

Guidelines for Spiritually Abused Persons

Spiritual abuse may be defined as injury to or mistreatment of the soul, of the deepest and most intimate aspects of a person's being.

Spiritual abuse often results when a human being sets himself or herself up as a kind of selfish "god" in another person's life, treating that person as an object that must be manipulated to serve the "god's" needs, agendas, and goals.

Deception lies at the heart of spiritual abuse. Therefore, spiritually abused individuals often do not identify themselves as such. Instead, they tend to blame themselves. They may, for example, view themselves as failures or "abandoned by God."

Sometimes spiritual abuse may be traumatic in intensity or of such long duration as to be traumatic in effect, even if the intensity of any one experience was not itself traumatic. Those whose abuse reaches the level of trauma may resort to denial, suppression, dissociation, or compartmentalization to manage the emotions associated with the traumatic experience.

Therefore, it is normal for the spiritually abused to feel betrayed and to demonstrate ambivalence, fear, volatile emotions, and distrust toward others. Those who have been burnt in the name of love are, understandably, hesitant about reaching out or responding to those who offer help or support.

Yet, because they typically come out of environments that indoctrinated them to feel sinful, incompetent, or otherwise deficient, spiritually abused persons may defer too readily to those who have authority or expertise (e.g., pastors, psychotherapists). Sometimes, abused persons' fear of trusting can flip into an indiscriminating trust when loneliness or isolation becomes unbearable. The bad judgments that may result can lead to more painful experiences and a further undermining of self-trust. This tendency may be exacerbated by helpers whose own psychological needs may lead them into inappropriate relationships with spiritually abused persons.

Thus, the first challenge for victims of spiritual abuse is to learn how to trust. One dictionary definition of trust is "assured reliance on the character, ability, strength, or truth of someone or something." Trust, then, implies having confidence in the good intentions and capabilities of another person – or of oneself.

If one does not trust oneself, one can't truly trust others. One can be dependent on others, but that is not the same as trust. As the dictionary definition makes clear, trust involves a judgment about a person. However, to make such judgments, one must first trust the person making the judgment, namely, oneself.

The experience of spiritually abused persons has undermined their self-trust. To regain enough self-trust to begin to consider trusting others often requires education, an understanding of the process through which self-trust was undermined and dependency induced. Spiritual Abuse Resources (SAR; spiritualabuseresources.com) provides much useful information. Workshops, conferences, special events, and local meetings provide opportunities to interact with and learn from people who understand the special challenges of the spiritually abused (see icsahome.com/events).

When trusting others results in positive experiences, one's self-trust increases, for one's judgment has been validated. A self-feeding loop is thus created in which self-trust and trust of others reinforce and strengthen each other. But for this feedback loop to work, one must know or learn how to make sound judgments about the trustworthiness of other people.

Spiritually abuse individuals must deal with three aspects of trust:

1. Determining who is trustworthy and who is not.
2. Learning how to safely open up to those who are trustworthy.
3. Learning how to assertively set limits on others, particularly those who may not be trustworthy.

Who Is Trustworthy?

The first point to keep in mind is that the black-and-white nature of this question (trustworthy vs. non-trustworthy) is a simplification. In practice, trustworthiness exists on a continuum from extremely trustworthy to not at all trustworthy. Moreover, a person may be trustworthy on one dimension, but not on another. For example, you may have a friend who is very competent in managing the practicalities of life (e.g., finding an apartment, understanding government bureaucracies), but not very sympathetic toward emotional problems. Hence, you may trust this person to advise you on finding a job or getting social assistance; but you may not be comfortable talking with him about deep feelings of depression that sometimes overwhelm you.

Principle 1: Each dimension of trustworthiness exists on a continuum.

Principle 2: Don't expect everybody to be trustworthy on all dimensions.

Finding trustworthy persons is important because spiritually abused persons usually need other people when they leave an abusive situation. Among the most prominent and common needs are

- **People to talk with.** Those who have been injured in their souls often need to vent. They need to talk about betrayal, exploitation, injustice, anger, fear, depression. They may need advice and help. But often what they first need is a sympathetic, non-judgmental ear.
- **Companionship.** Abused persons also need to simply relax and enjoy the company of others. ICSA (International Cultic Studies Association), of which SAR is a program, has run workshops and conferences for former members of cultic groups for more than 20 years. A vital part of these events is the socializing and fun that occurs during meals and in the evening, when participants let go of heavy talk and have fun with others who understand the special situation of the spiritually abused.
- **Information.** Frequently, people who were abused need to understand how something or someone who at first seemed so wonderful turned out to be so horrible. They need to understand how to respond constructively to the painful memories that seemingly innocuous experiences can trigger. They may also need information about practical concerns, such as getting housing assistance.
- **Hope.** Abusers gain power over their victims by making them feel dependent and inadequate. An ethical psychotherapist tries to help clients get to a point where they no longer need the therapist's help. A manipulative abuser, in contrast, tries to induce a permanent dependency, often in the name of love. Abusers claim to define the identity of those they seek to control. When individuals leave abusive situations, their self-confidence is often at rock bottom. They need hope that they can make their futures much better than their present; that they, rather than someone else, can answer the question, "Who am I?" Family and friends can be vital in building hope. Ethical, competent counsellors can also be extremely useful.

How Do You Know How Trustworthy a Person Is on a Given Dimension?

People who have a mature understanding of human nature realize that trust needs to be earned. Hence, these people don't take offense if somebody new to them or somebody who has been hurt emotionally is a bit standoffish.

Principle 3: People who lack the maturity that is part of trustworthiness tend not to respect boundaries and may take offense or resort to guilt trips if a person wants some space. Thus, when somebody tells you that you ought to trust (implying that there is something wrong with you if you don't), be wary. Trustworthy people will let you have your space, will respect your need to hold back, and will not take offense at your hesitancy.

Most people are generally trustworthy. But many are not. Mature, confident persons greet new people with a modest level of qualified trust, which implicitly says, "You're probably trustworthy, so I'll be respectful and open to a degree; but until I get to know you better, until I have more opportunity to assess your actions as well as your words, I'll wait and see before I move to the next level of trust."

Principle 4: Trust is assessed through the observation of actions over time. Trustworthy people realize this and do not take offense if you respectfully keep a bit of emotional distance.

Because evaluating a person's trustworthiness takes time, it is easiest to assess the trustworthiness of people you have known a long time: family and friends. Keep Principle 2 in mind, however. If you have come out of an abusive situation and have needs as described above, you may have to turn to different friends and family members for different kinds of support. One person might be a patient listener when you need to vent. Another one might help you collect and analyse information. Still another might have an infectious optimism that strengthens your hope.

Abusers often try to turn their victims into people they are not, twisting and distorting their identities in the process. Don't try to transform your friends and families. Accept with gratitude whatever kindnesses their personalities may enable them to give. You have left the abusive situation, and you no longer need to be dependent upon one person. If you have friends and family who care about you, be thankful that you do not have to rely only on one person.

Unfortunately, not everybody has friends and families to turn to. Some come from families that were indeed seriously dysfunctional. Others have burnt so many bridges that re-establishing old relationships is a major challenge. Those who were born or raised in abusive environments frequently leave family and friends behind when they depart to make a better life for themselves, so they have nobody in the outside world. Since isolation can be psychologically debilitating, these persons, when they exit abusive situations, need to turn to strangers for support.

That is one reason ICSA conducts workshops, conferences, and special events ([icsahome.com/ events](http://icsahome.com/events)). It is also why ICSA founded SAR and the Spiritual Safe Haven Network (SSHN; spiritualabuseresources.com/sshn).

SSHN is premised on the observation that a large percentage of spiritually abused persons will turn to churches, synagogues, or other religious institutions for support. Unfortunately, one research study found that the quality of support in these institutions left much to be desired. SSHN offers education to religious organizations to help them do a better job of being safe havens for the spiritually abused.

When approaching religious organizations, spiritual-abuse victims should show a cautious openness, even with organizations that may participate in the safe-haven project. Keep in mind the principles listed above. Review the articles and links on spiritualabuseresources.com

Opening Up and Assertively Setting Limits

Whether your challenge is to open up or to set limits, you must communicate with people.

The fundamental principal of human communication is...

The message intended is not necessarily the message received.

An intended message can become distorted when

- The sender does not accurately articulate what he wants to say. (“That isn’t what I meant to say.”)
- The recipient has certain expectations or prejudices that predispose her to hear only those portions of a message that are expected or anticipated (“She only

hears what she wants to hear.”)

- The recipient does not interpret the message’s words in the same way as the sender. “So, you’re saying X.” “No, I’m not!”)

Principle 1: When there is conflict in a communication, consider carefully the possibility that the communicating parties may not be receiving the messages that are intended.

Principle 2: Treat your interpretations of messages sent to you as hypotheses, not facts. Find out if your interpretation corresponds to the intent of the message by paraphrasing the message or asking for clarification or confirmation (e.g., “Am I correct in thinking that you are saying xxx?”).

Principle 3: It is easier to open up to somebody you understand than to somebody you don’t understand. Therefore, try to understand what others are intending to say. And don’t be afraid or embarrassed to ask others to paraphrase what you say to make sure that they understand what you intended to say.

When two people can communicate effectively, they can discover how much they have in common and how much they differ. Their relationship is thus based on reality, rather than on ideas that may distort the reality.

Principle 4: Build relationships on what you have in common, and accept your differences. And remember that everybody differs in some way.

Everybody maintains a defensive wall around themselves. This is because everybody can be hurt. For some, the wall is high and thick; for others, it is low and thin. Ironically, the former often have only one wall, whereas the latter have multiple walls, each forming a kind of ring around the inner- most self. The one-wall person has two levels of trust: Another person is either “out” or “in,” not trustworthy or trustworthy. Individuals with smaller, but numerous concentric walls, in contrast, have many levels of trust. They use concentric walls to control how close others may come. Such persons clearly distinguish, for example, between casual contact, friendliness, friendship, close friendship, and intimacy. People must gradually EARN their way to such a person’s inner self.

Spiritual abusers can skilfully get through individuals’ defences and create a fake

intimacy with their victims, an intimacy that relies on exclusivity and isolation, not genuine understanding. Only the abuser and those whom the abuser approves are deemed trustworthy; people outside that circle are untrustworthy. Thus, spiritual abusers manipulate people into seeing the world as black and white with no shades of grey.

When abused persons realize what has happened to them, they tend to feel betrayed. When they leave the abusive situation, it is natural for them to build a high, thick wall around themselves.

If abused persons understand how they were manipulated and exploited (see the point above about gaining self-trust through education), they will realize that they need to differentiate their self-boundaries—that is, to have many levels of trust: for example, “intimate, close friend, friend, friendly, casual.” Having such self-differentiation implies two additional principals.

Principle 5: Let other people get close to you by demonstrating their trustworthiness through a series of gradual steps.

Principle 6: Be wary of people who try to get too close too soon. Mature individuals understand and respect the concept of personal boundaries; they do not expect to become “good friends” quickly.

How can one deal with people who are untrustworthy or try to become too close too soon? Assert yourself!

Self-assertion is NOT aggression or belligerence. Self-assertion is NOT domination of another person.

Self-assertion IS the affirmation of oneself. Self-assertion is the honest expression of what one believes or feels, done in a way that respects the other person’s right to agree or disagree, accept or reject.

Self-assertion does NOT require that one justify one’s actions, merely that one expresses one’s choice.

Manipulators always have hope so long as they can keep a conversation going. Practice with tele- marketers. If you answer their questions (“Don’t you want to save

money?”), you’ll find that they are encouraged to continue asking questions designed to get you to say what they want you to say (usually some form of “I’ll buy it!”). However, next time a telemarketer calls, say simply, “I’m not interested.” When she comes back with something such as “Do you want to spend money that you don’t have to?,” say once again, “I’m not interested.” Continue saying “I’m not interested,” and within a few sentences, the telemarketer will hang up (if not, you can hang up). You don’t have to be rude, belligerent, or aggressive. Merely calmly state and restate your position – namely, that you’re not interested, without feeling obligated to justify your choice. By refusing to engage in a conversation, you deny manipulators angles that they can exploit to move you in the direction that serves their needs and goals, rather than yours.

Principal 7: You do not have to justify your choices, especially to people who do not seem trustworthy!

There are many books that can help you learn how to be assertive and how to recognize manipulative messages. However, two popular ones are

- Cialdini, Robert. Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion.
- Alberti, Robert, & Emmons, Michael. Your Perfect Right: Assertiveness and Equality in Your Life and Relationships.

If you have been spiritually abused, these books will give you conceptual tools that will help you defend yourself against manipulators.

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SSHN seeks to help churches and other organizations be safe havens for the spiritually abused. However, even people with the best of intentions can sometimes have personal issues that cause them to behave inappropriately. SSHN offers education to organizations to improve their members’ capacity to help spiritual-abuse victims heal.

No environment will ever be 100% safe for those who have been spiritually abused. Therefore, if you were abused, we hope that these guidelines help you deal with the problems that some people present to you. Then you can benefit from the opportunities and gifts that others offer to you.

About the Author

Michael D. Langone, PhD, received a doctorate in Counselling Psychology from the University of California, Santa Barbara in 1979. Since 1981 he has been Executive Director of International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA), a tax-exempt research and educational organization concerned about psychological manipulation and cultic groups. Dr. Langone has been consulted by several hundred former cult members and/or their families. He was the editor of *Recovery from Cults: Help for Victims of Psychological and Spiritual Abuse* (an alternate of the Behavioral Science Book Service). He is co-author of *Cults: What Parents Should Know*, and *Satanism and Occult-Related Violence: What You Should Know*. Currently, Dr. Langone is ICSA Today's Editor-in-Chief. He has authored numerous articles in professional journals and books and has spoken widely to dozens of lay and professional groups.