

# Religious Trauma

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Religious trauma occurs when one's religious experience is stressful, horrifying, degrading, dangerous, abusive, manipulative, or damaging. Traumatic religious experiences may harm or threaten to harm a person's physical, emotional, mental, sexual, or spiritual health and safety.

Often, religious trauma is experienced in a multi-step process:

**A person experiences a trauma:** The trauma may be directly related to religion, such as sexual assault by a religious leader, or it may be indirectly related or unrelated, such as a divorce in the family.

**The trauma has religious implications:** The effects of the trauma are processed through the lens of a person's religion. A person who's going through a divorce may feel pressure from their faith community to work harder, make unwise compromises, or even tolerate abuse to keep the marriage from dissolving. They may be told that their standing in the faith community or their relationship with their god is at stake.

**The response of the religious community may retraumatize:** Religious leaders may ignore or outright deny reports of physical, sexual, emotional, or spiritual abuse. The religious community may ostracize the victim of the trauma, claiming it was somehow deserved, decreed by their god as necessary, or not that bad in the grand scheme of things. The victim of the trauma may avoid sharing their experience out

of fear of what it would mean for their place in the faith community.

Many forms of religious trauma are not associated with specific events, but are instead an accumulation of a series of harmful messages enforced by the community over a long period of time. Many LGBTQIA+ individuals, for example, grow up in conservative religious communities that believe their identity is sinful or evil. The trauma may not be a single event, but instead the lifelong message that who you are somehow puts your relationship with your god, your family, and your community at risk.

Religious trauma may also occur when a person decides to leave their harmful or abusive religious community. Although leaving can be a healthy choice, it may be disorienting for people whose lives have been tightly controlled by a certain set of beliefs, rules, understandings, and expectations.

Leaving an unhealthy religious community may result in strained, damaged, or even broken relationships with friends, family members, parents, children, or partners. Sacrificing an entire worldview, community, and support system can be an incredibly difficult step on the road to healing that may result in trauma of its own.

### **What Is Religious Trauma Syndrome (RTS)?**

Although not yet added to the DSM, religious trauma syndrome (RTS) is a term gaining traction with therapists and mental health experts to describe the negative mental health effects of unhealthy or harmful religious experiences.

### **Have You Experienced Religious Trauma?**

1. Has someone ever used or attempted to use your religious beliefs

or practices to manipulate you into certain actions?

2. Are you free to practice your faith at home?
3. Has a parent or partner ever tried to force their religion on you?
4. Have your religious leaders ever tried to justify domestic violence or protect known abusers?
5. Has your boss ever limited your ability to work or opportunity for promotion based on your expressed belief in or disavowal of a certain faith?
6. Have your religious leaders ever recommended you stay in an abusive or harmful situation in order to grow closer to your god?
7. Do you have freedom of choice regarding how you live your life, raise your children, interact with your partner or spouse, etc., or are those decisions made for you by your religious leaders?

## **10 Symptoms of Religious Trauma**

The effects of religious trauma are real and can be life-altering and long-lasting. Common signs and symptoms of religious trauma include:

Self-hatred

Shame

Perfectionism

Hypervigilance

Difficulty with making decisions

Loss of community

Lack of boundaries

Delayed social milestones

Sexual dysfunction

### **Tips for Recovery**

Some mental health remedies rely more heavily on individual practice, rituals, and reflection than others. Such methods can help people who are or were religious heal in ways that are familiar to them. Common mental health practices that may be comforting or accessible to people of a more spiritual mindset include:

Mindfulness

Meditation

Self-care

Journaling