

Moving Ministry Workers Through Spiritual Crises Related to Traumatic Experiences.

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Abstract

This literature review examines how trauma can lead ministry workers into a time of spiritual crisis. To preserve the faith of these ministry workers, strong community support and guidance from mentors who have experience spiritual crises are crucial through this process. Further research on trauma and spiritual crisis is needed.

Problem Statement

Ministry workers often experience trauma in their work as career missionaries, humanitarian aid workers, or urban ministry workers. Traumatic experiences often lead to not only physical and psychological symptoms, but may also implicate the spiritual well-being of the ministry worker. Trauma may propel a ministry worker into a time of spiritual crisis. It may be helpful to understand the experience of trauma on a believer's faith in the framework of a spiritual development model. In order to ensure the long-term well-being of ministry staff, missions organizations need to seek better understanding of the relationship between trauma and spiritual crisis, and the process of moving through the crisis that will lead toward an enhancement of an individual's relationship with God.

Methods

A number of psychology and theology search engines were used to identify articles included in this literature review: ATLA, SAGE, PsychInfo, Psychology/Sociology Databases, and Google Scholar. Terms used in the literature search included: ministry workers, missionaries, pastors, humanitarian aid workers, trauma, posttraumatic stress disorder, dark night of the soul, and spiritual crisis. Both empirical studies and theoretical studies were examined. Only English peer-reviewed journals from the last ten years were used. One exception was made for an article published in 1998, as it is a classic text in the field of trauma and spirituality. One book chapter was also used in addition to journal articles as it provided a unique framework of spiritual crisis.

Findings in Literature

I. Ministry workers

- Ministry workers may include career missionaries (Bagley, 2003; Irvine et al., 2006), humanitarian aid workers (Eriksson et al., 2001; Eriksson et al., 2003), and urban ministry workers (Eriksson et al., 2007).
- Career missionaries may be involved with church planting, educating, training, administration, and supporting churches, missionaries in Africa also had medical, development, lingual/translation, and relief roles (Schaefer et al., 2007).
- Humanitarian aid workers may be involved with international relief or development (Eriksson et al., 2001; Eriksson et al., 2003).
- Urban ministry workers may be involved with teaching, mentoring, spiritual care, and community development (Eriksson et al., 2007).
- Missionaries may be subject to the "healthy-warrior effect" that self selects the more healthy to go into the field and leave the less healthy behind (Schaefer et al., 2007).

- With a high sense of purpose existing along with a high level of posttraumatic stress, missionaries may accept higher levels of suffering in their commitment to the work they are doing (Schaefer et al., 2007).
- Ministry workers often have a combination of positive self accomplishment feelings and emotional exhaustion and fatigue which could lead to burnout (Eriksson et al., 2007).
- Ministry workers use faith as a resource and were motivated by faith to join the ministry they are doing (Eriksson et al., 2007).
- Ministry workers do their ministry in a place where they can be put in personal danger and experience personal suffering and pain often leading to burnout and symptoms of trauma (Eriksson et al., 2007).
- Ministry workers try to make the whole of life better through justice work, changing the whole community and empowering the residents (Eriksson et al., 2007).
- Ministry workers used positive religious coping over negative (Eriksson et al., 2007).
- Motivation, no matter where the worker lives or whether they are part of the paid staff, is highly influenced by a spirituality factor (Eriksson et al., 2007).
- Most agreed with: God shares in our suffering, we won't suffer more than we can handle, people should trust in God's control, temporary suffering may happen but will have a good eternal purpose BUT did not agree with: suffering is a result of God failing, suffering is deserved (Eriksson et al., 2007).
- Mental health medication was used by less than ten percent, and about a quarter used mental health services, most used physical health services, and just under half used spiritual support services (Eriksson et al., 2007).
- Reasons that people did not use resources was they felt it wasn't accessible, they didn't think it was acceptable, no time, like they had to take care of the problem without help, and cultural barriers (Eriksson et al., 2007).

II. Ministry Workers and Trauma

Career Missionaries

- Traumas that career missionaries may experience on the field include natural disaster, violent crime, combat or civil unrest, and life endangerment (Bagley, 2003).
- Traumas experienced by these ministry workers were categorized and included system failures, personal crisis, illness, and work stress (Irvine et al., 2006).
- A large majority (80-94%) of the missionaries was exposed to at least one traumatic event on the field and 83% reported being exposed to multiple traumatic experiences (Bagley, 2003; Irvine et al., 2006).
- Missionaries were 7.69 times more likely to experience exposure to trauma on the field than anywhere else (Bagley, 2003).
- Individuals reported an average of 4.97 trauma symptoms (Irvine et al., 2006).
- Both positive and negative permanent change was reported by ministry workers; 60.7% and 27%, respectively (Irvine et al., 2006).
- Cultural and cross-cultural adjustment includes poverty, isolation, disease and social instability, which leads to lower mental health (Schaefer et al., 2007).
- Workers have a special ability to cope because they are committed to their cause, specifically a faith commitment in missionaries, which is unique among workers (Schaefer et al., 2007).

- Traumatic experiences were positively associated with posttraumatic symptoms, resilience and depression rates (Schaefer et al., 2007).
- As the posttraumatic stress increased in intensity, resilience and ability to function decreased, while the judgment on how the severe the trauma was, and the severity of depression increased (Schaefer et al., 2007).
- Resilience was positively associated with collaborative style of religious coping, although collaborative coping was not a decreasing factor on posttraumatic stress (Schaefer et al., 2007).

Humanitarian Aid Workers

- Humanitarian aid workers may experience both direct and indirect trauma (Eriksson et al., 2001).
- Humanitarian aid workers experience stressors that may be categorized into the following: interpersonal, physical environment, organizational, community/host country, and existential (Eriksson et al., 2003).
- As a result of trauma exposure, humanitarian aid workers may experience clinically significant levels of symptoms of PTSD and moderate to severe levels of emotional distress (Eriksson et al., 2001; Eriksson et al., 2003),

Urban Ministry Workers

- 90% had experienced either indirect or direct community violence, with an average of 7 events (Eriksson et al., 2007).
- Almost 75% of the workers had been exposed to direct community violence, including threats of serious harm, being close to gunfire, and being mugged. This is experienced at a higher level by ministry workers from the same community they work in and also living within the community (Eriksson et al., 2007).
- From five urban ministry organizations, 36% of participants report clinically significant levels of PTSD (Eriksson et al., 2007).
- Ministry workers have day to day stressors, or chronic problems which are not big or obvious problems, the biggest ones are existential and between people, which correlates to international workers who have management and between missionary problems (Eriksson et al., 2007).
- PTSD, burnout and emotional distress do not vary among workers, whether they live in or out of the community, and if they are local or relocated (Eriksson et al., 2007).
- Ministry stress seems to come from the individual's ability to control their response to the challenge and stress (listed as existential) of the work, which is linked to how the organization structures the work atmosphere; with clear boundaries, emphasis on communication, on self care and on working within a team culture, stressors are reduced as the individual load is shared and recuperation time is allowed for in the culture of the organization (Eriksson et al., 2007).
- For ministry workers who relocate, the situation is often similar to cross-cultural, which makes them vulnerable to more psychological distress, possibly evoking PTSD symptoms (Eriksson et al., 2007).
- The average worker has experienced 2 adverse childhood experiences, while 22% had experienced four or more (which include various kinds of abuse and neglect, parents' marital conflict, etc.; (Eriksson et al., 2007).

- For burnout, about a quarter were at high risk for emotional exhaustion, 8% were at high risk for depersonalization, a third were at moderate risk, but most were at low risk, which shows a connection with the population being worked at (Eriksson et al., 2007).

III. Spiritual Crisis

- The period during the life of a Christian when he or she feels the particular absence of God in their lives has been described as the dark night of the soul (Coe, 2000).
- The dark nights that Christians experience are part of a greater journey of spiritual development through stages of love for God that can be explored psychologically (Coe, 2000).
- It is during these dark nights that a paradoxical working of God in our lives takes place, where God is closest to us when we feel God is most absent (Coe, 2000).

IV. Spiritual Crisis and Trauma

- Religious beliefs were often helpful to trauma victims (Falsetti et al., 2003).
- PTSD was a significant predictor for a change in religious beliefs (Falsetti et al., 2003).
- Many trauma victims reported no change in religious beliefs following first/only traumatic event (Falsetti et al., 2003).
- Traumatic events can often throw a person into a spiritual crisis or a time of spiritual development (Davidowitz-Farkas, & Hutchison-Hall, 2005; Wilson & Moran, 1998).
- The traumatized person hits a wall in their faith journey when they feel alienated from a God and set of religious practices that they can no longer understand or connect to (Wilson & Moran, 1998).
- Trauma victims often experience a spiritual crisis where there is no security in objects or clarity of faith, but only a wilderness experience that lead them to choose to turn toward or away from God (Bidwell, 2002; Falsetti et al., 2003).
- The four religious postures that are often taken toward suffering are the deterministic (God's will), didactic (God's lesson), athletic (God's test), disciplinarian (God's punishment) (Bidwell, 2002).
- Traumatic life experiences may challenge a person's faith foundation of hope and promise (Wilson & Moran, 1998).
- Faith may provide a framework that provides a sense of coherence to a trauma, leading to better adjustment after a traumatic exposure (Almedon, 2005).
- Personality and faith cannot be separated, and trauma impacts the center of human personality (Wilson & Moran, 1998).
- The concept of interbeing describe the divine and the ordinary world as existing simultaneously, suggesting that the world is not morally clear, and many factors contribute to traumatic experiences. Simple responses are not adequate (Bidwell, 2002).
- Pastoral caretakers can help trauma survivors get through spiritual crisis by affirming their pain and encouraging them to talk about their struggles within a community (Bidwell, 2002), broadening their view of the nature of God to accept that the divine cannot be fully understood or explained (Wilson & Moran, 1998), or creating a language for the traumatic experience, identify and normalize reactions while allowing room to grieve (Davidowitz-Farkas, & Hutchison-Hall, 2005).

V. Spiritual Crisis as Embedded in Spiritual Development as Framework

- Believers may enter into spiritual crisis, or the Wall, through a variety of experiences including a crisis, general spiritual boredom or a deep, unresolved sense of longing.
- This period can be perplexing, frightening or unpredictable and a person will naturally try anything to get around it often without success.
- This is a place where frustration and healing converge, the place where God works in us in a mysterious way through our fear, and the place where the healing and transformation of the soul can be experienced; the Wall is where our will meets face to face with God's will.
- Challenges differ based on the type of person facing the Wall.
 - Those of us with strong egos will try anything to scale over the wall. Our attempts are futile until we are able to replace a self-centeredness attitude for one that is God-centered.
 - On the other end of the spectrum we encounter those of us that are self-deprecating in our encounter with the Wall. Attempting to burrow below the Wall only to realize that God's foundation is too deep to be dug under, we struggle until we realize that God accepts us just as we are.
 - The guilt and shame that many of us carry can also cause us difficulties at the Wall. Facing the ghosts of our pasts and leaving our search for substitutes of God is the only way to get through the Wall from this perspective.
 - The battle of our intellectual selves at the Wall is no less difficult. In an attempt to rationalize our way through it, we find that the opposite is true. Only when we humble ourselves and accept, rather than argue, the will of God can we move forward through the Wall.
 - Our efforts to over-achieve can seem to be fruitful until we realize that no matter how hard we try, we can't overcome the Wall simply with our efforts. The key in this case is to let go.
 - The difficulty for those of us who are doctrinaires, who are well fixed into our worldview, is attempting to see things from the viewpoint of another. Letting go of what we thought we knew is the only way to see ourselves moving through the Wall on God's terms.
 - Those of us who believe to be ordained, the chosen leaders, have a hard time letting go of our spiritual pride enough to realize that we too have to go through the Wall like everybody else.
- The emotional experiences of people going through the wall can also vary greatly.
 - Some may experience the overwhelming discomfort of loneliness.
 - There is a need to experience the process of surrendering those parts dearest to us and then giving them God.
 - The recognition of our ever-present need for psychological and spiritual healing.
 - A four-stage process consisting of (1) the development of an awareness of the imperfection of our lives, (2) the forgiveness of ourselves and others, (3) the ability to accept our lives as understood by our new-found awareness, and (4) the growth of our love for others that is closer to God's overflowing love than anything we've experienced before.
 - As we move further through the Wall, we begin to experience a new closeness with God. This is accomplished in part by our willingness to let go of the human foundations on which we have previously stood. God can then begin the molding and

melting required to be transformed in our moments of solitude and reflection as we traverse the Wall.

- The process of traversing through and eventually leaving the Wall is a great paradox. While being less in control and having less clarity through this process we gain a greater feeling of confidence and humility in the recognition of God's will for our lives.

VI. The Process of Moving Through Spiritual Crisis

- The Spiritual Framework of Coping provides various spiritual factors that move an individual from a stressful experience towards well-being, including appraisals, person factors, coping behaviors, spiritual connection, and meaning-making (Gall et al., 2005).
- People who develop positive and meaningful narratives for coping with and understanding their trauma tend to have lower rates of PTSD (Peres et al., 2007).
- Intrinsic religiosity, social, and religious support are associated with less PTSD and more posttraumatic growth (Schaefer et al., 2008). This may suggest that promoting development of intrinsic religiosity and being involved in a spiritual community may assist in moving through a time of spiritual crisis.
- Time after the traumatic event should be considered as an important mitigating factor in the relationship between religiosity and posttraumatic stress or growth (Schaefer et al., 2008). Many religious people, compared to non-religious people, often experience an increase in posttraumatic stress symptoms immediately after the trauma, but a significant decrease in posttraumatic stress symptoms over time.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Research Proposal

In light of the literature review, it may be beneficial to conduct qualitative research around the subject of trauma and spiritual crisis among ministry workers. The following research questions may be examined:

1. What are different experiences that lead to spiritual crisis among ministry workers?
2. If the experience is traumatic, what are characteristics of the experience that lead to spiritual crisis?
3. Within the group of those who experience spiritual crisis related to traumatic events, what is the process of moving through?

Implications for Practice

Suggestions for Processing a Traumatic Event

- Give permission for anger and confusion
- Normalize posttraumatic reactions
- Construct a meaningful narrative around the experience
- Encourage positive spiritual appraisal
- Encourage spiritual coping behaviors such as promoting religious experiences such as prayer, meditation, and scripture reading, to engage with God
- Encourage spiritual connections with God, nature, and others
- Provide mentorship through the process, preferably by someone who has already experienced a spiritual crisis related to trauma

- Seek therapy
- Promote good self care: sleep, healthy diet, exercise
- Practice Sabbath
- Relaxation and meditation exercises
- Create space in one's schedule to process
- Avoid making big life changes immediately
- Encourage play and fun
- Allow time for healing and symptom reduction

Characteristics of a Crisis that would be Helpful to Identify Struggling Team Members

- Negative religious coping (punitive God reappraisal, self-directed coping, demonic reappraisal)
- Withdrawal from spiritual community
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Symptoms of PTSD: Re-experiencing, hyperarousal, withdrawal
- Refusal to engage in processing and meaning making
- Throwing self into work, excessive alcohol/drug use, casual sex
- Signs of burnout—lack of personal accomplishment, emotional exhaustion, depersonalization