

Sexual Assault and Spirituality

We live in an imperfect world where individuals are free to make choices, both good and bad. For this reason, many of us will fall victim to violations or abuse at the hands of others who make choices that are inappropriate, illegal, or evil. Experiences that threaten our lives or sense of safety are traumatic; and trauma caused at the hands of another person is especially difficult to overcome. Sexual abuse is the most intimate of these violations, and often results in some of the most profound struggles for the survivor.



Traumatic experiences often shake the very foundation of our beliefs. These experiences challenge our beliefs about safety, fairness, and trust. Many victims experience a profound sense of betrayal, and for some this includes feelings of estrangement from, and betrayal by, God. These feelings are natural and are not an indication of your inherent righteousness or corruption. A traumatic experience wounds our very souls. Recovery takes time and must include physical, emotional, and spiritual healing.

The path to spiritual healing from sexual abuse is unique for each individual. Spiritual healing means finding meaning and peace in your life once again. It may mean finding new definitions and a new understanding of your system of beliefs. Many find that through prayerfully seeking answers to these difficult questions, seeking wisdom and spiritual peace, they discover a deeper and stronger self than they ever knew existed, and a greater capacity for love. May God grant you peace and wisdom on your journey toward recovery.

You May Find Yourself Troubled by Deep and Difficult Questions

Why would God let this happen to me?

Remember, God is never the author of evil. God would not cause nor purposefully introduce evil into your life. However, we all are granted free-agency, or freedom of choice. Just as you may choose to use that freedom in the pursuit of righteousness, others may choose to use that freedom to do evil.

Why wouldn't God save me from this awful experience?

Throughout history kind and righteous individuals have experienced tragic events. There are many things in life that may seem to indicate that life is unfair or that there is no justice or logic directing life's events. We simply do not have the ability to see the purposefulness of all things in the immediate moment. When we fixate on the unfairness of what has happened and allow ourselves to grow in bitterness and anger, we block our own ability to heal and grow. A more purposeful question for us to ask is, "How can God help me to heal, find peace, and gain wisdom from this difficult struggle?"

Why me? What did I do to deserve this?

No one deserves to be abused or raped. You did not deserve for this to happen to you. It just happened. It is not your fault. Perhaps it was simply the circumstances, your trust, or naiveté that made it convenient for the perpetrator to prey upon you. The responsibility for this abuse belongs with the abuser. You did not choose for this to happen. The choice was made by the abuser.

Am I unclean, unchaste, or have I lost my virtue?

This can be an especially difficult issue if you lost your virginity as a result of the assault. However, morality and virtue are spiritual qualities. This person may have stolen your physical virginity, but your chastity and virtue are qualities that cannot be taken from you. They are yours alone to protect or to give away. You were not in control of what happened to you. God does not blame you or view you as unclean. God loves you and grieves your pain with you.

Will I ever feel "normal" again? Will I ever be happy?

This is a natural and a common concern. Because a sexual assault is so far outside the range of what we would expect to occur in our lives, your thoughts and reactions may feel strange or even "crazy" at times. These feelings are understandable and natural. These are normal reactions to an abnormal event. All new experiences change us to some degree. This is how we learn and grow and develop wisdom in life. It is to be expected that an experience as profound as a sexual assault will bring with it change. Your views of the world, others, yourself, even spirituality may change and take on new or deeper meaning. You can, however, expect to feel peace, normalcy, and happiness again. God wants you to succeed. God wants you to share your newfound wisdom and compassion with others. God wants you to be happy.

About Forgiveness

When seeking healing we cannot overlook the issue of forgiveness. As you seek peace, the most important forgiveness is the forgiveness of self. A life characterized by guilt and regret cuts you off from healing and spiritual growth. You must forgive yourself for having been powerless, perhaps for trusting someone who did not deserve your trust, or for not having done more to prevent or stop the abuse. Compassion for your own humanity and suffering is essential.

Having said that, the issue of whether to forgive the offender is a profoundly individual question and depends a great deal on your own definitions of forgiveness. A common misconception is that forgiveness is a feeling toward the offender. Some believe that they have only forgiven when they can feel good toward and even embrace the person who violated them. In situations of abuse, embracing the perpetrator may not



only seem counterintuitive and illogical, it may in fact be dangerous.

Most victims feel anger and even rage when they remember the abuse they experienced. This emotion comes from a good place--the love and protection of oneself, as a child of God, who deserves to be treated with respect and dignity. Righteous anger can be purposeful in your recovery. Anger can motivate us to survive and overcome difficult circumstances. We must, however, beware of directing our energy toward destructive anger that fosters feelings of hatred or a desire for revenge. These feelings cannot coexist with spiritual peace and healing of your wounded soul. If we hold on to anger and hatred we block our own spiritual growth, health, and healing.

Judaism has the concept of shlemut, which means wholeness, personal integrity, and peace. Seeking

shlemut may put us on the path toward recovery and perhaps eventually what we may call forgiveness. The Greek word translated as "to forgive" means "to leave behind." This does not mean that you should forget or deny the abuse. It does not mean that you must embrace the perpetrator nor refuse to seek justice. At some point on your personal path toward spiritual healing, however, you may find that you can choose to leave the matter behind. Moving toward forgiveness in this way can open your heart and soul, and make room for love, peace, and meaning to more easily enter your life.

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 *The voice of sexual violence survivors in Texas.*

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