

Religious Trauma Signs & Symptoms

Religious trauma is often expressed through shame, rigid thinking, fear, suppression, and relationship dysfunction. Keep in mind that not every religious trauma survivor experiences all of these symptoms.

Shame

Self Criticism: Harsh self-talk, low self-compassion, perfectionism, overworking, inability to accept help or compassion from others.

Self Neglect: Poor self-care, poor boundaries, unaddressed physical and mental health issues, (in extreme cases) self-harm.

Learned Helplessness: Lack of agency, feelings of powerlessness, low motivation, premature sense of defeat, self-doubt.

Low Self-Trust: Low confidence in one's own judgment, desires, feelings, and needs, reliance on external advice or instruction.

Purity Culture Shame: Excessive guilt and shame about sex and sexuality, stunted sexual development, stigmatizing of healthy sexual expression.

High-control groups hold their members to high standards, often placing unrealistic responsibilities on them. This causes many survivors to feel ashamed and inadequate as they constantly try to prove they're "good enough". Shame often creates patterns of false guilt, unrealistic expectations, poor self-care, and excessive self-blame when they are unable to achieve perfection.

This religious trauma symptom is especially common in groups that teach that humans are fundamentally evil, sinful, or worthless on their own. Some groups discourage healthy self-worth by labeling it "pride" or warning their members not to indulge in sources of comfort. This can give members the impression that suffering and self-hatred are not just normal, but ideal.

Rigidity

Impaired Critical Thinking: Difficulty determining fact from opinion, dismissing nuance, difficulty compromising.

Binary Thinking: Categorizing things into extremes (good vs. bad), moralizing, and judging neutral ideas or actions as right or wrong.

False Certainty: Inflated confidence in the correctness of one's own stance, intolerance, poor listening skills, frequent confrontations, limited empathy, refusal to accept contradicting evidence.

Many religious trauma survivors struggle with inflexible thinking. This makes it hard to listen to other perspectives, be curious, or change our minds when we learn new information. Black-and-white thinking also causes us to make automatic moral judgments without paying attention to nuance.

Rigid thinking typically develops in belief systems that use inflexible and oversimplified frameworks to explain truth, morality, and goodness. In high-control groups, different beliefs and opinions are often dismissed, criticized, or mocked to discourage members from compromising.

Fear

Afterlife Anxiety: Terror of oneself or loved ones going to hell or being excluded, rapture anxiety, insecurity about salvation, and pressure to witness to or "save" non-believers from hell.

Scrupulosity (Religious OCD): Superstitions, obsessive religious thoughts, compulsive behaviors, repetitive rituals, and hyperfocus on doing what's "right".

Supernatural Anxiety: Fear and paranoia about evil spirits (demons, the devil) possessing or harming someone, fear of spiritually-induced afflictions (mental illness, physical illness), or dread of cosmic punishment.

Sexual Dysfunction: High anxiety about sex, physical pain during sexual activity, coerced sex or marriage, inability to enjoy sex, and obsessive fears about virginity, pregnancy, or modesty.

Religious Cynicism: Difficulty feeling safe in religious settings due to suspicion, distrust, and paranoia about being controlled, exploited, or manipulated by religious systems.

Most religious trauma survivors experience chronic anxiety symptoms like generalized worries, panic attacks, nightmares, intrusive thoughts, and superstitious compulsions. These symptoms usually stem from fear-inducing religious teachings that pose some kind of practical or spiritual threat (ie. exclusion from the group, hell, or spiritual warfare).

High-control religious groups often use these fear tactics to enforce control and conformity within the group and to recruit new members. Teachings about a conditional afterlife (ie. heaven and hell) can induce extreme fear about who will be rewarded or punished. Another

common source of anxiety is the concept of unseen supernatural forces that have the power to control or harm people.

Suppression

Emotional Suppression: Habitual invalidation of one's feelings, depression, emotional numbness, shame, low motivation, and dissociation (detachment or disconnection from the present).

Identity Suppression: Denial of one's natural traits/tendencies, identity confusion, low self-awareness, internalized homophobia/transphobia, anger, low motivation, self-hatred, and suicidal ideation.

Somatization: Converting emotional/mental distress into physical health problems such as chronic pain, chronic fatigue, insomnia, hypertension, gastrointestinal issues, and headaches.

Addictive Behaviors: Unhealthy stress management through unhealthy relationships with work, substances, food, sex, risk-taking, shopping, gambling, etc.

Religious trauma survivors experience a wide range of symptoms that come from long-term suppression of their natural instincts, feelings, and identities. They often have trouble identifying and understanding their own feelings and needs and don't trust their own perceptions. This can eventually turn into depression, unexplained physical symptoms, and unhealthy coping strategies.

In high-control groups, suppression is used to keep members compliant. Certain ways of expressing identity and emotion are idealized in the group while others are depicted as weak, shameful, or dangerous. When members are punished for trusting and expressing themselves, they learn to rely on the group's expectations more than their own experiences. Members whose identities don't naturally fit into the religious group's norms feel deep shame and often try to force themselves to change.

Relationship Dysfunction

Codependency: Needing a relationship and feeling needed by others, excessive inter-reliance, poor boundaries, obligation, guilt, and a sense of being trapped.

Trauma Bonding: Defending or protecting a relationship that is the source of abuse.

Social Anxiety: Fear of being scrutinized or judged by others, high sensitivity to perceived rejection, fear of being the center of attention, social avoidance, and isolation.

Authority Overreliance: Extreme submissive or people-pleasing behaviors and an excessive need for permission, instructions, or approval from authority figures.

Authority Defiance: Contempt and distrust of authority figures, paranoia about being targeted, and refusal to comply with rules regardless of consequences.

Many religious trauma survivors struggle to navigate relationships in healthy ways. They often feel an intense sense of obligation to be loyal to the group (even when they are mistreated) or find it difficult to separate their own thoughts and feelings from others in the group. These patterns extend to personal relationships as well.

Groups can ensure control over their members with authoritarian leadership that devalues personal privacy and autonomy. This normalizes dysfunctional relationship patterns and unhealthy inter-reliance within the group. Members are motivated to please authority figures and are often encouraged to police one another's behavior as well, creating a culture of conditional acceptance.

To reinforce group loyalty, members might be told that outsiders are dangerous and the group is the only place they will be safe. This creates fear and makes it hard for members to identify and trust healthy relationships if they leave the group.