

# WHAT IS SPIRITUAL ABUSE?

Spiritual abuse is a term used to describe any form of coercion, control, or exploitation that uses religion, faith, or spiritual beliefs to manipulate or harm individuals. It is a form of abuse and a violation of human rights.

### Key Facts

- In the paper 'Spiritual abuse in Christian faith settings: Definition, policy and practice guidance' (Oakley, 2018), spiritual abuse is defined as "...a form of emotional and psychological abuse. It is characterised by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour in a religious context. Spiritual abuse can have a deeply damaging impact on those who experience it
- Spiritual abuse may include: manipulation and exploitation, enforced accountability, censorship of decision making, requirements for secrecy and silence and coercion to conform
- It can also include control through the use of sacred texts or teaching, requirement of obedience to the abuser, the suggestion that the abuser has a 'divine' position, isolation as a means of punishment, and superiority and elitism
- Spiritual abuse can occur within religious institutions, families, communities or intimate relationships
- It is often linked to 'honour'-based abuse (HBA) when it is used to maintain family or community 'honour'
- It is not limited to a certain religion, faith or denomination. Anyone is capable of perpetrating or being subjected to spiritual abuse

## Why Does Spiritual Abuse Happen?

Spiritual abuse occurs for a range of reasons, including:

- **Power and control:** Perpetrators use religious beliefs to dominate or manipulate others
- **Cultural and religious expectations:** Strict interpretations of faith can be used to justify abuse
- **Family or community 'honour':** Controlling behaviour is often rationalised as necessary for maintaining the family's and/or community's 'honour'
- **Fear and exploitation:** Fear of supernatural consequences, divine punishment, or social exclusion can be used as a coercive tool

## What Does Spiritual Abuse Look Like?

Spiritual abuse can manifest in various ways, including:

- **Coercive control:** Restricting personal freedoms using religious or spiritual justifications
- **Forced conformity:** Pressuring individuals to follow specific beliefs or practices against their will
- **Shaming and guilt:** Using religious teachings to induce guilt, shame, or fear
- **Isolation:** Preventing someone from engaging with non-religious individuals or different viewpoints
- **Forced exorcisms and rituals:** Subjecting individuals to harmful religious ceremonies because the perpetrators feel they are possessed or evil, or need to be 'cleansed'
- **'Honour'-based abuse:** Using faith/beliefs to justify forced marriages or other forms of abuse
- **Accusations of witchcraft or black magic:** Branding individuals as witches (taking part in 'satanic' activity or using 'magic') or being possessed, leading to physical violence, ostracisation, or harmful 'cleansing' rituals
- **Ritual killings:** In extreme cases, belief in supernatural forces can lead to violence, including ritualistic harm or murder

## How is Spiritual Abuse Justified or Excused?

- **Religious Doctrine Misuse:** Selective interpretations of religious texts to justify abuse.
- **Superstition and Fear:** Misfortune, illness, or mental health struggles may be blamed on supernatural forces.
- **Community Pressure:** Individuals affected may fear ostracisation or harm if they challenge abusive spiritual practices.
- **Parental and Guardian Influence:** Some parents justify coercion or punishment as a means to discipline their children spiritually.

## Who is at Risk of Spiritual Abuse?

Anyone can be affected by spiritual abuse, but those most at risk include:

- Individuals in strict religious or spiritual communities
- Children accused of possession or witchcraft
- LGBTQ+ individuals facing conversion 'therapy'/practices or exclusion
- Those questioning or leaving their faith
- People with disabilities, particularly in cultures that associate disabilities with spiritual causes
- Affected individuals (e.g. Children/young people, people with learning disabilities, neurodivergent needs or mental health issues)

## Signs and Indicators

- Fear of divine punishment or religiously justified harm
- Pressure to conform to strict or extreme religious practices
- Physical or emotional punishment linked to spiritual beliefs
- Isolation from non-religious individuals or external influences
- Reports of exorcisms, forced fasting, or ritual 'cleansing' ceremonies
- Those affected appearing fearful or secretive about their faith experiences

## Impacts of Spiritual Abuse

- **Emotional and psychological harm:** Including but not limited to anxiety, depression, PTSD, and trauma
- **Loss of autonomy:** Difficulty making independent choices due to spiritual coercion
- **Social isolation:** Disconnection from family, friends, or wider society
- **Self esteem issues:** Internalised shame and fear of rejection
- **Physical harm:** In cases where religious teachings justify violence or forced rituals. At its most extreme this can result in death or murder

## Spiritual Abuse and the Law

While spiritual abuse is not always explicitly covered under UK law, it can be addressed through the following legislation:

- **Domestic Abuse Act 2021:** Recognises coercive control, emotional, and financial abuse, which can include spiritual abuse
- **Forced Marriage Act 2014:** This refers to section 121 of the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, which criminalised forced marriage and implemented a maximum penalty of seven years' imprisonment for forced marriage offences.
- **Children Act 1989 & 2004:** Addresses cases where children are subjected to religious abuse
- **Equality Act 2010:** Protects individuals from discrimination based on religion or belief
- **Serious Crime Act 2015:** Criminalises coercive and controlling behaviour, which can include forms of spiritual abuse

## We will end 'honour'-based abuse and harmful practices

Helpline: **0800 107 0726**

10am - 4pm, Monday to Friday



- **National Action Plan to Tackle Child Abuse Linked to Faith or Belief (CALFB):** Developed in partnership with government, faith leaders, and safeguarding bodies to prevent child abuse linked to faith or belief

## Responding to Risk of Spiritual Abuse

Where someone discloses fear, risk or threat of spiritual abuse professionals in all agencies should:

- Take the disclosure seriously and act on it
- Refer to Adult or Children's Social Care and the Police promptly
- Always follow your organisational policy and other relevant local/national policies and procedures
- Follow the ONE CHANCE RULE at all times. We believe that there might be only one chance to speak to someone who may be at risk or under threat a potential victim, and, therefore, just one chance to prevent a forced marriage
- Hold an emergency strategy/professional meeting with relevant agencies, (this should be immediately or within no less than 24 hours)

## UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES

- Let the family, community or social network know about the disclosure
- Speak to the person at risk in front of family members or within the family home
- Approach the family, any member of the community or attempt mediation
- Use members of the community to interpret
- Accidentally give out information which might jeopardise the person's safety

Caution is required about how information is shared, recorded, and safeguarded within the organisation. Information should only be shared on a need-to-know basis.

To make a professional referral to Savera UK, complete our online form: [saverauk.co.uk/get-help/referrals-for-professionals/](https://saverauk.co.uk/get-help/referrals-for-professionals/)

If you are an individual who needs help or advice, complete this form: [saverauk.co.uk/savera-uk-individual-referral-form/](https://saverauk.co.uk/savera-uk-individual-referral-form/)

**In an emergency, please call 999.**