

Training Resource

When Belief Becomes a Tool of Control: Faith, Spirituality and Domestic Abuse



1. What is spiritual or faith-related abuse?

Faith or spirituality can be a source of comfort, identity, community and strength. For many people, their beliefs are an important part of who they are and can play a positive role in coping with difficult experiences, such as domestic abuse and coercive control.

Faith or spiritual abuse happens when another person uses religion, spirituality or belief as a way to control, frighten, shame, manipulate or exploit someone. It can form part of a wider pattern of domestic abuse and coercive control.

This does not only happen within organised religion. It can occur in any setting where beliefs, spiritual ideas or practices are given authority or meaning.

This might include:

- Established religions and faith communities
- Traditional or conservative beliefs about marriage and family
- Spiritual or new age practices
- Healing, wellness or retreat communities
- Groups with beliefs around karma, energy, manifestation or spiritual awakening
- Highly personal belief systems shared within a relationship
- High-control communities, particularly where leaders or elders hold significant authority over members' relationships, behaviour, healthcare, finances or contact with the outside world.

Two or more people may freely share strong religious or spiritual values, including beliefs about marriage, sex, parenting or family life. The concern is when one or more of them uses those beliefs to remove the other person's choices, autonomy or ability to say no.

For example, someone might be told that leaving an abusive marriage is sinful, that they must obey their partner because of their faith, or that suffering is part of a spiritual journey they should accept. A person may be pressured into sexual activity, rituals, fasting, taking substances or other practices because they are told it is necessary for healing, enlightenment or spiritual growth.

Faith and spiritual abuse can also involve preventing someone from practising their own religion, forcing them to follow another belief system, or threatening spiritual consequences if they do not comply.

Domestic abuse guidance recognises that perpetrators may exploit a person's faith or belief as part of emotional, psychological, controlling or coercive behaviour.

The central question is not what someone believes, but whether those beliefs are being used to restrict their freedom, undermine their safety or control their decisions.



Case Study

Based on anonymised survivor accounts and used with consent.

Jemmy was introduced by a friend to a cacao ceremony, something completely new to her. She enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere and the people she met there, and after reading about cacao and the way it was used in these settings, she felt comfortable attending further events.

After attending several gatherings, she met Iain. They got on well and soon began a relationship. Iain had travelled extensively through Asia and South America and often spoke about his interest in spirituality, altered states of consciousness and psychedelic drugs, including ayahuasca. He believed that these substances could help people release trauma and achieve greater spiritual awareness.

Jemmy had experienced anxiety since a road traffic collision in which her younger brother had died. Iain began telling her that psychedelic drugs could help her deal with her grief and anxiety. Jemmy had never taken psychedelic drugs. She also had epilepsy, for which she took anti-seizure medication, and diabetes requiring insulin. She did not feel that taking ayahuasca was safe and repeatedly said that she did not want to do it.

As Iain became increasingly controlling, however, the pressure intensified. He told Jemmy that she was “spiritually naïve” and accused her of holding herself back because she was unwilling to “embrace her authentic self”. He mocked and humiliated her in front of other people, describing her as someone who wanted to appear spiritual without being prepared to do the work. Most painfully, he began using the death of her brother against her. He told her that she was wasting the experience of losing him and should use her grief as a pathway to spiritual awakening.

Over time, Jemmy became worn down by the criticism, humiliation and constant questioning of her judgement. Eventually, she agreed to attend a small ayahuasca ceremony in the UK. Ayahuasca may contain controlled substances, including DMT, which is classified as a Class A drug in the UK. Jemmy’s epilepsy, diabetes and prescribed medication should also have raised serious concerns about her safety.

During the ceremony, Jemmy experienced multiple seizures. Those present were reluctant to involve the emergency services immediately because of the illegal nature of the gathering. By the time an ambulance was called, Jemmy was critically unwell. She was admitted to hospital and spent several days in intensive care. Even afterwards, Iain refused to accept responsibility for pressuring her to take the drug. Instead, he blamed Jemmy, telling her that the seizures had happened because she had resisted the experience and had not been sufficiently open to it.

For Jemmy, the near-fatal experience was a turning point. With support, she was able to recognise the pattern of coercion and safely end the relationship.

Jemmy’s story demonstrates something particularly important: the abuse is not that Iain believes in ayahuasca or spiritual awakening. It is that he systematically undermines Jemmy’s right to make decisions about her own body, health and beliefs, then uses spiritual language to justify that coercion.



2. How can spiritual or faith-related abuse manifest?

Spiritual or faith-related abuse can take many forms. It may be obvious, such as a direct threat of religious punishment, or much more subtle, developing gradually through guilt, shame, pressure or the misuse of trust and authority. It can be perpetrated by a current or former partner, family member, community leader, spiritual teacher or another person who holds influence over the victim.

Examples can include:

- Using religious teachings to demand obedience or submission, including telling someone that they must tolerate abuse because of their role as a wife, husband or partner.
- Telling someone that separation or divorce is sinful, or that leaving an abusive relationship will result in punishment, shame or rejection.
- Using marriage vows as a form of control, particularly ideas around remaining together “for better or worse”, regardless of abuse or risk.
- Presenting suffering as spiritually necessary, for example suggesting that abuse is a test, a lesson, karma or part of someone's spiritual development.
- Telling a victim that they caused or attracted the abuse, perhaps because of negative thoughts, insufficient faith, poor energy, past behaviour, a past life, or an alleged failure to “heal”.
- Using prayer, scripture, prophecy or spiritual messages to manipulate decisions, including claiming that God, spirits, guides or another higher authority has instructed the victim to behave in a particular way.
- Threatening spiritual consequences, such as damnation, curses, possession, loss of salvation, bad karma or harm to loved ones if the victim does not comply.
- Preventing someone from practising their own faith, attending services, observing religious customs or maintaining contact with their faith community.
- Forcing or pressuring someone to participate in religious, spiritual or ritual practices they do not want to take part in.
- Pressuring someone to fast, change their diet, take substances or undergo alternative treatments against their wishes or despite medical concerns.
- Using spiritual or therapeutic language to override sexual boundaries, such as claiming that sexual activity is necessary for healing, enlightenment, energy work or spiritual growth.
- Using a position of spiritual authority to obtain sex, money, labour or obedience, particularly where a person is encouraged to believe that questioning the leader demonstrates a lack of faith or spiritual maturity.
- Restricting contact with people outside a faith or belief community, or portraying family, friends and professionals as dangerous, unenlightened or hostile to the group's beliefs.
- Threatening exclusion from a community, including loss of friendships, family relationships, housing, financial support or a person's entire social network.
- Controlling money or possessions in the name of faith or spirituality, including pressuring someone to donate money, surrender earnings or financially support a leader, partner or community.
- Using faith or belief to justify monitoring, surveillance or restrictions, for example controlling clothing, friendships, employment, socialising or access to technology.



- Using spiritual explanations to discredit a victim, including portraying distress, trauma or disagreement as evidence that they are unstable, possessed, spiritually weak or being influenced by harmful forces.

Reproductive control

Faith and belief can also be used as part of reproductive abuse. There may be an overlap when a perpetrator attempts to control whether someone becomes pregnant, continues a pregnancy or uses contraception, while presenting that control as a religious or moral requirement.

This might include:

- Preventing access to contraception
- Sabotaging contraception
- Pressuring someone to become pregnant
- Preventing or obstructing access to abortion
- Pressuring someone to continue a pregnancy regardless of their wishes
- Forcing or pressuring someone to end a pregnancy
- Telling someone that making their own reproductive choices is sinful, immoral or spiritually harmful
- Using religious or community pressure to prevent someone seeking medical advice or treatment.

Again, the issue is not whether a person holds strong beliefs about contraception, pregnancy or abortion. People have the right to make decisions in accordance with their own beliefs. The concern is when one person imposes those beliefs on another through coercion, intimidation, deception, threats or control.

When authority becomes difficult to challenge

Spiritual abuse can be particularly powerful when the perpetrator is seen as having special knowledge, authority or access to a higher power. A victim may believe that challenging the person means challenging their faith itself. In high-control communities, disagreement may also risk losing friends, family, status, practical support or an entire way of life.

This can make behaviour that would appear controlling in another context much harder for the victim to identify, challenge or disclose. It is also why practitioners should avoid focusing solely on whether a particular belief or practice appears unusual.

The important question is how power is being used.

- Is the person free to disagree?
- Can they say no without fear?
- Can they leave?
- Can they make decisions about their own body, relationships, money, healthcare and beliefs?

Where the answer is no, there may be a wider pattern of coercive control that needs to be explored.



Case Study

Based on anonymised survivor accounts and used with consent.

Farouk had lived with his grandmother in London since the age of eight. At first, he was happy living with her and enjoyed going to school. As he grew into a teenager, however, his grandmother began blaming any failure or setback on “demons”. If he did not get top marks in an exam or failed to come first in a race on sports day, she became convinced that demons or devils were inside him and holding him back.

She began trying to rid him of these supposed spirits by forcing him to have ice baths. At first, Farouk did not recognise the behaviour as abuse, but it gradually escalated. His grandmother began withholding food, refusing to let him sleep in a bed and whipping his legs with a garden cane in an attempt to “purge” him.

Farouk had no close family member he felt able to trust with what was happening. He was also frightened that speaking out might result in him being removed from the home and placed somewhere worse. As his mental health deteriorated, the abuse began to affect his own understanding of what was happening. He started to wonder whether his grandmother might be right and whether he really was possessed in some way.

Finally, at seventeen, during the first year of his A-levels, Farouk broke down and told a teacher what had been happening. By this time, his legs and back were deeply scarred from the whippings.

An aunt he had met only once before came forward to foster him. In time, Farouk was able to join her lively household and live alongside cousins of a similar age.

3. What are the impacts?

The impact of spiritual or faith-related abuse can be profound because it may affect much more than a person's relationship with the perpetrator. For many people, faith, spirituality or belief is closely connected to identity, family, culture, community and their understanding of the world. When those beliefs are used against them, the abuse can affect their sense of safety, self-worth and belonging.

Possible impacts include:

- Fear, guilt and shame, particularly where the victim has been told that leaving, resisting or seeking help is sinful, selfish or spiritually wrong.
- Loss of confidence in their own judgement, especially if the perpetrator repeatedly presents themselves as more spiritually knowledgeable, enlightened or morally correct.
- Confusion about what is abuse, particularly where controlling behaviour has been framed as love, guidance, discipline, healing or religious duty.
- Fear of spiritual consequences, such as punishment from God, loss of salvation, bad karma, curses or harm to loved ones.



- Isolation from family and friends, especially where outside relationships are discouraged or where the victim fears rejection from their wider community.
- Loss of community and practical support if leaving the relationship also means losing a congregation, friendship group, housing, financial support or contact with relatives.
- Damage to a person's relationship with their own faith or spirituality. Someone may struggle to separate their own beliefs from the way those beliefs have been distorted or weaponised by the perpetrator.
- Trauma associated with religious or spiritual practices, including prayer, ceremonies, places of worship, retreats or rituals that were once meaningful or comforting.
- Increased vulnerability to further abuse, particularly where the victim has been taught not to question authority or to distrust professionals and people outside the community.
- Physical harm, where someone is pressured into fasting, restrictive diets, unsafe rituals, sexual activity, substance use or practices that conflict with medical advice.
- Restricted access to healthcare, including reproductive healthcare, mental health support, medication or other treatment.
- Financial harm, where money or possessions are controlled, surrendered or donated under pressure.
- Sexual and reproductive harm, where faith or spiritual beliefs are used to justify sexual entitlement, pregnancy, contraception or decisions about continuing or ending a pregnancy.

Why it can be difficult to leave

Spiritual or faith-related abuse can create additional barriers to leaving an abusive relationship. A victim may not simply be considering the loss of a partner. They may believe they are risking their relationship with God, their family, their community or their entire way of life. They may fear being shunned, judged or blamed. They may have been told that professionals outside the community cannot be trusted, or that seeking help will bring shame on their family or faith.

In some cases, the perpetrator may be respected within the community, making disclosure even more difficult. The victim may fear they will not be believed or that concerns will be reported back to the perpetrator.

These pressures can leave someone feeling that there is no safe option.

When faith is also a source of strength

It is equally important not to assume that a victim needs to abandon their faith or spirituality in order to recover.

For many survivors, belief remains an important source of hope, identity, comfort and resilience. A supportive faith community or trusted leader may also play a positive role in recovery.

The aim of support should therefore be to help the person regain choice and autonomy, including the freedom to decide what they believe, how they practise those beliefs and who they want to involve in their support.



Spiritual or faith-related abuse can take something deeply meaningful to a person and turn it into a mechanism of control. Recovery may therefore involve not only becoming safe from the perpetrator but also reclaiming the right to define their own beliefs, values and identity.

Case Study

Based on anonymised survivor accounts and used with consent.

Georgina was a young nanny who had lost her mother when she was a child. She lived with her father and younger sister and carried a great deal of responsibility at home, including cooking, cleaning, caring for her sister and contributing financially from her wages. Her father was closely involved with the leaders of their faith community and was very strict.

After Georgina had worked for the family for around a year, she left a beautifully handmade card inviting them to an event organised by her religious community. The invitation was politely declined. A few weeks later, she asked whether she could take the children she cared for to a family event run by the same group. Again, their parent declined.

At that point, Georgina became extremely upset. She explained that she was under considerable pressure from both her father and senior members of the community because, despite working for the family for a year, she had not persuaded them to attend any events.

It became clear that what had appeared to be friendly invitations were not entirely Georgina's own choice. She was being held responsible for bringing other people into the community and feared the consequences of failing to do so.

As the family's childcare arrangements were already due to change, the decision was made to bring those plans forward. This removed Georgina from the pressure of trying to involve the children and also protected them from being drawn into a situation their parent had not consented to. Georgina was offered support, information about local services and reassurance that she could make contact if she ever needed help. Some time later, it was learned that she had left the community and entered a relationship with someone from outside it. She had become estranged from her father.

This case illustrates how control within a faith or belief community may extend beyond religious observance itself. Georgina was carrying significant responsibilities at home while also being pressured to recruit others into the community. What initially looked like enthusiastic participation was, in reality, shaped by fear, obligation and a lack of freedom to say no.

4. How can you support someone?

Supporting someone who is experiencing spiritual or faith-related abuse requires the same core principles as any domestic abuse response: listen, believe, avoid judgement, support safety and respect the person's right to make their own decisions.



There are also some additional considerations.

Do not challenge or ridicule the person's beliefs

A victim may still value their faith or spirituality, even when it has been used against them. Avoid telling someone that their religion is oppressive, that their beliefs are irrational, or that they need to reject their faith in order to be safe. This can increase shame and isolation and may make them less likely to seek further help.

Instead, focus on the behaviour of the person causing harm.

You might say:

- “You have the right to make your own decisions.”
- “No one should use your beliefs to frighten or control you.”
- “You can hold onto your faith and still question the way someone is treating you.”

Explore whose belief it is

It can be helpful to gently explore whether the belief being described is genuinely held by the victim, or whether it has been imposed or interpreted for them by someone else.

For example:

- “Is that something you believe yourself, or something you have been told?”
- “What would happen if you disagreed?”
- “Do you feel able to make a different choice?”
- “Are you frightened about what might happen if you do not comply?”

The aim is not to debate theology or decide whether a belief is right or wrong. It is to understand whether fear, coercion or control is limiting the person's choices.

Recognise additional barriers to seeking help

Leaving or challenging an abusive person may have consequences beyond the relationship itself.

The victim may fear:

- Rejection by family or community
- Losing contact with children or relatives
- Being shunned or excluded
- Losing housing, financial support or employment
- Being blamed for bringing shame on the family or community
- Spiritual punishment or consequences
- Not being believed because the perpetrator is respected
- Being reported back to the perpetrator by someone they approach for help.

These concerns should be taken seriously as part of safety planning.



Be cautious when involving faith or community leaders

A trusted faith leader can sometimes be an important source of practical and emotional support. However, do not automatically assume that involving someone from the victim's faith or spiritual community will be helpful.

The perpetrator may be influential within that community, the leader may share or reinforce some of the beliefs being used to control the victim, or information may be passed back to the perpetrator. Ask the victim who they trust and whether they want anyone from their community involved.

Consider health and safeguarding risks

Some forms of spiritual or faith-related abuse can create immediate physical risk.

For example, a person may be pressured to:

- Stop taking prescribed medication
- Refuse medical treatment
- Fast or restrict food
- Take substances or unregulated remedies
- Participate in unsafe rituals
- Undergo physical punishment
- Engage in unwanted sexual activity
- Continue or end a pregnancy against their wishes.

Where there is a risk of serious harm, practitioners should follow their organisation's usual safeguarding and emergency procedures.

Include faith and spirituality in safety planning

If faith, spirituality or a belief community forms part of the abuse, include it in the safety plan rather than treating it as a separate issue.

Consider:

- Who within the person's community can genuinely be trusted
- Whether the perpetrator has access to community networks
- Whether attending services, ceremonies or gatherings creates additional risk
- Whether the person is being monitored through community contacts
- Whether they may lose practical support if they leave
- Whether important religious documents, clothing or possessions need to be included in an emergency plan
- Whether specialist, culturally appropriate or faith-sensitive support would be helpful.

Support autonomy

The purpose of support is not to replace one authority with another. Victims of spiritual or faith-related abuse may have spent a long time being told what they should believe, how they should behave and what choices they are allowed to make.



Wherever possible, support should help them regain control over those decisions. They may choose to remain within their faith, reconnect with it in a different way, find another community, or step away from spiritual practice altogether. That choice belongs to them.

Good practice is not about deciding whether a belief is reasonable. It is about recognising when belief has been turned into a tool of fear, coercion or control, and helping the person regain safety, choice and autonomy.

5. Questions to consider in practice

- Is this belief freely held, or being imposed?
- What happens if the person disagrees or says no?
- Is fear of spiritual, family or community consequences restricting their choices?
- Is faith or spirituality being used to justify behaviour that would otherwise clearly be recognised as controlling or abusive?

6. Resources

Home Office: Domestic Abuse Act 2021 Statutory Guidance (p.39, section 77)

Explicitly recognises that domestic abuse can occur *through an individual's faith and belief system*, including where faith or belief is exploited as part of emotional, psychological, controlling or coercive behaviour.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/62c6df068fa8f54e855dfe31/Domestic_Abuse_Act_2021_Statutory_Guidance.pdf

Crown Prosecution Service: Spiritual-related abuse guidance

The CPS expanded its guidance in February 2026 to address abuse linked to faith, belief or ritual, including coercion associated with witchcraft, possession and ritual practices. It is useful because it shows this is increasingly being recognised within criminal justice practice, not simply by specialist charities.

<https://www.cps.gov.uk/cps/news/spiritual-and-immigration-abuse-included-cps-honour-based-abuse-guidance-first-time>

Charity for Action on Spiritual Abuse

A registered UK charity specifically supporting people who have experienced abuse and trauma within faith settings and for the professionals supporting them. Lots of useful and informative information on their website.

<https://www.actiononspiritualabuse.org.uk/support-and-practical-advice>

SafeLives: Spiritual Abuse Awareness, Echo webinar

This is practitioner-friendly and specifically looks at the different forms of spiritual abuse, its impacts and how professionals can support victims and survivors.

<https://safelives.org.uk/resources-library/spiritual-abuse-awareness-echo-webinar>

