

What is Spiritual Abuse?

Spiritual abuse is not a category of abuse recognised in statutory guidance but can be an aggravating factor in bullying, controlling behaviour or any other kind of abuse.

Spiritual abuse is coercion and control of one individual by another in a spiritual context. The target experiences spiritual abuse as a deeply emotional personal attack.

(Oakley and Kinmond, 2013)

This abuse may include

- the misuse of Scripture, the authority of leadership or penitential discipline, with a requirement to be obedient to the abuser
- enforced accountability and pressure to conform
- requirements for secrecy and silence, with isolation from others external to the abuse context
- oppressive teaching
- censorship of decision making
- intrusive or forced healing and deliverance ministries or rituals (“exorcism”)
- the denial of the right to faith or the opportunity to grow in the knowledge and love of God
- radicalization (for further guidance here see [Government Prevent material](#)).

For example, bullying or abuse might be justified by threatening dire consequences or the wrath of God if the abuser is disobeyed or resisted. The abuser may use their religious authority to cloak their behaviour with respectability or to say that God has revealed certain things to them and so they know what is right. Abusers in this context may even be convinced by their own justifications.

It is important to note that as an aggravating factor, a spiritual or religious context can make abuse harder to resist or report. It can significantly increase the damage to a person’s personal confidence and sense of self, and consequently harm their spiritual development.

Encouraging a Nurturing Environment

Robust systems of accountability within a clear – and clearly communicated – safeguarding policy are the best defence against misconduct. (For further guidance see <https://www.rochester.anglican.org/safeguarding/for-parishes/> .)

Encourage collaborative and mutual accountability amongst our diversity of leadership, ensuring all lines of authority are transparent and public.

Avoid any congregations creating their own ‘bubble’ and encourage cross boundary working with other congregations, benefices and communities and the Diocese.

Encourage people to tell their own stories and find their own meaning, valuing and learning from what is shared.

Recommended reading; *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse* by Dr Lisa Oakley & Justin Humphreys

978 0 281 08131 8 £10.99

For more information see

<https://www.churchofengland.org/safeguarding/promoting-safer-church-safeguarding>