

OKLAHOMA CHILD WELLBEING

# SPIRITUAL ABUSE

Recognize the Signs. Protect Your Safety. Reclaim Your Voice.

*A practical guide for survivors, loved ones, faith communities, and advocates*

## **SAFETY FIRST**

If you are in immediate danger, call 911. If you are considering harming yourself or cannot stay safe, call or text 988 in the United States. You deserve support without pressure, shame, or retaliation.

**Every Person Seen. Every Person Safe.**

[www.okchildwellbeing.org](http://www.okchildwellbeing.org)

# How to Use This Guide

This guide is educational and survivor-centered. It does not diagnose a person, determine legal liability, or replace emergency, legal, medical, mental-health, or advocacy services. Use the sections that are relevant to your situation. You do not have to decide today whether to report, leave, stay, forgive, confront, or explain your experience to anyone.

- **1. What spiritual abuse is:** A pattern of using faith, sacred authority, doctrine, community, or fear of God to control, shame, isolate, exploit, silence, or harm someone.
- **2. How to recognize it:** Common patterns, warning signs, and impact - including behavior by leaders, partners, relatives, peers, or groups.
- **3. What healthy faith leadership looks like:** A quick contrast between spiritual care and spiritual control.
- **4. Safety planning:** Practical steps for immediate risk, communication, documents, technology, children, and support.
- **5. Tools and resources:** Scripts, checklists, national and Oklahoma support lines, online education, and vetted channels.

## 1. What Is Spiritual Abuse?

Spiritual abuse is the misuse of spiritual beliefs, religious teachings, sacred texts, spiritual authority, or a person's faith community to gain power or control, cause harm, or block someone from seeking safety and support. **It can happen in a church, ministry, school, family, intimate relationship, recovery group, or any community where spiritual authority carries weight.**

**A key question:** Does this person or system use faith to support your dignity and agency - or to pressure you into silence, obedience, fear, dependence, or isolation?

Spiritual abuse often overlaps with emotional, financial, sexual, physical, or coercive control. It is not limited to one religion, denomination, political view, gender, or type of relationship. The harm is real even when it leaves no visible bruise.

**Spiritual abuse is about a pattern, not one imperfect moment.**

- People can make mistakes, misuse a verse, offer poor advice, or handle conflict badly without creating an abusive pattern.
- A pattern becomes concerning when power is used repeatedly to override consent, punish questions, discourage outside support, excuse harm, or make a person feel unsafe for thinking independently.
- Your belief, love for your community, or respect for a leader does not cancel your right to safety, informed choice, boundaries, and outside support.

## 2. Signs and Tactics to Watch For

No checklist can capture every experience. One sign alone may not prove abuse. Look for repetition, escalation, fear, secrecy, retaliation, and the way the behavior affects your ability to make free choices.

Pattern	What it can sound or look like
<b>Using God or scripture as a weapon</b>	“God told me you must obey me.” “Questioning me is rebellion.” “If you leave, you are abandoning God.”
<b>Demanding unquestioned loyalty</b>	You are told that loyalty to a leader, ministry, spouse, parent, or group is the same as loyalty to God.
<b>Shame, fear, and spiritual threats</b>	You are threatened with spiritual consequences, public humiliation, loss of salvation, curses, demonic labels, or isolation for setting boundaries.
<b>Silencing disclosures</b>	Concerns about abuse, exploitation, misconduct, or safety are treated as gossip, bitterness, division, dishonor, or an attack on the ministry.
<b>Blocking outside help</b>	You are discouraged from therapy, law enforcement, advocates, medical care, family contact, legal advice, or independent investigation.
<b>Forced forgiveness or reconciliation</b>	You are pressured to forgive, reconcile, remain available, or stop talking before safety, truth, repair, and accountability exist.
<b>Misusing confession and private information</b>	Personal disclosures, counseling details, prayer requests, or confessions are shared, weaponized, or used to control you.
<b>Control of relationships, money, time, or body</b>	The person or group dictates whom you see, how you dress, how you spend money, where you work, whether you can leave, or what medical care you receive.
<b>Gaslighting through faith language</b>	You are told your memory is false, your discomfort is sin, your discernment is rebellion, or your fear is a lack of faith.
<b>Retaliation or scapegoating</b>	After raising a concern, you lose access, status, work, friendships, ministry opportunities, custody support, housing, or community standing.

### How spiritual abuse can affect people

- Confusion, self-doubt, shame, panic, grief, or a sense that you cannot trust your own judgment.
- Fear of God, loss of faith community, nightmares, hypervigilance, depression, or trauma symptoms.
- Isolation from family and friends, difficulty setting boundaries, financial instability, or increased vulnerability to further harm.
- For children and teens: fear, secrecy, loyalty conflicts, distorted beliefs about authority, and reluctance to disclose harm.

## 3. Spiritual Care vs. Spiritual Control

Healthy spiritual care	Spiritual control / abuse
Invites questions and respects conscience.	Punishes questions and demands agreement.
Encourages independent support and informed choices.	Discourages therapy, advocates, police, family, or outside review.
Treats boundaries as legitimate.	Labels boundaries as rebellion, selfishness,

	betrayal, or sin.
Protects confidentiality and reports safety concerns responsibly.	Uses private information as leverage or hides safety concerns.
Separates forgiveness from access, trust, and accountability.	Uses forgiveness to demand silence, reconciliation, or continued exposure.
Takes reports seriously and manages conflicts of interest.	Investigates itself, protects reputation first, and retaliates against reporters.

## 4. What You Can Do Next

You do not need anyone's permission to take your concern seriously. Choose the actions that increase safety and reduce pressure.

1. **Name what is happening.** Write down specific words, actions, dates, witnesses, screenshots, messages, and the impact on you or your child. Use neutral, factual notes.
2. **Talk to a safe person outside the controlling system.** Choose someone who will not report back to the leader, partner, family member, or group. A trained advocate can help you think through options.
3. **Get independent support.** Consider a domestic-violence advocate, sexual-assault advocate, therapist experienced in trauma, attorney, medical professional, or child advocacy center.
4. **Protect your privacy.** Use a safer device or account when possible. Turn off location sharing, change passwords from a safe device, and avoid storing sensitive plans where another person can access them.
5. **Do not confront someone if it may increase danger.** Leaving, reporting, confronting, or setting boundaries can raise risk in some situations. Safety planning first is not weakness - it is strategy.
6. **Get help for a child promptly.** If a child may be abused, neglected, exploited, or in immediate danger, contact emergency services or the appropriate child-protection reporting line.

## 5. Personal Safety Planning

A safety plan is a personalized, practical plan for increasing safety before, during, and after a crisis. It is not a promise to leave or report. It is a way to create options.

- **Immediate danger:** Call 911. Move toward a public place, exit, trusted neighbor, or room with access to an exit. Avoid rooms with weapons or hard surfaces when possible.
- **Code word:** Choose a phrase with a trusted person that means: "Call for help," "Come get me," or "I cannot talk safely."
- **Documents and essentials:** Identify safe copies of identification, medications, school records, protective orders, keys, cash/cards, emergency contacts, and evidence. Store only where it is safe.
- **Children and dependents:** Teach age-appropriate safety steps: who to call, where to go, and that their job is not to intervene in adult conflict. Tell school/daycare who is and is not authorized for pickup if needed.
- **Digital safety:** Use private browsing only if it is safe; clear history when appropriate; update passwords from a safer device; review location sharing, shared cloud storage, Bluetooth trackers, and linked accounts.
- **Support network:** Identify at least two people and one professional resource. Decide where you can go, how you will get there, and what you need them to do.

- **After leaving or reporting:** Consider changing routines, alerting workplace/school security, keeping a log of contact or threats, and asking an advocate about protection orders and local options.

**Important:** Do not rely on this guide alone if you believe someone is monitoring you, threatening you, has access to weapons, has strangled you, has threatened suicide or homicide, or is escalating after you set boundaries. Contact trained support or emergency services.

## My Safety Plan - Private Worksheet

Complete only what is safe. Keep this page somewhere that will not increase risk. You can also complete it with an advocate.

<p><b>My warning signs that danger may be rising:</b></p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p><b>My code word / signal:</b></p> <p>_____</p>
<p><b>Two people I can contact:</b></p> <p>1. _____ 2. _____</p>
<p><b>A safe place I could go:</b></p> <p>_____</p>
<p><b>What I need to take or secure:</b></p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p><b>A safer way to communicate or access help:</b></p> <p>_____</p>
<p><b>A professional / advocate resource:</b></p> <p>_____</p>

## 6. When Someone Tells You They Are Being Spiritually Abused

Your first response matters. Focus on safety, choice, and support - not proving, fixing, debating doctrine, or protecting an institution.

- Say: “Thank you for telling me. I believe you deserve to be safe.”
- Say: “You do not have to decide everything today. What would help you feel safer right now?”
- Ask permission before taking action, unless there is an immediate emergency or a legal duty to report a child or vulnerable adult concern.
- Do not pressure someone to confront, forgive, reconcile, remain, report, or disclose publicly.
- Do not contact the person or organization accused without a safety plan. It may increase retaliation.
- Help them connect with independent, survivor-centered support rather than only internal leadership.

## 7. Support Resources

Services change. Verify current options before relying on them. These resources are independent of Oklahoma Child Wellbeing unless otherwise noted.

<b>Resource</b>	<b>Contact / purpose</b>
<b>Emergency</b>	911 - immediate danger or urgent medical/emergency response.
<b>988 Suicide &amp; Crisis Lifeline</b>	Call, text, or chat 988 for 24/7 confidential crisis support in the United States and territories.
<b>National Domestic Violence Hotline</b>	Call 1-800-799-SAFE (7233), text START to 88788, or use chat at thehotline.org. Free, confidential support and safety planning.
<b>RAINN National Sexual Assault Hotline</b>	Call 1-800-656-HOPE (4673), text HOPE to 64673, or visit rainn.org for confidential sexual-assault support and local referrals.
<b>Oklahoma Safeline</b>	1-800-522-SAFE (7233), 24/7 confidential statewide support for domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, and related safety needs.
<b>DVIS - Tulsa area</b>	24/7 information and crisis line: 918-743-5763 or toll-free 1-833-338-5763. Text SAFE to 207-777 during listed evening hours. DVIS provides advocacy, safe housing, counseling, and legal advocacy.
<b>Oklahoma Child Abuse / Neglect Hotline</b>	1-800-522-3511. If a child is in immediate danger, call 911 or law enforcement. Oklahoma reports that persons with reason to believe a child is abused or neglected have a reporting duty.
<b>Find certified Oklahoma programs</b>	The Oklahoma Attorney General maintains a list of certified domestic violence / sexual assault programs.

## 8. Education Tools and YouTube Learning

Online learning can be useful, but videos are not a substitute for personalized safety planning. Use a safer device and headphones if viewing could create risk. The channels below are educational starting points; evaluate content critically and prioritize survivor-centered, trauma-informed materials.

- **National Domestic Violence Hotline - “What is spiritual abuse?”**: Explains spiritual abuse as using belief or spiritual authority to manipulate or control. YouTube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oFo\\_ICaXWag](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oFo_ICaXWag)
- **GRACE (Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment) - “Domestic Violence & the Church”**: Conversation about abuse of power and the church response. YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6lt3-WDZmUY>
- **GRACE YouTube channel**: Educational discussions on prevention, response, survivor support, and church accountability. <https://www.youtube.com/@gracegodlyresponsetoabusei6445>
- **FaithTrust Institute YouTube channel**: Training-oriented materials related to healthy boundaries and faith-community safety. <https://www.youtube.com/user/FaithTrustInstitute>
- **National Domestic Violence Hotline YouTube channel**: General survivor-support and domestic-violence education. <https://www.youtube.com/user/NDVHotline>
- **RAINN safety planning resource**: Written safety-planning guide for survivors of assault, harassment, and stalking: <https://rainn.org/strategies-to-reduce-risk-increase-safety/safety-planning-for-survivors-of-assault-harassment-stalking/>

## 9. What Safe Accountability Looks Like in a Faith Community

A survivor-centered response does not require public accusation, mob pressure, or a predetermined conclusion. It requires clear safety practices, independent review when appropriate, transparent conflict-of-interest safeguards, and no retaliation for good-faith reports.

- Immediate protection of children and vulnerable people when safety concerns arise.
- A reporting pathway outside the direct chain of authority or alleged offender.
- Independent investigators or qualified external experts when leaders, staff, boards, or close associates have conflicts of interest.
- Clear confidentiality limits, record preservation, and lawful reporting to civil authorities when required.
- No retaliation: no shaming, social punishment, spiritual threats, job loss, housing pressure, or forced silence for those who report concerns.
- Separation of forgiveness, restoration, access, leadership eligibility, legal responsibility, and safeguarding. These are not the same decision.
- Follow-up: written corrective action, monitoring, and communication that prioritizes safety over image management.

## Sources and Further Reading

Primary resources consulted for this guide. Accessed June 25, 2026. This guide summarizes information in original language and does not reproduce source text extensively.

7. **National Domestic Violence Hotline. “What Is Spiritual Abuse?”**  
<https://www.thehotline.org/resources/what-is-spiritual-abuse/>
8. **National Domestic Violence Hotline. “Power and Control.”** <https://www.thehotline.org/identify-abuse/power-and-control/>
9. **National Domestic Violence Hotline. About and contact information.**  
<https://www.thehotline.org/about/>
10. **RAINN. “Safety Planning for Survivors of Assault, Harassment, & Stalking.”**  
<https://rainn.org/strategies-to-reduce-risk-increase-safety/safety-planning-for-survivors-of-assault-harassment-stalking/>
11. **RAINN. National Sexual Assault Hotline.** <https://rainn.org/help-and-healing/hotline/>
12. **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. Help Yourself / What to Expect.** <https://988lifeline.org/help-yourself/>
13. **Oklahoma Attorney General. Certified Domestic Violence / Sexual Assault Programs.**  
<https://oklahoma.gov/oag/about/divisions/victim-advocacy-and-services-unit/certified-dvsa-programs.html>
14. **DVIS. Contact information and services.** <https://dvis.org/about-us-domestic-violence-intervention-services/contact-us/>
15. **Oklahoma DHS. Child Protective Services reporting information.**  
<https://oklahoma.gov/okdhs/services/cps/cps-program-information.html>

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