

World Conference of Women's Shelters, 2008

# **Building Bridges to End Abuse**

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# FaithLink: What it Is

**Mission:** Spiritual/religious communities and service providers working together to prevent domestic violence and to provide healing and hope to all those affected by it.

FaithLink interprets the term 'religious/spiritual communities' broadly to include a wide variety of religious traditions and spiritually based groups. It is presently working within Christian, Jewish and Buddhist communities.

# FaithLink: What It Does

## **With religious/spiritual/ethno-cultural communities:**

- Raising awareness of family violence, developing educational resources and offering support to leaders and community members in responding effectively to disclosures of domestic abuse.

## **With secularly-based family violence related service providers:**

- Raising awareness of the spiritual and its importance to clients who espouse a spiritual life perspective.

**Sponsoring conferences, workshops and consultations** designed to foster understanding and working relationships between spiritual leaders and service providers.

**Conducting relevant research** that seeks to add to the family violence knowledge base, particularly as it relates to the interface between the spiritual and service providers

# Spirituality and Victims of Violence

## Research Questions:

- How important is spirituality for clients who have experienced family violence?
- Does spirituality enter into the professional work with clients?
- How is the topic of spirituality introduced into the counselling conversations?
- **Methodology:**
- Semi-structured interviews
- Partial sample N = 12 secularly-based service providers
  - 7 – shelter based
  - 5 – general counselling, immigrant serving agencies
  - All worked with family violence victims

# Definitions

## **Research participants defined:**

- ‘Religion’ as an established set of theological beliefs and traditions designed to connect with the spirit (however conceived)
- ‘Spirituality’ as a personal search for meaning that was not necessarily grounded in any particular religious structure

## **Participant self-identification:**

- 27% identified themselves as currently practicing within a religion
- 78% identified themselves as spiritual

# Research Findings: Importance of Spirituality to Clients

## Participants:

- Described the **negative impact of abuse on the spirit:**
  - Resulting in spiritual brokenness - a disconnection with one's sense of self and the divine;
  - Engendering feelings of failure, guilt and/or anger when clients' life experience is not congruent with religious/spiritual beliefs
- Identified **spirituality as a source of strength** for clients:
  - As a foundation from which other personal strengths important in the healing process can develop
  - Sensing one's connection to the divine can provide 'relief' and 'release' of emotional burdens
  - A spiritual perspective provides a broader world view – one in which the abuse experienced can be seen as a part, not the whole, of one's life experience

# Research Findings: Importance of Spirituality to Clients

## Participants identified

- the **client's struggle** when their life experience is not congruent with religious/spiritual belief, resulting in conflict between the client's desire to be obedient to beliefs and continuing in an abusive relationship.
- The **barriers encountered by victims** of religious/cultural communities where there is denial that family violence occurs and where the expectations for the family are high.
- The **lack of support** from family and community for victims who disclose abuse and/or separate from abusive partners.

# Research Findings: Spirituality and work with clients

Most participants identified spirituality as a topic which arises in their work with clients - either:

- Raised by clients or
- Introduced by the counsellor

Their own comfort level in addressing it varied from

- Not considering spirituality as an appropriate topic within the context of family violence;
- Discussing spirituality only if raised by the clients, and then only with the intent of better understanding the client's context;
- Introducing the topic of spirituality to their work with clients.

# Research Findings: Spirituality and work with clients

All identified the need for:

- Ethical and respectful practice – this is about the client's healing process, not the counsellor's spiritual journey, nor an opportunity for proselytizing
- Sensitivity to the client's receptivity to the topic when introduced by the counsellor. If a client is not receptive, the topic is not pursued.

# Research Findings: Introducing Spirituality to the Counselling Context

Those participants who were comfortable with addressing spirituality within the counselling context identified a variety of approaches. Examples included:

- Being alert to the client's world view and asking whether this includes the spiritual
- Exploring life's purpose and living by one's values – which are spiritual issues

# Research Findings: Introducing Spirituality to the Counselling Context

- The use of questions:
  - What does culture say about this; What do others say about this; What does self say about this; What does religious tradition say about this?
- Making one's office a 'spiritually sensitive' place
- Introducing spiritual practices which could help reduce stress.

# Research Findings: The Counsellor's Dilemma

Participants raised important questions:

- How do counsellors respect the client's desire to live by her belief and cultural perspectives and at the same time challenge the limitations and the potential danger these may impose?
- How do counsellors not impose their own values but work for the safety and empowerment of clients?
- How do counsellors reconcile their desire to be respectful and at the same time challenge a culture of patriarchy?

# Conclusions

- Experiencing abuse impacts the spiritual
- Spirituality can be a source of strength in the healing process
- Religious beliefs/cultural norms pose dilemmas for both victims of abuse and counsellors
- The need to bring religious/spiritual/cultural leaders into the fight against family violence is clear. This can be done through engagement, awareness raising, resources development. These individuals are the keys to confronting abuse and affecting change within their communities.