



Preventing Spiritual Abuse

Presenter: Melodie Bissell

Definitions:

Spiritual abuse is the use of coercive techniques or manipulative appeals that bypass a person's critical faculties, play on psycho-social weaknesses, undermines relationships with family or religious institutions, or masks the true nature of faith conversion.



Example 3:

We believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ and affirm the importance of Christian evangelism. However, we do not believe that this justifies any means to fulfill that end. Hence, we disavow the use of any coercive techniques or manipulative appeals that bypass a person's critical faculties, plays on psychological weaknesses, undermines relationships with family or religious institutions, or mask the true nature of Christian conversion.



Example 4:

Spiritual abuse is the misuse of a position of power, leadership, or influence to further the selfish interests of someone other than the individual who needs help. Sometimes abuse arises out of a doctrinal position. At other times it occurs because of legitimate personal needs of a leader that are being met by illegitimate means. Spiritually abusive religious systems are sometimes described as legalistic, mind controlling, religiously addictive and authoritarian.



What makes a healthy family?

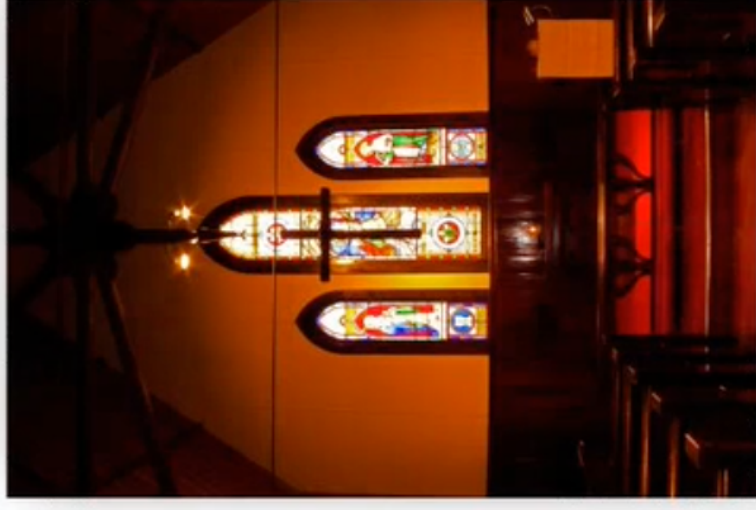
- Care
- Nurture
- Loving
- Authority structure
- Provide need-meeting relationships
- Experiences
- Respect
- Guidance in parameters
- Role-modeling
- Affirmation
- Appropriate consequences
- Teaching
- Celebrations
- Growth
- Affirmation

What makes an unhealthy family?

- Harsh treatment • Undue Pressure
- Judgment • Rejection
- Belittling • Imbalance of power to gratify his or her needs for importance, power, emotional or even sexual gratification
- Insulting
- Blame
- Shame
- Attacks
- Unclear Expectations • Disrespect

Detecting Spiritual Abuse:

- Manipulative spiritual systems
- Undue influence on people's choices
- Try to sway someone's decisions
- Controlling spiritual systems
- Promises of blessings or curses



What Spiritual Abuse is Not:



- Spiritual leadership makes a decision that goes against your opinion
- Confronting someone's sinful, wrong, or honest mistakes
- Asking someone to step down from a position of leadership
- Holding certain standards of group lifestyle code of conduct for staff and volunteers.

What is Spiritual Abuse:



- If someone's opposing view is used to devalue a person's spirituality
- The use of blame, shame, or isolating others to confront someone's sinful choices or conduct

What is the difference between abusive and non-abusive systems?

Abusive Systems	Non-Abusive Systems
Hurt happens.	Hurt happens.
It is not permissive to talk about problems and hurts and abuses.	Stories are shared so that we can learn from the past.
No healing and restoration after the wound occurs.	Healing and restoration can occur.
Abuse is swept under the carpet.	Abuse is not swept under the carpet.

Impact of Spiritual Abuse:

- Distorted image of God
- Distorted self-identity
- Difficult time understanding grace
- Trouble with personal boundaries
- Trouble with personal responsibility



Impact of Spiritual Abuse:

- Burden bearer
- Lack of living skills
- Hard time admitting abuse
- Hard time with trust



Identifying Abusive Systems



- **Silenced:** The most powerful of all unspoken rules in the abusive systems is the ‘can’t talk’ rule. There are no mechanisms of feedback and no framework for escalating concerns.
- **Lack of Balance:**
 - Extreme objectivism
 - Extreme subjectivism

Characteristics of Abusive Systems

1. Nurture an environment of paranoia/fear/scare tactics
2. Image conscious
3. Have a distorted view of respect
4. Secretive and suppresses criticism
5. Demand allegiance as proof of the follower's allegiance

Characteristics of Abusive Systems

6. Use exclusive language
7. Create a culture of shame
8. Often have a charismatic leader at the helm who starts off well, but slips into arrogance, protectionism and pride
9. Keeping people wounded
10. Cultivate a dependence on one leader or leaders for spiritual information

Characteristics of Abusive Systems

11. Demand servanthood of the followers but leaders live prestigious, privileged lives
12. Buffer him/herself from criticism by placing people around themselves whose only allegiance is to the leader.
13. Hold to outward performance but rejects authentic spirituality.
14. Use exclusivity for allegiances.

How to Combat Spiritual Abuse:

- Define what spiritual abuse is
- Write whistle blower policies
- Write policies on bullying
- Model servant leadership
- Provide mechanisms for feedback and a voice to share concerns

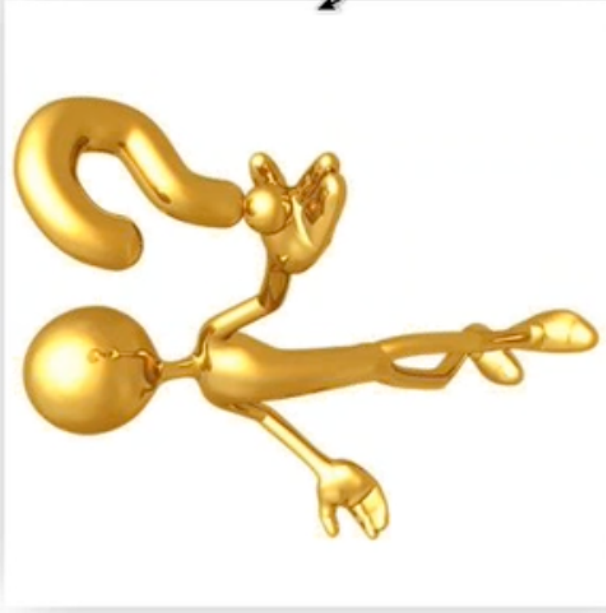


How to Combat Spiritual Abuse:

- Develop progressive discipline for those who have abused others
- Provide opportunity for testimony
- Teach and preach against it
- Ensure consistency



How to Recover from Spiritual Abuse:



- Understand what has happened and how
- Learn the true nature of grace, love and forgiveness
- Share your experience
- Provide time for healing and recovery

Recommended Reading:

- *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse* by David Johnson and Jeff Van Vonderen
- *Faith That Hurts, Faith That Heals* by Stephen Arterburn and Jack Felton
- *Breaking Free* by David R. Miller
- *Wisdom Hunter* by Randall Arthur
- *Churches That Abuse* by Ronald Enroth

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