

Exploring Women’s Spiritual Struggles and Resources to Cope with Intimate Partner Aggression

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Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. (Ephesians 5:22–24; English Standard Version, ESV)

Jesus answered “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” (Matthew 19:4–7, ESV)

Theologians and social scientists alike have expressed concerns that some Christian men lean on passages from the New Testament like those above to justify domestic violence against their wives (e.g., see Clark, Chap. 12). These verses may also be used to encourage survivors to endure spousal abuse to avoid a divorce. Yet, religion and spirituality encompass more than men or women relying on narrow interpretations of any religious tradition’s scriptures to defend violent behavior in a marriage. Rather, religion and spirituality can be part of the problem or the solution when problems arise when women date, live with, or marry abusive men. In this chapter, we illustrate the dual-edged potential for religion to trigger spiritual struggles and to offer spiritual

resources to women coping with being in an intimate relationship with a physically violent man. Our primary audience of interest includes social service providers, and mental health counselors who want to address helpful and harmful manifestations of faith when they assist women involved in ongoing romantic relationships involving situational interpersonal violence.

Drawing on theory and research about relational spirituality (Mahoney 2010, 2013) and spiritual coping (Pargament 1997, 2007), we delineate ways that spirituality may shape how women cope, for better or worse, with situational interpersonal violence, a relatively less severe form of intimate partner violence that involves physical aggression at the hands of a male partner (e.g., slapping on face, pushing, shoving) associated with situational factors. This is in contrast to more severe forms of intimate partner violence characterized by persistent behaviors of the violent partner that exert power and control over the abused partner (Peters 2008). We discuss ways a helping professional can explore with women the dilemmas they face in prioritizing their goals and deciding if they should travel down the pathway of reforming or exiting the relationship to reach the destination of zero tolerance for physical aggression. We offer two case examples to illustrate spiritual struggles and resources women may encounter along the way to transform the connection to their partner.

Before proceeding, we want to be clear that our focus on women’s spiritual coping strategies does not mean that we view women as being

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culpable for their partner's actions. Rather, we view men as being responsible for using violence in a romantic relationship, and we believe there is no justifiable reason for men resorting to any form of physical aggression toward women (or vice versa). In short, we do not view women as being at fault for men's violence nor are women responsible for stopping men's violence. Thus, we urge the women we counsel to adopt a zero tolerance policy toward experiencing any aggression in a relationship. Given our focus, we refer readers to chapters in the second part of this handbook for discussions on ways religion and spirituality may influence men's decisions to engage in violent behavior toward women within specific religious cultural groups.

We also want to be clear that we generally take the stand that women have the right and responsibility to make their own decisions about how to respond to being a target of men's misconduct. Further, we recognize that women often struggle with ambivalence about how to respond when their partner engages in aggression, particularly if it is sporadic and relatively less severe, and that women often remain in relationships where they are at risk for future or escalating maltreatment. Thus, our chapter addresses ways that mental health professionals can engage in collaborative and spiritually sensitive dialogues that empower women to protect themselves from future harm. An exception to our rule of respecting a woman's autonomy is if she appears to be at imminent risk of serious physical harm and she is unwilling or unable to protect herself. As we discuss in more detail later, to evaluate her level of safety, we ask pointed and behaviorally anchored questions about aggressive behaviors that her partner has already used and her fears about behavior he may use in the future. In situations where we believe that a woman is at risk of serious harm, and she cannot or refuses to take steps to protect herself, we contact legal authorities to help ensure her safety. Notably, our chapter does not focus on crisis intervention with women who are in imminent risk of serious violence. Further, we do not intend for mental health professionals to use our suggestions in this chapter to respond to crisis situations.

Religion/Spirituality and the Risk Versus the Reality of Women Coping with Violence

We summarize the research literature about involvement in organized religion and the risk versus reality of women experiencing physical aggression from the men they love as the basis for the chapter. It is important for counselors to clearly understand these two contrasting sets of findings.

Risks of Exposure to Intimate Partner Violence Numerous sociological studies conducted on the US population have addressed the following question: Does higher religious attendance increase or decrease women's risk of exposure to physical violence by intimate partners? The basic answer is decrease. That is, studies show that greater religious attendance lowers the risk of intimate partner violence in heterosexual dating (Halpern et al. 2001), cohabiting, (Wilcox and Wolfinger 2008) and married (Ellison et al. 2007) relationships. For example, American men and women who frequently attend religious services have been found to be about half as likely as nonattenders to be physically aggressive toward their partners, according to reports from both the offenders and victims (Ellison and Anderson 2001). This decreased risk persists after taking into account the offenders' level of integration into society, alcohol and substance abuse, and low self-esteem and depression (Ellison and Anderson 2001). Further, no ties have been scientifically verified between being a victim or perpetrator of intimate partner aggression and being affiliated with a conservative Protestant group, holding conservative views of the Bible, or having an interfaith marriage. But an important qualification applies; namely, one rigorous study has found that the odds of husbands using physical aggression against wives greatly increases if the spouses had major disagreements with each other in how to interpret the Bible (Ellison et al. 1999). Specifically, this study focused on the relatively rare number of American couples (7.5%) where marked disparities exist in spouses' biblical beliefs. The researchers found

that men with highly conservative biblical views were four times more likely in the past year to hit, shove, and/or throw things at wives who held more liberal biblical views compared to men married to women with similar biblical views. Thus, men who had biblically based conflicts with wives were more prone to being aggressive toward them. Overall, however, based on current scientific evidence, greater attendance at a place of worship by women or their partners greatly decreases the risk that women will be exposed to intimate partner violence by male partners, at least in the USA (Mahoney 2010; Mahoney et al. 2001); we could not locate parallel sociological studies on non-Western populations.

Reality of Intimate Partner Violence The finding that higher religious attendance decreases women's risk of being the target of intimate partner violence should not be confused with the answer to the following question: Does higher involvement in organized religion inhibit or escalate male violence for the subset of women romantically involved with abusive men? To our knowledge, the answer to this question is unknown. That is, no scientific studies have addressed the roles, for better or worse, that religious attendance may play within intact relationships where the man is being violent toward the woman. Nevertheless, religious leaders (and mental health professionals) are likely to encounter the reality that some women in their care are dating or living with physically aggressive men. For example, around 12–15% of female adolescents and young adults report being the target of physical aggression by a dating partner in the past year (Humphrey and White 2000; Wolfe et al. 2001), and 22% of all American women report having been physically assaulted at some point in their lives by an intimate partner (Tjaden and Thoennes 2000). Even though these percentages are reduced if either partner more often attends religious services, religious leaders should be prepared to confront the reality of intimate partner violence as some women they know will have been victimized. Ironically, women of faith may be especially reluctant to disclose that their partners have been physically aggressive to

people in their religious circles precisely because fellow parishioners who more often attend religious services are at lower risk of being victims themselves. As a result, victims may feel their experience violates the norms of their religious communities and wish to keep the aggression hidden. We hope our chapter helps our audience be willing and able to initiate nonjudgmental, compassionate dialogues with women intimately involved with aggressive men.

The Scope of This Chapter

Prior to proceeding, we want to delineate further the scope of this chapter. First, we focus on women's religious and spiritual coping with male aggression within an ongoing romantic relationship. For our purposes, a romantic relationship refers to a dating, cohabiting, or marital relationship entered into voluntarily. Although we recognize that romantically involved same-sex couples also experience domestic violence and that gay and lesbian individuals report as being about as religious as heterosexuals (Sherkat 2002), we restrict ourselves to opposite-sex relationships given the focus of this handbook. In addition, given our expertise, we focus on women who are the target of physical rather than sexual aggression. Finally, we focus on women currently involved in a relationship with a male peer of their choosing rather than women recovering from violence by an ex-partner, acquaintance, stranger, or authority figure. For readers interested in interventions to help women overcome past relational trauma, we highly recommend the exemplary work of Nichole Murray-Swank who has created and evaluated an 8-session manualized intervention, *Solace for the Soul: A Journey*, that integrates spirituality into psychotherapy interventions to help survivors recover from a history of sexual trauma (Murray-Swank and Waelde 2013). Using rigorous data analytic techniques for single-case designs, Murray-Swank demonstrates the value of addressing spiritual struggles as well as facilitating a sense of spiritual connection and well-being to facilitate women's recovery from past sexual aggression. Similar to Murray-Swank, we

take a client-centered, pluralistic, and integrative approach to working with women who hold a belief in a Divine Other/Higher Spiritual Force. However, our focus here is on dialoguing with women currently involved in a consensual relationship where the man is engaging in physical aggression toward her.

Second, a rich body of descriptive studies exists on the roles of religion and spirituality in the lives of American women who have sought services from domestic violence shelters to exit an abusive marital or cohabiting relationship (e.g., Hassouneh-Phillips 2001; Nash 2006; Schneider and Feltey 2009; Yick 2008). Notably, this research focuses on women who have experienced severe physical aggression and chose to leave their partner. We were unable to locate similar qualitative studies of women whose exposure to domestic violence is ongoing and limited to more common forms of physical assault, such as being slapped, shoved or pushed, or verbally threatened. These less severe forms of violence often precede more extreme forms of violence that are more likely to trigger a women's decision to end an abusive relationship. In this chapter, we focus on the psychospiritual dilemmas that women face in coping with these more common forms of physical aggression while dating or living with an abusive partner for three reasons: (1) Therapists are more likely to encounter these women; (2) we especially would like to encourage early intervention into the cycle of domestic violence; and (3) we assume helping professionals may be less conscious of, or more hesitant to confront, less severe forms of intimate aggression. We hope our chapter facilitates a greater awareness and willingness to confront the relatively less severe end of the continuum of domestic violence with victims in a sensitive, but direct, manner.

Third, we were unable to locate peer-reviewed, quantitative research that has systematically assessed ways that spiritual struggles or spiritual resources contribute to how women cope when their partner engages in any type of physical violence, ranging from less to more severe. Thus, we draw on descriptive findings from interviews conducted with women who have sought help at domestic violence shelters. Further, we were

unable to find controlled treatment outcome studies on the efficacy or effectiveness of addressing religious or spiritual coping when counseling women currently in a physically abusive relationship. However, we draw on rich body of basic research on religious and spiritual coping with other major stressors besides relational violence (e.g., Pargament 1997; 2011) to inform this chapter.

Fourth, to our knowledge, nearly all of the peer-reviewed community or national survey studies on faith and domestic violence in the past 30–35 years involve couples from the USA (Mahoney et al. 2001; Mahoney 2010). Thus, the statistical figures that we cite involve primarily Christians because relatively few Americans belong to other religious traditions. Here, for example, are rates of religious affiliation for women based on a 2007 US survey: 82.4% endorsed a Christian affiliation (53.8% Protestant, 25% Catholic), 12.8% reported no religious affiliation, 4.2% were affiliated with one of the many minority US religions, particularly Buddhist (0.7%) and Judaism (1.6%), and 0.7% did not know or disclose an affiliation (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2008). We hope more survey research is conducted henceforward on the role that religion and spirituality plays in the lives of women from diverse religious and ethnic subcultures. With the boundaries of our chapter now spelled out, we next describe our model to help religious leaders or pastoral and mental health counselors address women's spiritual coping with intimate partner violence, particularly when the physical aggression is relatively less severe in nature as in situational interpersonal violence or the early stages of the intimate partner violence cycle.

Overview of the Relational Spirituality Framework and Intimate Partner Violence

Introduction to the Relational Spirituality Framework Consistent with world religions having developed rituals and doctrines surrounding significant family events from birth to death (Onedera 2008), scientific studies on religion or

spirituality and family life have covered a wide range of topics on romantic relationships, such as mate selection, gender roles in heterosexual marriages, marital satisfaction, sexuality in and out of marriage, and divorce. Mahoney (2010, 2013) developed a relational spirituality framework (RSF) to organize the findings from these studies and studies on other topics located at the intersection of faith and family life (see <http://www.bgsu.edu/departments/psych/spirituality/>). In this framework, relational spirituality refers to when the search for the sacred is united with the search for relationships. Also in the RSF, the search for a relationship is divided into the stages of (1) discovery—form and structure the relationship, (2) maintenance—engage in processes to conserve the relationship, and (3) transformation—radically reform or exit the relationship. Further, spirituality is defined as the search for the sacred, a definition that encompasses the discovery, maintenance, and transformation in individuals' approach to the sacred over the life span (see Pargament 2007; Pargament and Mahoney 2009, for elaboration). In the RSF, the sacred refers not only to human perceptions of the divine, God, or transcendent reality but also to any aspect of life that takes on extraordinary character by virtue of its association with, or representation of, divinity (Pargament and Mahoney 2009; Mahoney, Pargament et al. 2013). Thus, we envision the sacred as composed of a core and a ring (Mahoney et al. 2013), such that the heart of sacred can extend outward and the sphere can encompass intimate relationships and other domains of life (e.g., career, community work, nature) perceived as possessing sacred qualities or reflective of God. The RSF also highlights that people's searches for the sacred and for intimate relationships often overlap. Further, both pursuits often occur within the context of organized religion as no other social institutions promote spirituality as a central mission (Mahoney 2010). Thus, religion is defined as the search for significance that occurs within the context of established institutions that are designed to facilitate spirituality (Pargament et al. 2013).

The RSF highlights that an important element of an individual's search for the sacred involves

developing an understanding of the divine, God, or transcendent reality, and taking a position in relation to this central element of the sacred (Mahoney 2013). For many, such a connection represents a psychologically powerful bond. For example, people speak of having formed a personal relationship with an external deity who has well-delineated characteristics; however, people also speak of experiencing profound connections to a spark of the divine within the self or to supernatural forces that permeate all of existence (Hall and Fujikawa 2013; Pargament 2007). People travel along diverse pathways to foster their felt connections to what they experience as sacred, ranging from solitary exploration to engagement in religious networks. Given that empirical studies of faith and family life rely virtually exclusively on samples drawn from monotheistic societies that comprise predominantly Christians with minorities of nonaffiliated individuals, such as Jews, Latter Day Saints, or Muslims, we hereafter use the term "God" in this chapter to refer to women's felt connection with the core of the sacred, recognizing that images of God—theistic or nontheistic, tangible or abstract, immanent or transcendent, personal or transpersonal—vary widely across individuals, communities, and cultures. With this introduction to mind, we turn our attention to dilemmas triggered by intimate partner violence.

Relational Spirituality and Key Dilemmas of Intimate Partner Aggression

Mahoney's discrimination between the three stages of relationships in the relational spirituality framework illuminates three key dilemmas that women of faith face when involved with aggressive men. First, problems can emerge within intimate unions that require a transformation of the structure and/or processes of the relationship. In our view, any male-to-female physical aggression reflects a problem that cannot be tolerated or justified on secular or theological grounds. Rather, our value-driven stance is that a woman's ultimate destination in coping with male aggression

should be that the relationship fundamentally changes. Assuming a woman agrees that radical change is imperative, she then faces dilemmas in deciding what pathway to use to reach transformation. Should she (1) pressure the man to change and thus attempt to reform the relationship, or (2) accept that the man will not change and thus exit the union? These two pathways are, of course, not mutually exclusive, and could be pursued sequentially over time to reach the final goal. Further, both routes involve empowering the woman and are incompatible with her tolerating aggression. But, as we shall illustrate, her decisions about which destinations and pathways she should choose raise profound spiritual dilemmas that can greatly complicate coping with intimate partner aggression.

Second, with regard to the stages of forming and maintaining a romantic heterosexual relationship, major religious traditions generally concur that two highly desirable goals for women to pursue in life are to (1) establish a romantic relationship that evolves into a marriage, and (2) after a marriage is formed, engage in sexual intercourse to create a permanently intact family with biological children (Onedera 2008). Women's decisions of whether to reform or exit an abusive relationship, especially if children are involved, may also be complicated by how much they internalize these two life goals.

Third, disagreements exist within and between religious groups about the spiritual acceptability of forming and maintaining sexually active, nonmarital relationships. Divisive theological conflicts over premarital sexual relationships, cohabiting unions with children, and same-sex marriage can obscure the following point of theological consensus. Namely, like many secular groups, diverse religious groups concur about the ideal virtues that people should exhibit to sustain their romantic relationships after they are formed. For example, to our knowledge, no major religious group condones sexual or physical violence by a man toward a woman as a means to maintain a marriage. Rather theologically conservative and liberal religious groups alike teach that married couples should give and receive love, sacrifice, sexual fidelity, commit-

ment, and forgiveness from each other (Onedera 2008). The degree to which women internalize the goal to fulfill such virtues when dating or living with a man may intensify their dilemmas in deciding who should be responsible for making change happen and whether to reform or exit an abusive relationship. Next, we provide an overview on spiritual coping. We then explore spiritual struggles and resources relevant to coping with a destructive relationship given the potentially sacred goals highlighted above (i.e., get married, preserve a marriage, and exhibit ideal virtues in a relationship) and the routes to follow to make change occur.

Overview of Spiritual Coping and Intimate Partner Violence

Introduction to Spiritual Coping Due to the scarcity of empirical research on specific spiritual strategies that women use to cope with intimate partner violence, our chapter draws heavily on Pargament's model of "spiritual coping" (1997, 2007). Pargament's approach builds on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) classic tripartite theory of coping consisting of a person (a) appraising the nature of a stressor, (b) engaging in cognitive or behavioral strategies to respond to the stressor, and (c) pursuing particular goals via coping. Pargament (1997) defines spiritual coping as a search for significance in times of stress in ways related to the sacred. He posits that stressors can be appraised as being spiritually threatening, that unique spiritual pathways are available to cope with stressors, and that the destinations people strive to reach when coping with stressors can be imbued with sacred significance. Pargament (1997, 2007) also emphasizes that individuals can proactively identify and pursue goals that they view as significant. For example, as mentioned earlier, women may strive toward the goals to form and maintain a lifelong healthy marriage or to transform an unhealthy marriage. Pargament also highlights that individuals travel down diverse pathways to reach their desired goals. Women, for instance, may view repeatedly granting forgiveness to an abusive partner as a

spiritually condoned means to remain married. Finally, Pargament emphasizes that spirituality can be part of the problem by triggering spiritual struggles over the ends or means that people should pursue in their life journeys, or spirituality can be part of the solution in helping people alter dysfunctional destinations and pathways. Accordingly, spirituality can undermine or enhance women's pursuit of self-protective goals and processes when coping with an aggressive intimate partner.

Two Major Types of Spiritual Coping Research on spiritual coping has rapidly grown in the past 25 years (Pargament 2011), and two broad types of spiritual coping have been identified: (1) spiritual struggles, commonly labeled as "negative religious coping," and (2) spiritual resources, commonly labeled as "positive religious coping."

Spiritual struggles in coping refer to people's efforts to conserve or transform their approach to the sacred during stressful situations (Pargament 1997, 2007). For instance, abused women may wrestle with God about whether they should try to reform a relationship with an abusive partner or exit a union they have previously viewed as sacred and worth any sacrifice. They may also feel alienated and abandoned by a religious community that ignores or fails to grasp their plight. An inability to resolve these spiritual conflicts may mire them down in turmoil and intensify their distress. Empirically, greater spiritual struggles with other life stressors, such as natural disasters or illness, predict greater psychological maladjustment and poorer medical outcomes (Ano and Vasconcelles 2005; Pargament 2011). In an initial effort to examine specific methods of spiritual coping with a romantic partner's verbal and physical aggression, the second author surveyed 289 college students at a state university involved in a dating relationship (Abadi 2013). Two distinct subtypes of spiritual struggles were identified using factor analyses. Regarding the first subtype, 42% of the students reported that they had felt punished by God due to their partner's conduct and/or had passively expected or waited for God to fix their partner's behavior. This deferring style of spiritual coping has also been identified

in research on other stressors (Pargament 2011), whereby the individual views spiritual forces as being externally oriented, punitive, and authoritarian in nature. Such perceptions appear to lower people's sense of competence and control, and thus increase their anxiety or avoidance in confronting personal problems. Indeed, in Abadi's study, the more students felt spiritually punished or passive, the more posttraumatic stress (PTSD) symptoms they also reported, even after taking into account how much they engaged in secular forms of maladaptive coping (e.g., alcohol use, denial) that might aggravate poor adjustment.

Notably, we have begun to steer clear of the term "negative religious coping" because spiritual struggles can reflect pivotal "forks in the road" in people's lives that can lead to growth or decline. Specifically, people who resolve spiritual struggles over time often report spiritual or psychological growth from working through their pain (Pargament 2011). Along these lines, 100% of the students in Abadi's (2013) study endorsed at least one item reflective of a distinct, second subtype of spiritual struggle; this form of spiritual struggle is characterized by feeling angry at or abandoned by God or their religious community when coping with their partner's aggressive behaviors. But this form of spiritual struggle was tied to greater intentions to end a hostile dating relationship. In other words, a greater sense of disappointment and betrayal by God or a religious group was correlated with plans to exit the dating relationship, which presumably would often be in a young woman's best interest rather than remaining tied to a boyfriend who used verbal bullying or lashed out physically. Although longitudinal research is needed, this finding suggests the following: Over time, women engaged in spiritual struggles marked by feelings of anger or abandonment may be forced to rework their view of God or religious network as all-powerful, impotent, or uncaring forces, and come to relate to these entities as empowering allies who support women's efforts to protect themselves from harm in relationships. This hypothesis is consistent with reports by some women at battered women's shelters who said they struggled with their religious teachings, particularly about

women's roles in marriage, but after coming to a different understanding of their faith, they felt spiritually empowered to protect themselves by exiting the union (Yick 2008). In our opinion, the term "spiritual struggles in coping" better captures the potential for faith to advance either growth or decline, whereas "negative religious coping" implies that struggles are always better to be avoided than approached.

Spiritual resources in coping refers to accessing spirituality as a resource to reach desired goals when confronting difficulties, such as working with God in a collaborative manner to take action to resolve the problem, asking for God's help to gain and give forgiveness, and seeking a closer spiritual connection with God and others. However, such efforts are not necessarily associated with more desirable outcomes for two reasons. First, at any one point in time, greater "positive religious coping" is often correlated with more, not less, psychological, spiritual, and relational distress. In short, at any one given point in time, the more people are suffering, the more they turn to spirituality to cope as means to solve the problem. For example, in Abadi's study (2013), the more students said they tried to rely on spiritual resources to cope with their partner's aggressive behaviors, the more PTSD symptoms they reported. Second, accessing spiritual resources tends to be related to better outcomes over time (Ano and Vasconcelles 2005), but not always. For example, one longitudinal study showed that turning to God to help forgive an ex-spouse after the time of a divorce was tied to more verbal aggression toward the ex-spouse a year later (Krumrei et al. 2008). Thus, we prefer "spiritual resources in coping" over "positive spiritual coping" because spiritual resources are not inevitably tied to desirable outcomes.

Here is a final note on terminology. We have shifted over time to using the term "spiritual" over "religious" when dialoguing with clients for three reasons. First, atheists and people who are not engaged in organized religion report experiencing spiritual struggles, such as feeling distant, unhappy, angry, cut off from, or abandoned by God (Exline 2013). Second, people who are not involved in organized religion still often report

turning to spiritual resources, such as a connection to a Higher Power for help during times of trouble (Pargament 2011). Third, about 15–20% of American label themselves as "spiritual but not religious," with 65% describing themselves as "spiritual and religious" and 5–10% as "religious but not spiritual" (Marler and Hadaway 2002). In our view, the term "spiritual coping" speaks to everyone who uses spiritual coping strategies, inside or outside the context of institutionalized religion.

Collaborative Dialogues about Spiritual Coping with Intimate Partner Aggression

We now turn to pragmatic suggestions and case illustrations to engage in collaborative dialogues about spiritual coping with women who are experiencing intimate partner aggression in a romantic union.

Entering the Conversation: Initial Questions on Spirituality and Physical Aggression

To broach the topics of spirituality and physical aggression, we have found that directly asking questions in a matter-of-fact, kind tone of voice works well. In our experience, using specific questions about both domains gives people encouragement and permission to reveal information often shrouded in privacy. With regard to a partner's aggressive behavior, people especially are more likely to endorse concrete questions about the partner's behavior rather than vague or general questions such as "Have you been abused or physically assaulted?" (Holtzworth-Munroe et al. 2010). Here are some specific questions that we ask to open up the topic of domestic violence and assess the severity of the aggression: Has your partner thrown something that could hurt you? Has he pushed, grabbed, or shoved you? and, Has he slapped or hit you? Going further, it is imperative to assess whether the woman is in imminent harm by asking pointed questions about more severe forms of violence including acts of coercive control, verbal threats of severe violence, severe physical violence, sexual

violence, and stalking. For detailed guidelines for assessing the risk of serious injury or death, we recommend a recent article by Holtzworth-Monroe et al. (2010); the Appendix (Table 4.1) of this chapter includes instructions about building rapport and a list of specific questions to assess the full range of domestic violence. The interview protocol by Holtzworth-Monroe et al. (2010) is available free of charge in the public domain, and was designed for mediators working with families in court-connected mediation programs. In our view, mental health professionals can also use this type of approach to consider the risks presented in the specific situation, including safety, balance of power issues, the possibility of coercion, and the professional's ethical duty not to facilitate involuntary and/or unconscionable agreements between a woman and her partner. For additional information on assessing and understanding intimate partner aggression, this US government report is a helpful resource: <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/181867.pdf> (Tjaden and Thoennes 2000). To reiterate, the rest of this chapter assumes that a woman is not in a crisis situation or in need of assistance to avoid risk of serious injury or death.

Three questions we use to become familiar with the woman's religious/spiritual identity include: How important is spirituality or religion to you? Do you attend religious services in a church or another type of religious or spiritual community? and, Are there certain spiritual or religious beliefs and practices that you find particularly helpful in dealing with difficulties? For more information on our approach to assessing and understanding relational spirituality, see <http://www.bgsu.edu/departments/psych/spirituality/>.

Understanding the Helping Role: Facilitate Insight and Action About the Relationship After sparking an initial conversation, helping professionals may have an opportunity to help a woman gain insight and take action to cope more effectively with being in a relationship with an aggressive man. Increasing insight involves exploring the woman's desired destinations and her preferred pathways to reach her goals. It also means uncovering spiritual strug-

gles that cause problems in her selected ends or means as well as identifying spiritual resources that she could access to facilitate solutions. Taking a stance of motivational interviewing (Miller and Rollnick 2002), we strive to help a client recognize the pros and cons of retaining or changing her current goals or methods of coping with her partner. In short, we see our role as helping her sort through her dilemmas so she can prioritize her goals, resolve spiritual struggles that obstruct her goals or pathways, and identify constructive spiritual resources to help her reach her desired ends.

Being Ethical: Transparency About Desired Destination and Pathways Consistent with the ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association, we are transparent with clients in abusive relationships that our top goal is for her to protect herself from further aggression by her partner, and that we see two acceptable pathways to transform the relationship so she is safe: reform the dynamics or exit the union. However, we are also quite clear that her life is her own, and we are not responsible for making her decisions for her. In our experience, being unambiguous about our position empowers, not usurps, a woman's decision making because she can more easily give informed consent to access our help or seek help elsewhere. We are also clear that we will take time to explore fully the dilemmas and obstacles she faces in making her safety her top priority. Being transparent about our agenda typically engages a woman as an informed, active agent in a collaborative process to increase her insight and action about her choices about her relationship.

In the event that we cannot forge a mutual agreement with a woman that the ultimate goal is to end the abuse by her partner (not necessarily end the relationship), we refer her to another professional. Prior to referring, we use clinical judgment and consult with colleagues to decide how confrontational to be with a woman about her decisions that place her in potential danger. Of course, as we have highlighted above, if the issues involve protecting her from imminent lethal harm (e.g., suicidal or homicidal threats or

behavior) or her children from domestic violence or child maltreatment, we contact legal authorities, per our state and local laws.

Exploring Spiritual Struggles and Resources over Goals when Coping with Partner Aggression: Illustrations with a Case Study Women who experience relational violence when dating or living with a man more often utilize passive coping strategies to deal with life stressors than women who are not in abusive relationships (e.g., Rhatigan et al. 2006). Thus, victims may be especially vulnerable to passively pursuing the goal to tolerate an aggressive partner rather than proactively aiming to transform the relationship. To illustrate the ways spiritual struggles may contribute to women's dilemmas of which of these two goals to pursue (i.e., tolerate versus transform), we focus on a case study of one woman's spiritual struggles over being the "agent of blame" versus "agent of change," and focusing on possible causes versus solutions of the man's behavior: partner, God, others, and self.

People naturally seek out explanations for the causes of problems, such as why men behave badly. Within medical and social sciences, "etiology" is concerned with the origins or causes of diseases and pathological behavior. In the case of domestic violence, as the chapter by Kilmartin and other chapters in this handbook detail, many factors have been identified as causing men's violent behavior. For example, relational aggression has been traced back to biological predispositions, stable personality characteristics, family-of-origin experiences, peer influences, past and current relationship dynamics, and subcultural influences, such as media exposure and poverty. Ideally, any problem would be prevented by eliminating the root causes. But after a problem has developed, causes may have very little to do with solutions. For example, neither a victim nor perpetrator can change the man's past or current factors beyond either partner's control, such as low unemployment opportunities. And, obviously, the only factor that a victim has direct control over is her own behavior. Yet, a victim faces two troubling questions in proactively taking on the goal to transform the relationship: (1)

"Why should I be the one to make change happen?" and (2) "If I am successful, does that mean I was to blame all along?" In our clinical experience, these two questions raise profound spiritual struggles that can contribute to the woman's passivity and ambivalence about being the agent of change. However, if she chooses to pursue the goal of changing the relationship, a woman can draw on spiritual resources to stop waiting for someone else (the man, God, or others) to initiate change and to stay clear that being the primary agent of change is not tantamount to being the cause of the problem.

Our case example illustrates a woman who experienced spiritual struggles over what goal to pursue after her partner became aggressive. All cases in this chapter are fictionalized composites of different clients we have seen who face dilemmas about whether their goal is to tolerate mistreatment or to take assertive action to change their situation. Joan was a 38-year-old married woman from a conservative Christian background who attended church weekly. Her 40-year-old husband Jake shared her religious convictions and often attended services with her and their 12-year-old twins. They appeared to have a solid marriage, but Jake had a long standing pattern of yelling at Joan after he came home frustrated from his factory job as a mid-level foreman. In the past year, he had escalated quickly on several occasions to slapping her when discussing whether he should find a new job. Jane sought counseling after Jake broke a lamp, but he refused to come to sessions with her. She reported a growing sense of despair and anxiety about the situation. She made clear that her desired goal was to transform the marriage by reforming the couples' dynamics, saying she disapproved of Jake's behavior, but she also wanted to remain married as a divorce would violate the sanctity of her marriage. Our discussions about assertive actions she could take to openly insist that Jake change his behavior, however, repeatedly stalled and circled back to her privately analyzing Jake. She ruminated about the causes of his behavior. Rather than fight her resistance to be open about her misery, we explored her spiritual attributions of his conduct. She cautiously and tearfully

revealed that she viewed Jake as being “prideful” and “sinful” for failing to fulfill his designed role as the spiritual leader of the family. She also disclosed that she prayed daily to God to change Jake’s heart so he would come into therapy to confess his wrongdoings. Given God’s apparent failure to intervene, Joan felt quite frightened that Jake’s behavior would spin further out of control. Joan also began to wonder what she had done wrong in God’s eyes to deserve Jake’s hostility, citing her own failings to be sufficiently patient, loving, and kind. But, in fact, she appeared to relate to Jake in an excessively appeasing manner that reinforced his stance that his verbal outbursts were justifiable and his physical aggression was unfortunate but forgivable. Jane and Jake had one meeting with their pastor in which she alluded to Jake’s temper, and Jake vaguely admitted he “sometimes had a tough time with anger.” But the pastor did not ask specific questions about Jake’s behavior and neither spouse spontaneously revealed the details about his violent behavior. Joan hoped Jake would change after he agreed with the pastor to pray more. But his pattern persisted. Joan then felt disappointed in her pastor for not better assessing or correcting Jake’s conduct. All in all, Joan felt that the goal of being the one who proactively transformed the marriage threatened her fundamental spiritual understanding of who should be the primary agent of change when a marriage was not working, and she quietly but deeply resented being forced into the role of taking assertive action to protect herself from harm.

To help Joan overcome passivity, I helped her articulate her most cherished sacred goals about her marriage which included: (1) preserving a lifelong union, (2) living out the virtues taught by her religious tradition to maintain a marriage, and (3) helping her husband be virtuous. Helping Joan explore the sacred goals for her marriage fostered her self-confidence and helped her trust that I would be transparent about my goal, while respecting her goals. I also consistently validated that her husband’s unchecked aggression was a growing and serious threat to her top three spiritual strivings, and we worked to increase her insight into her spiritual ambivalence over being assertive. She began to draw on spiritual

resources to motivate her to try to protect herself from Jack’s aggressive behavior. This included seeking God’s support to confront Jack’s problems, joining an online Christian chat group who encouraged her to overcome her fear and anger about being an agent of change in a dysfunctional marriage, and enlisting her pastor’s approval to be a more assertive wife. Once she fully embraced the goal to proactively transform the marriage, she took vigorous action to pressure Jake to change. He was initially quite defensive and did not agree to work on his aggression until after Jane moved out from their home with their twins. Once she made clear she was willing to file for a divorce, he sought out professional help to pursue the goal to salvage his marriage by gaining control over his aggressive behavior.

Spiritual Struggles and Resources Over Pathways When Coping With Partner Aggression: Illustration With Case Example

Even women who are always clear their goal is to transform and not tolerate relationships marked by partner aggression face dilemmas about what pathway to follow when their partner is aggressive: try to reform their romantic relationship, or exit the union and, if the couple has children together, work on being effective co-parents with their ex-partner? Reforming an intact but dysfunctional relationship is always challenging, with a woman asking herself: “Is it worth it to try to fix this relationship?” Commitment to persist in reworking a relationship depends on perceived satisfaction, irretrievable investments, and quality of alternatives (Rhatigan et al. 2006). When it comes to exiting the relationship, research on women coping with relational aggression indicates that two critical questions that women ask themselves are: “Will I be better off (outside of this relationship)?” and “Can I do it (exit successfully)?” (Choice and Lamke 1997), and if children are involved “What is in my child(ren)’s best interest?” As illustrated below, spirituality can intensify struggles over these questions and block progress down either the route of reform or exit. Alternatively, spirituality can offer unique resources to help women persist to traveling down either pathway to reach the goal of not tolerating physical aggression by an intimate partner.

The next case example is also a fictionalized composite of several cases. It illustrates ways spiritual coping can intersect with efforts to reform versus exit a relationship with an aggressive partner. Sue was a 24-year-old woman cohabiting with Rob, the father of their 3-year-old daughter, Beth. The couple met shortly before both graduated from a mid-western Catholic college. They quickly fell in love, conceived Beth unintentionally when dating over the summer, and then moved in together. Sue postponed going to graduate school to become a full-time mother while Rob unhappily settled for an entry-level retail job. Despite their intense sexual attraction, the couple soon discovered they had divergent goals for their lives, with Rob wanting to travel internationally and work abroad and Sue being adamant about staying close to home. They had chronic arguments over when and whether to marry, with frequent angry outbursts. Rob had slapped or hit Sue with his fist on several occasions when she had sworn and yelled at him. After the last violent episode where Sue slapped Rob back for the first time, he moved out of their apartment saying he wanted to separate permanently. Heartbroken and furious, Sue sought out individual counseling.

Sue recognized that her relationship with Rob was harmful to all parties involved and needed radical change, but she faced spiritual struggles over both the pathway of reforming and of exiting their romantic bond. With regard to reforming the union, she felt that God would only forgive her and Rob for an unplanned pregnancy if they married. She also disclosed that she had laid “guilt-trips” on Rob about his failure to keep his “sacred promise” to marry her when they learned about the pregnancy, which escalated their conflicts. After fights, Rob would tearfully confess his regret and ask her forgiveness for his aggression. She then granted him absolution, and the couple would reconcile by making passionate love. We gradually realized that Sue’s implicit spiritual belief was that Rob needed her unconditional love to grow into the kind of man “he was meant to be.” Regarding whether to exit their romantic bond, Sue was exhausted by the couple’s deep incompatibilities and relieved that Rob’s

aggression provided a valid reason in the Catholic Church to annul a marriage. She especially felt less guilt-ridden for not pursuing marriage when Rob told her their priest had admonished him for his wrongdoings during a private reconciliation rite. Yet, she struggled with ambivalence about relinquishing marriage and instead focusing on the goal to be effective co-parents. She felt profound guilt of depriving her daughter of an intact and two-income biological family, which violated what she had always viewed as God’s hopes for herself and her children. She also resented that Rob would probably more easily pursue his vocational dreams as a single parent than she would.

Working with Sue first involved helping her gain insight in spiritual struggles that were blocking her from effectively either reforming or exiting a romantic relationship with Rob. She decided first to try to change her own behavior toward Rob. She hoped this would trigger major improvements so they both would want and be able to pursue a healthy marriage. She drew on spiritual resources to help her change including praying to God for help to talk calmly with Rob and not use sexuality as a bonding strategy to recover from destructive interactions. She also came to see that while God could function as a source of infinite, unconditional love for herself and Rob, she needed to cease participating in a dynamic where she provoked Rob and, after he acted badly, she felt spiritually superior to him and absolved him of his sins. She was successful in changing her own behavior, which made her feel less guilty and helped her gain perspective on Rob’s issues. Sue gradually decided Rob was not a man she would have wanted to marry if she had not become pregnant. She then shifted to trying to exit their romantic relationship in a manner that would maximize their odds of working together as co-parents without verbal or physical aggression being part of the picture. To reach this end, Sue turned to prayer and meditation to help her overcome feelings of guilt, loss, and anger so her emotions would not escalate conflicts with Rob. Fortunately, Rob was able to stop his violent behavior, and the pair was able to work together effectively as co-parents.

Closing

We have offered a heuristic model for mental health professionals to use to address ways spirituality can be part of the problem and the solution for women coping with a relationship marked by situational intimate partner violence that is relatively less severe. We have suggested helping professionals can help women identify spiritual struggles and resources as they work to overcome obstacles to transform the union by one of two pathways: reform the relationship dynamics or exit the union. We have emphasized the need to be respectful but direct in discussing with a woman the spiritual dimensions of her coping with being in a romantic relationship with an aggressive man. In our view, the goal of such dialogues is to increase the women’s insight so they are better equipped to take effective actions to ensure their safety and protect themselves. We hope such collaborative discussions empower women to find and maintain loving, long-lasting unions.

Appendix (Table 4.1)

Table 4.1 Guidelines to explore spiritual coping with mild intimate partner aggression. (Adapted from an interview protocol by Holtzworth-Monroe et al. (2010) that is available free of charge in the public domain, and was designed for mediators working with families in court-connected mediation programs)

<i>Explore the frequency and severity of acts of physical aggression by male partner</i>
Ask directly about the man’s physical aggression to detoxify the topic. Concrete questions asked in a kind, matter-of-fact manner will elicit more disclosure than vague questions about if she has experienced “abuse.” Specific questions for mild physical aggression include: Has your partner thrown something that could hurt you? Has he pushed, grabbed, or shoved you? Has he pulled your hair? Has he slapped or hit you? (http://www.domesticviolenceresearch.org/)
Rule out the risk of serious injury or death to the woman by asking pointed questions about more severe forms of violence (e.g., acts of coercive control, threats or use of severe violence, sexual violence, stalking). See Holtzworth-Munroe et al. (2010) for an interview protocol that is free of charge in the public domain. If the woman is in a crisis situation, take appropriate action to help ensure her safety

Table 4.1 (continued)

<i>Explore the frequency and severity of acts of physical aggression by male partner</i>
<i>Explore the woman’s general religious and spiritual identity</i>
Become familiar with the woman’s religious/spiritual identity. Opening questions include: (1) I am wondering how important spirituality or religion is to you? (2) Do you happen to attend religious services in a church or another type of religious or spiritual community? (3) Are there certain spiritual or religious beliefs and practices that you find particularly helpful in dealing with difficulties? (4) Has your problem affected your spiritually? (see Hodge 2013)
<i>Clarify the woman’s ultimate goal for her romantic relationship and dilemmas that interfere with her taking action to transform the relationship</i>
Find out if the woman’s goal is to transform the relation by no longer tolerating physical aggression by her male partner
Make clear your own position on the appropriate goal—in our case, the ultimate goal is zero tolerance of physical aggression
<i>If the woman passively accepts the situation or is ambivalent about change, then explore</i>
Spiritual struggles that contribute to her tolerating physical aggression
Conflicts with God, self, and religious community over relationship goals
Spiritual resources to make her safety her top priority
Support from God, self, and religious community over relationship goals
<i>Explore two alternative pathways she can use to reach the goal of transformation</i>
<i>Reform the relationship</i>
Spiritual struggles that interfere with her pressuring the man to change
Conflicts with God, self, and religious community over change processes
Spiritual resources to empower her to pressure the man to change
Support from God, self, and religious community over change processes
<i>Exit the relationship</i>
Spiritual struggles that interfere with her leaving the man
Conflicts with God, self, and religious community over breakups
Spiritual resources to empower her to leave the man
Support with God, self, and religious community over breakups

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