



Queensland  
Churches Together


Not in  
my  
Church  
DOMESTIC AND  
FAMILY VIOLENCE

# Spiritual Abuse

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# Definition of Spiritual Abuse

Typically, Spiritual Abuse uses faith, religion or beliefs to extort or control. Spiritual Abuse can involve coercive control or exploitation by another person in a spiritual context and include aspects of verbal, emotional, and/or physical abuse.

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# Forms of Spiritual Abuse

- Misuse of the Bible to :
    - Excuse or minimise abuse
    - Force someone to stay in a relationship
    - Impose gender roles that are abusive or coercive
  - Deny someone access to their faith
  - Ridicule someone's beliefs to undermine their identity
  - Use faith as a weapon
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# Examples of Spiritual Abuse

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Using the Bible to shame the victim and highlight failures and guilt.

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Using the bible to force forgiveness and a return to an abusive relationship

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Criticising a spouse's loved ones by questioning their faith and values (isolation).

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Making a partner feel guilty for maintaining a relationship with those who do not share their beliefs. (Isolation)

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Guilt tripping a spouse for not being spiritual enough, or making them feel inadequate or unworthy in their spiritual journey.

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Constantly reminding the victim of their perceived lack of spirituality or commitment to their faith.

# Examples of Spiritual Abuse

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Blaming the victim for any problems in the relationship and attributing them to their supposed spiritual shortcomings.

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Telling a spouse their suffering is a result of lack of faith.

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Distorting a spouse's perception of reality, making them doubt their own experiences or emotions related to their spirituality.

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Using the bible to force someone into sex

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Restricting decision making by imposing strict gender roles.

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Denying a spouse opportunities to pursue their interests or career aspirations.

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# Discussion

“The studies that have been done in the area of spirituality or religion and domestic violence show that domestic violence victims harness religious and spiritual resources to cope and find meaning, yet religion and spirituality can overtly and covertly promote abuse.”

Yick 2008



*He was a “good church man”, so he regularly quoted the Bible at me in order to justify his abusing me — mainly psychologically and sexually. I quickly lost count of the times I heard that Ephesians verse about wives submitting to their husbands. Even now, it makes me feel sick every time I hear it; it brings back horrible memories.*

### *Anna's Story*

Source: Lutheran Church of Australia Hidden Hurts Healing Hearts website

*A young wife, Gemma, sees her husband, Nathan, being harsh and acting unloving toward their children. Gemma is concerned, so she approaches her husband later that night.*

*Nathan calmly tells her that she is not to challenge him and that he's doing what the Bible says to do. She pushes back and brings to his attention the ways that he invoked fear in their children.*

*Nathan responds by questioning her interpretation of Scripture, her understanding of grace, her inability to trust his authority, and ultimately her faith — and he artfully uses passages of Scripture to do it.*

*Now, Gemma feels disoriented and littered with guilt and shame. She questions not just what she witnessed but also her own heart before the Lord.*

Source: Focus on the Family



*Carly's husband presented her with long lists of her shortcomings and claimed that they were sins against God. There was not an evening during which he did not scrutinize her cooking, parenting, appearance or housekeeping.*

*She began to subsequently question whether she was a believer. She believed she had failed at so many things, and she was left with many questions. If her heart produced only bad fruit, should she even lead her children in devotions?*

*She questioned why God would not help her. Were her prayers wrong? Why else wouldn't God grant her desire to be pleasing to Him? Could the Bible be wrong about what was required of her? It felt like too much for anyone to get right.*

Source: Focus on the Family

# Impacts of Spiritual Abuse



- The psychological, emotional, and spiritual toll of domestic abuse which takes a spiritual focus.

# Why Is It So Damaging?

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- Targets the core of identity: faith, purpose, belonging.
- Undermines self-worth: instils shame, sinfulness, and guilt.
- Creates deep internal conflict: between personal safety, personal values and spiritual loyalty.
- Severs community connections: often leads to social isolation.
- Distorts concept of God or the sacred: may lead to spiritual disillusionment or atheism.
- May not seek help: believes therapists & DFV agencies will not understand.

# Common Impacts on Victim- Survivors

## **Emotional & Psychological:**

- Depression, anxiety, CPTSD
- Low self-esteem, self-blame, self-punishment
- Fear, guilt, sadness

## **Physical:**

- If encouraged to remain with partner, safety can be compromised
- Impacts on health and wellness

## **Spiritual:**

- Feeling spiritually “lost” or betrayed by God
- Struggling to accept grace or forgiveness
- Losing faith or religious identity

## **Social:**

- Withdrawal from family, friends, and faith community
- Isolation, particularly acute in CALD communities

# How Abusers Use Spiritual Power

- Justifies control: "God says you must obey me."
  - Encourages submission: misuse of religious texts.
  - Shifts blame: victim is told they're spiritually deficient.
  - Silences dissent: questions are framed as disobedience.
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- "My husband said if I left, I'd be damned forever." – Survivor testimony

# Research Highlights

- AIFS & international studies: strong association with trauma, PTSD, diminished self-worth
- Mulvihill et al. (2023): long-term effects include depression, disrupted relationships, silencing in community
- Hulley et al. (2023): misuse of scripture and church welfare prioritised over survivor safety
- Gezinski et al. (2019): faith leader responses often limited to prayer/church attendance, not safety

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## Barriers to Recovery

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Victims may fear judgment or avoid help altogether.

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Shame, fear of divine punishment prevent disclosure.

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Distrust in religious authorities extends to faith-based counselors.

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Cultural silence or denial can further isolate victims.

# Implications for Support

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Trauma-informed care is critical.

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Spiritual safety must accompany emotional/physical safety.

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Sensitivity to beliefs without reinforcing abuse is essential.

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Survivors may reconstruct or step away from faith.

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Let survivors define their own path  
= empowerment.



# Key Takeaways

Spiritual abuse is  
real, under-  
recognized, and  
deeply harmful.

It wounds at the  
intersection of  
belief, identity, and  
safety.

Recovery requires  
empathy, validation,  
and trauma-  
informed care.

Faith leaders need  
better awareness  
and training.

# Final Reflection

“Faith should be a source of comfort and belonging—  
not a weapon of control.”

Support begins by believing survivors, validating their pain, and walking with them on their journey—whatever direction it takes.