



Childhood Sexual Abuse and Adult Relationships: Spiritual Struggles and the Acceptance of God's Love

Deanna B. Eddy, MS, LMHC-S, LPC

Department of Counseling Supervision
and Family Studies, Liberty University





Childhood Sexual Abuse (CSA) Defined

- Any sexual act that is forced and forbad by law to a person under the age of 18
- The act is not consensual due to the person's cognitive developmental stage
- One in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys will experience a form of sexual abuse during the first 18 years of life
- 91 % of these victims are familiar with their perpetrator
- In the United States alone there are approximately 42 million adults who have experienced a CSA encounter.

The Cost of CSA

- Relational instability and disordered behaviors
- Females who experienced CSA are twice as likely to be diagnosed with depression and three times as likely to have a psychiatric disorder and substance abuse compared to females with no history of CSA.
- Males who experienced CSA are almost three times as likely to suffer from substance abuse than those who had no history of CSA.
- Economic loss due to CSA has reached over 9 billion dollars





CSA and Relational Issues

- CSA robs victims of meaningful relationships and healthy attachments
- Trusted adults did not protect and caused harm
- Friendships are difficult to maintain
- Innate attachment needs go unmet

McDonald et al., 2013; Neilson et al., 2018; Walker et al., 2011

CSA, Religion, and Spirituality

- Distorted trust skews perception of God
- Spiritual connection is uncomfortable but desired
- Religious affiliations are intimidating
- Shame of CSA separates the victim from God and His church
- Relationships are fear-provoking
- Touch can be triggering

Koenig, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2017; Sansone et al., 2012; Song et al., 2016; Vaillencourt-Morel et al., 2019



A portrait of a woman with dark, curly hair pulled back, smiling gently. She is wearing a dark top. The background is a soft, out-of-focus teal color. The portrait is partially framed by a white curved border on the right side.

CSA, Religion, and Spirituality

- A strong relationship with God safeguards from depression and anxiety
- Positive emotions and healthy coping is increased by a close relationship with God
- Bonds with others are improved with spirituality
- Faith-based activities are shown to decrease depression and anger
- Trusting God contributes to feelings of hope and acceptance
- Self-confidence is increased with practiced spirituality

The background of the slide is a blurred photograph of a church interior. In the foreground, a person's hand is raised, palm facing forward, in a gesture of praise or prayer. The hand is dark-skinned. In the background, there is a large, colorful stained glass window with various shades of blue, green, and red. To the left of the window, there is a screen displaying a blue image with white text. The overall atmosphere is warm and spiritual.

CSA, Religion, and Spirituality

- Religious community involvement promotes healthy behaviors and decreases risky behaviors
- Church has shown to decrease substance abuse and promiscuity
- Overall health improves with involvement in faith-based communities

God and His Wounded Child

- A relationship with God increases marital satisfaction as well as any committed relationship
- With God, forgiveness comes more readily
- Religious community benefits relationship success
- Spirituality improves intimacy in couples
- With a strong faith, the non-CSA partner has a better ability to understand and find acceptance of partner's abuse
- The faithful couple can have meaningful engagement.



References

- Cashwell, C. S., & Young, J. S. (2020). Integrating spirituality and religion into counseling: A guide to competent practice (3rd ed.). American Counseling Association.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020). Preventing child sexual abuse.
<http://cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childabuseandneglect/childsexualabuse/html>
- Darkness to Light (2015). Child sexual abuse statistics. <https://www.d2l.org/child-sexual-abuse/statistic>
- David, P., & Stafford, L. (2015). A relational approach to religion and spirituality in marriage: The role of couples' religious communication in marital satisfaction. *Journal of Family Issues*, 36(2), 232-249. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X13485922>
- Hovens, Jacqueline G. F. M, Giltay, E. J., Spinhoven, P., van Hemert, A. M., & Penninx, B. W. (2015). Impact of childhood life events and childhood trauma on the onset and recurrence of depressive and anxiety disorders. *The Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*, 76(7), 931-938. <https://doi.org/10.4088/JCP.14m09135>
- King James Bible. (2017). King James Bible Online. <https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/> (Original work published in 1769).
- Koenig, H. (2018). *Religion and mental health: Research and clinical applications*. Academic Press.
- McDonald, S., & Tijerino, A. (2013). Male survivors of sexual abuse and assault: Their experiences. *Canada Department of Justice*.
<http://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/cj-jp/victim>
- Nielsen, B. F. R., Wind, G., Tjørnhøj-Thomsen, T., & Martinsen, B. (2018). A scoping review of challenges in adult intimate relationships after childhood sexual abuse. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 27(6), 718-728. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10538712.2018.1491915>
- Nguyen, T. P., Karney, B. R., & Bradbury, T. N. (2017). Childhood abuse and later marital outcomes: Do partner characteristics moderate the association? *Journal of Family Psychology*, 31(1), 82-92. <https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000208>

References

- Padgett, E., Mahoney, A., Pargament, K., & DeMaris, A. (2019). Marital sanctification and spiritual intimacy predicting married couples' observed intimacy skills across the transition to parenthood. *Religions*, 10(3), 177. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10030177>
- Sansone, R. A., Kelley, A. R., & Forbis, J. S. (2013). Abuse in childhood and Religious/Spiritual status in adulthood among internal medicine outpatients. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 52(4), 1085-1092. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-012-9582-0>
- Song, J., Min, J., Huh, H., & Chae, J. (2016). Types of childhood trauma and spirituality in adult patients with depressive disorders. *Comprehensive Psychiatry*, 69, 11-19. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.comppsy.2016.04.003>
- Vaillancourt-Morel, M., Vaillancourt-Morel, M., Rellini, A. H., Rellini, A. H., Godbout, N., Godbout, N., Sabourin, S., Sabourin, S., Bergeron, S., & Bergeron, S. (2019). Intimacy mediates the relation between maltreatment in childhood and sexual and relationship satisfaction in adulthood: A dyadic longitudinal analysis. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 48(3), 803-814. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-018-1309-1>
- Walker, E. C., Sheffield, R., Larson, J. H., & Holman, T. B. (2011). Contempt and defensiveness in couple relationships related to childhood sexual abuse histories for self and partner. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 37(1), 37-50. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-0606.2009.00153.x>
- Yonker, J. E., Schnabelrauch, C. A., & DeHaan, L. G. (2012). The relationship between spirituality and religiosity on psychological outcomes in adolescents and emerging adults: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Adolescence*, 35(2), 299-314. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2011.08.010>