

# Spiritual Abuse

Spiritual abuse refers to abuse (e.g. control, deception, oppression and manipulation) which invokes a child or young person's religious beliefs and faith to perpetrate harm and negatively impact a person's spirituality (National Association for Christian Recovery n.d.).

Spiritual abuse may include abuse that:

- occurs in a religious setting (e.g. church, religious school, youth group)
- is perpetrated by an adult or 'religious' representative (e.g. parent, priest, nun, youth leader, catechist, teacher)
- involves the use of religious concepts, texts or practices to condone inappropriate or abusive behaviour
- exploits information revealed during confession, pastoral activities or counselling to manipulate and control a person
- invokes a child or young person's faith to manipulate them into engaging in behaviour that they are not comfortable with or that is abusive towards themselves or others (e.g. a member of the clergy who requires a person to reject their family because they are of a different faith to avoid damnation)
- prevents a person from participating in religious observances and practices.

A number of victims told the Committee that their experience of criminal child abuse had led to a loss of faith, particularly in the institution of the Catholic Church, but sometimes also in their God. Others felt fearful that they would go to hell because of the criminal child abuse they experienced.

Family and Community  
Development Committee 2013,  
vol. 1, p. 67

## BEHAVIOURAL INDICATORS

Spiritual abuse may involve the following behaviours:

- control
- domination
- coercion
- manipulation
- misuse of power
- isolation and rejection (e.g. as a punishment or in relation to disconnecting the person from those outside the Church such as family or friends)
- increasing expectations of commitment (e.g. time, financial commitment, devotion)
- lack of accountability and transparency (e.g. rigid, controlling interpretations of liturgy)
- secrecy
- negation of personal identity
- bullying
- emotional, physical or sexual abuse.

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## INDICATORS

Possible indicators of spiritual abuse are consistent with indicators of other forms of abuse are:

- compliance and passivity
- withdrawal
- depression and/or anxiety
- fear
- guilt
- anger
- shame
- distress
- avoidance of the context where the abuse is occurring (e.g. church, parish)
- lack of trust
- poor self-esteem
- crisis of faith (e.g. questioning, rejection of faith)
- isolation (e.g. loss of friends, relationships and opportunities for social interactions)
- sense of loss or grief (Oakley & Oakley 2017).

[A]buse by a trusted religious figure can destroy a child's belief that the world is a safe place and makes the world seem chaotic and unstructured.

Family and Community Development Committee, 2013, vol. 1, p. 47.

## REFERENCES

Family and Community Development Committee 2013, *Betrayal of trust: Inquiry into the handling of child abuse by religious and other non-government organisations*, report (G Crozier, chair), 2 vols.

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