

HANDLING SPIRITUAL CONCERNS

Some advocates, counselors and other professionals are uncomfortable with issues of religion and spirituality and may even distance themselves from discussions of spirituality with the people they serve. Gillum, Sullivan & Bybee (2006) state that reasons for this include lack of staff time and resources, the personal nature of spirituality, the diversity of religious or spiritual beliefs among individuals, and apprehension about creating misunderstanding or intruding on an individual's privacy. The result, they point out, may be that "the shelter provides a haven for physical safety, but fails to provide an environment for spiritual healing."

Interpersonal violence creates a spiritual crisis for many victims. The experience of being hurt by someone they believe should love, cherish and protect them (whether a partner or a parent) often causes victims a great deal of spiritual distress, which can manifest itself in various ways – feelings of despair, belief that life is meaningless, or perceptions of oneself as powerless (Gillum, Sullivan & Bybee, 2006). If, in response to the violence, the victim does something that violates their previous beliefs, this can heighten the sense of spiritual crisis. A survivor who was sexually assaulted when she was in high school shares:

"The sexual assault did result in a pregnancy and then I had an abortion. Being Catholic, I had a horrible amount of guilt and shame to deal with. I remember in college having a lot of late nights of deep depression and sorrow, and calling home and crying, and saying, 'I'm losing my mind. You need to help me.'"

Unfortunately, it also is not unusual for abusers to twist and distort spiritual or religious teachings to justify their violence. A survivor shares:

"He said: 'This is your fault. You're making me do this. God is going to hate you. You're going to go to hell.' He said all the things that were my biggest fears at that time. He said I was making him do this, and then, it felt like I was making him do this. It felt like it was my fault."

At the same time, many people, especially those from marginalized groups, view adherence to spiritual practices as resilience against adversity (Comas-Diaz, 2007). Naomi Michalsen, Executive Director of Women In Safe Homes in Ketchikan, AK, says:

"I think the word 'spiritual' or 'spirituality' kind of throws a lot of people off. It does me, even. But I feel like everybody has that part of them, and they need to work on that part as well as all the other things. It has to be part of the healing somewhere. For a lot of Native people, I believe that learning about their culture is spiritual, because it's something that we've lost and we long for" (Michalsen, 2007).

Many survivors of trauma have found their spiritual beliefs or their spiritual community to be a source of strength in times of trouble, and critical to recovery and healing.

A survivor shares:

“I would say the one single thing that helped me the most, throughout my life, my survival, was my spirituality. I believe that if I pray, somebody is going to listen.”

For one survivor, a familiar religious ritual was critical to helping her cope when she was a child whose father often beat her mother and then abused her as well:

“She [a next-door neighbor] let me know that God would hate the abuse, that God loved me. She gave me a rosary and taught me how to pray the rosary, and she set up a plan for me. She said she wanted me to go home and find places where I could hide where my father wouldn’t find me, and to take the rosary with me and pray. So I did. I would go home. I would find those hiding places. After a while, I was wearing the rosary so I could go at any time.”

For another survivor, her spirituality was an important source of empowerment:

“Spirituality is very important. I’ve gone through the tundra and I’d say, ‘Where are you? Be near me. Where’s that light?’ Because I can feel the light. I’ve been told that when I speak, I give this radiance – and I can feel it right now. The power. The radiance. It’s like an electricity that comes out of my body. Because I’ve dealt with my issues, and I’m like a guiding light that is full of power. The ray that I give out, I can’t describe it, but I can feel it.”

People exposed to chronic or repeated traumatic events may feel an especially strong need for a spiritual connection. Often these victims develop a fundamental sense of alienation from themselves, other people, and spiritual faith as a result of feeling permanently damaged – they may experience existential or spiritual changes in their view of the world, including loss of faith in humanity or a sense of hopelessness about the future (Herman 1997, 2009).

One survivor shares that a sense of spiritual connection literally kept her alive:

“I needed to find connection, a sense of belonging, belief in the human race, that kind of stuff, and the spiritual help – connectedness, the meaning of life. When I couldn’t do it for myself, I’d think about my nephews and my niece, children in my life. Okay, I’ve got to do this for them. Keeping those connections for me was more important initially, because I was suicidal at the end.”

Given the importance of spiritual concerns for many trauma survivors, Gillum, Sullivan & Bybee (2006) offer suggestions for advocates wishing to provide an environment that accommodates spiritual needs without being intrusive:

- Respect spiritual needs by providing free time for attendance at church services.
- Make a quiet room available for prayer or reflection.
- Invite spiritual leaders to attend trainings that provide education about interpersonal violence and the dynamics of abusive relationships, as well as the experiences and needs of victims and survivors.

References

Comas-Diaz, L. (2007). Ethnopolitical psychology: Healing and transformation. In *Advancing Social Justice Through Clinical Practice* (E. Aldarondo, Ed.). New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Gillum, T.L, Sullivan, C.M. & Bybee, D.L. (2006). The importance of spirituality in the lives of domestic violence survivors. *Violence Against Women, 12* (3), 240-250.

Herman, J.L. (1997). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence from domestic abuse to political terror*. New York: Basic Books.

Herman, J.L. (2009). Forward to *Treating Complex Traumatic Stress Disorders*. Courtois, C.A. & Ford, J.D., eds. New York: The Guilford Press.

Michalsen, N., Women In Safe Homes, Ketchikan, AK. Personal interview with Debi Edmund, May 2007.