

## Understanding Religious or Faith-Based Distress and Wounding

Including impacts on identity, relationships, values, and sexuality

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### What is Religious or Faith-Based Distress?

Religious or faith-based distress may occur when messages or experiences within a religious or spiritual setting create fear, shame, guilt, or confusion. It may affect beliefs, identity, relationships, values, or sexuality. Everyone's experience is different, and you are not alone if this is your experience.

Some people may experience significant emotional or psychological responses that resemble what is sometimes called "trauma" in clinical or diagnostic contexts. This language helps explain how intense or prolonged experiences can affect thoughts, emotions, the nervous system, and relationships. It does not mean you are broken or damaged.

### Common experiences may include:

- Guilt or shame
  - Fear of rejection
  - Anxiety or low mood
  - Difficulty trusting yourself or others
  - Feeling conflicted about personal values, sexual expression or identity
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### How Religious or Faith-Based Distress Can Affect Identity and Relationships

Experiences of religious or faith-based distress can influence many areas of life. Not everyone will experience all the following, and these impacts may shift or change over time:

- Beliefs about worth, goodness, or belonging
- Identity development and self-expression
- Trust, boundaries, and emotional or intimate relationships
- Patterns of anxiety, avoidance, or self-criticism
- Comfort with the body, intimacy, or sexuality

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### Healing and Support Options

Support can be entirely secular, spiritual, or a combination, depending on your preferences. Trauma-informed approaches focus on psychological well-being, safety, and personal growth rather than judging beliefs or encouraging belief change.

#### Evidence-based approaches may include:

- **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT):** Supports identifying and gently reframing unhelpful beliefs, managing difficult emotions, and developing practical coping strategies.
- **Narrative Therapy:** Helps separate identity from harmful messages, reclaim your personal story, and make meaning of lived experiences.
- **Trauma-informed and trauma-focused therapies:** Offer structured, safe ways to process distressing experiences and reduce their emotional impact at your pace.
- **Parts-based approaches (e.g., Internal Family Systems):** Explore different aspects of yourself shaped by past experiences and support integration with compassion and curiosity.

Healing is collaborative and paced by you. You decide what feels safe to explore and when. Therapy is grounded in respect for autonomy, choice, and self-compassion.

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### Practical Supportive and Trauma-Informed Strategies

- **Grounding:** Gently slow your breathing or orient to your surroundings to support regulation when feeling overwhelmed.
- **Journaling:** Writing thoughts or memories can help reflect on feelings in a contained and safe way.
- **Boundaries:** Limiting discussions, media, or environments that trigger shame or fear can support emotional safety.
- **Self-Compassion:** Practice speaking to yourself with the same kindness and understanding you would offer a trusted friend.
- **Professional Support:** A trauma-informed therapist can support healing while honouring your pace, values, and choices.

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### Resources

*The following resources are offered for information and support. They are intended to provide guidance and options for exploration, but you are the expert in your own healing. Please use what feels safe, helpful, and appropriate for you, and remember that support from a qualified therapist can help you navigate these experiences at your own pace.*

- **When Religion Hurts You: Healing from Religious Trauma and the Impact of High-Control Religion** by Dr. Laura Anderson: A comprehensive, compassionate guide for understanding the mental/emotional toll of spiritual abuse and finding a path to healing.
- **Leaving the Fold: A Guide for Former Fundamentalists and Others Leaving Their Religion** by Dr. Marlene Winell: Offers practical, gentle steps for recovering from high-control religious environments.
- **Shameless: A Case for Not Feeling Bad About Feeling Good (Sex, Pleasure, and Body Culture)** by Nadia Bolz-Weber: Focuses on healing from the damage of purity culture and regaining body autonomy.
- **Holy Hurt: Understanding Spiritual Trauma and the Process of Healing** by Hillary L. McBride: Provides evidence-based healing strategies rooted in clinical research, with practical exercises at the end of each chapter.
- **Recovering From Religion** – <https://www.recoveringfromreligion.org/>: An international non-profit offering support, resources, and community to individuals leaving religion, questioning their faith, or experiencing trauma from religious experiences. Offers free, confidential services including a hotline, online chat, and local support groups.

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### Remember

Your experiences are valid. You are not broken. Healing does not require rejecting or adopting any belief system. Support is about helping you live in alignment with your values, well-being, and sense of self.

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