenario

1. Elements of pressure / fear/ threat?
2. Able to make decisions freely?
3. Control of daily behaviour / spiritual life?

What would safer/healthy version of this situation look like?



33

Scenario 2 – Musa

- A new believer encouraged to take on more
- Increasing expectations exceed his capacity
- A leader's influence begins shaping his spiritual decisions

34

Coercive control in spiritual abuse

- Long-term internal impact
- Can lead to identity damage
- Healthy spirituality builds
- Coercive leadership erodes



35

Victim-Survivor:

“

I was taught that I was a deceiver and that belief is now deep in my soul. I have no idea how to get rid of that belief from my inner spirit.

”

36

Religious contexts or rationale



Places



People



Practices

37

Religious contexts or rationale

- Use of sacred texts to coerce or control
- Use of spiritual practices to influence decisions
- Applying religious beliefs as leverage
- Elevating leaders to a god-like status



38

Safer spiritual situations

Encourage
theological audits



Power-aware
spirituality

39

Minimising harm in spiritual situations

What 'good practices' have you seen?

If a teaching/practice harms a
subgroup, do we change it or defend it?

Can someone say 'no' to a spiritual
request without penalty?



40

The power of voices

- Quiet[ened] voices
- Missed voices
- Outside voices



41

Framing questions: The distortion



From your framing scenario:

- How was spirituality distorted?
- What could healthy practice have looked like?
- Whose voice was missing or silenced?

42

Safeguarding & Spiritual Abuse

Session 2



43

Is it spiritual abuse?

- Emotional / psychological abuse
- Coercive control
- Religious context or rationale



44

Module 3

- Various 'grey areas'
- Pause and reflect
- Safeguarding actions



45

1. Behaviour doesn't meet the threshold



- Unhealthy vs. abusive environments
- Criticism and feedback
- One-off behaviour or bad reaction

Safeguarding action: Review codes of conduct and safeguarding policy

46

Pause and consider:

What situation would make you think, 'This needs an informal conversation,' rather than, 'This needs a formal safeguarding measure'?



47

2. Intent and impact



Spiritual abuse can be unintentional, emerging from unhealthy beliefs, fear, and unchecked power.

Safeguarding action: Behavioural risk assessments

48

Pause and consider:

If someone meant well but harm was still caused, what is the appropriate next step?



49

3. Challenge and discipleship



Healthy challenge invites growth.
Unhealthy challenge pressures compliance.

Safeguarding action: Consent?

50

Pause and consider:

What examples of healthy/unhealthy challenge have you seen?

What language or actions made a difference?



51

Victim-Survivor:

“

Today's victory
should have been
could have been
Yesterday's.

”

52



53

5:00

54

4. Complicity of the 'inner circle'



Spiritual abuse rarely exists without a surrounding system that enables it – intentionally or unintentionally.

Safeguarding action: Accountability structures

55

5. Hindsight



People often revisit past experiences once they learn the language of spiritual abuse.

Safeguarding action: External reviews, records, reflection

56

Case Scenario

1. Elements of complicity?
2. Why did hindsight matter?
3. Earlier action?

What would safer/healthy version of this situation look like?



57

Scenario 2 – Talven

- Talven and attendants manage temple life
- Intense teaching style, many students leave
- Rami's story led to multiple disclosures

58

6. Perceived experience of spiritual abuse



A person feeling spiritually abused does not automatically mean spiritual abuse has occurred – but it always indicates something important is happening.

Safeguarding actions: Trauma-awareness & spiritual abuse in policy

59

Pause and consider:

A person's perception may not describe the whole situation, but it always describes their experience.

How does this shape our safeguarding responsibilities?



60

Mini-scenario poll

How should you respond?



61

7. Spiritual abuse as a distraction



Because spiritual abuse is powerful and a relatively new term, it can be used to divert attention from other issues.

Safeguarding action: Clear safeguarding processes.

62

Framing questions: The ambiguity



From your framing scenario:

- What had clouded perception?
- Was there a complicit inner circle?
- What made it hard for victim-survivors to speak?

63



64

5:00

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Module 4

- Policies
- Accountability
- People-centred practice



The
Practice

66

A who's who in safeguarding

Roles and responsibilities.

Who'll action what?



67

Policy

1. Clear definitions and thresholds
2. Codes of conducts include spiritual practices
3. Reporting and whistle-blowing

See handbook:

Learning applied to practice



68

Policy

4. Safeguarding assessment processes
5. Ongoing policy review

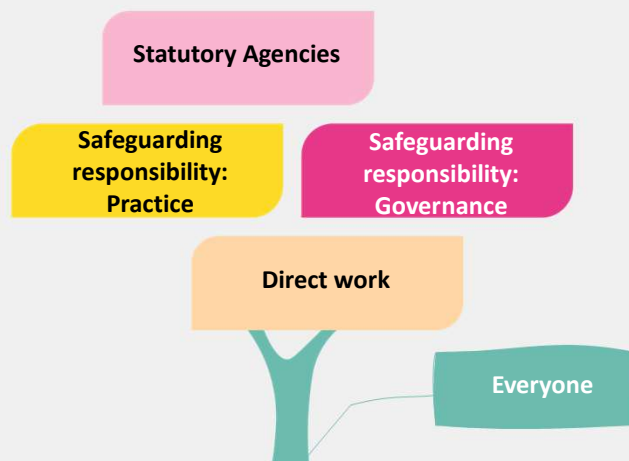
See
handbook:

Learning
applied to
practice



69

Policy - see handbook

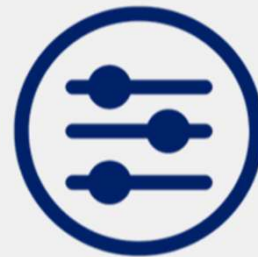


70

Quick Poll

Rate your group on your policies

- 1 = very low
- 3 = average
- 5 = strong



71

Accountability

1. Real accountability requires...
2. Accountability for all
3. Transparency and communication



72

Accountability - see handbook

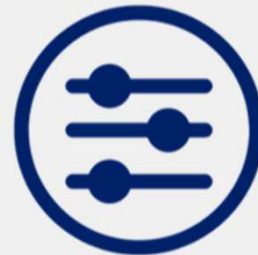


73

Quick Poll

Rate your group on your accountability structures

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- 3 = average
- 5 = strong



74

People-centred practice

1. Victim-survivor centred
2. Cultures that prevent harm
3. Cultural signals
4. Embedding real change



75

People-centred practices



76

Quick Poll

Rate your group on your people-centered practices

1 = very low
3 = average
5 = strong



77

Victim-Survivor:

“

It is vital that we see our journey to living well with our experiences as not being one direction of travel.

”

78

Victim-survivor practices

Boundaries

Signposting

Finding the words

Find healthy environments



79

Framing questions: The practice



From your framing scenario:

- What accountability had existed?
- What had happened when concerns were raised?
- What would have strengthened safety?

80

Our task - build faith communities where...

Safety is intentional, not assumed.

Accountability is normal, not exceptional.

Victim-survivors are believed and centred.



81

**Your feedback is
important to us**



82



thirtyone:eight

Creating safer places. Together.