

7 Ways Faith Can Heal What Religion Broke

Introduction

For many, faith is a source of comfort, guidance, and community. It can provide a framework for understanding the world, a moral compass, and a deep sense of belonging. Yet, for an increasing number of individuals, the very institutions meant to foster faith have become sources of profound pain and disillusionment. This phenomenon, often referred to as religious trauma, arises when religious environments, practices, or teachings inflict psychological, emotional, or spiritual harm. It can leave deep wounds, shattering trust, distorting perceptions of God, and alienating individuals from their spiritual selves.

Religious trauma is not merely a crisis of faith; it is a deeply personal and often isolating experience that can impact every facet of an individual's life. It can manifest as anxiety, depression, identity confusion, difficulty trusting others, and even physical symptoms. The pain is compounded by the fact that many survivors feel invalidated or misunderstood, as their experiences are often dismissed or minimized by those who have not walked a similar path. The very concept of healing within a religious context can seem paradoxical when religion itself has been the source of the wound.

However, this journal posits a powerful truth: faith, in its purest form, possesses an inherent capacity to heal what religion may have broken. This is not an invitation to return to the same harmful environments, but rather a journey to reclaim a personal, authentic

spirituality that transcends institutional limitations. It is about discerning the difference between genuine faith—a deep connection to the divine and a commitment to love and compassion—and the rigid, often fear-based doctrines that can lead to trauma. This journal will explore seven transformative ways in which faith, understood through a trauma-informed lens, can guide individuals toward profound healing, renewed purpose, and a vibrant spiritual life.

Our journey will delve into the nuances of trauma-informed healing, recognizing the profound impact of past experiences on the present. We will explore the comforting and restorative power of scripture, not as a weapon of condemnation, but as a balm for wounded souls. Finally, we will make space for the rediscovery and embrace of your unique, God-given gifts, understanding that your authentic self is an integral part of your spiritual journey. This is a path toward wholeness, where the broken pieces are not discarded but are lovingly reassembled into a mosaic of resilience, grace, and unwavering hope.

Way 1: Reclaiming Your Narrative: Understanding Religious Trauma

Religious trauma is a term that has gained increasing recognition in recent years, shedding light on the profound and often devastating impact that religious environments, practices, or teachings can have on an individual's psychological and emotional well-being. It's crucial to understand that religious trauma is distinct from a simple crisis of faith or a disagreement with religious doctrine. Instead, it refers to the deep-seated wounds inflicted when a person's spiritual or religious experiences lead to psychological or emotional distress, often through manipulative practices, spiritual abuse, or rigid, fear-based control.

At its core, religious trauma is a betrayal of trust. For many, religion is meant to be a safe haven, a source of comfort, and a guide for living. When this sacred space becomes a source of harm, it can shatter a person's sense of safety, their ability to trust, and even their understanding of themselves and the divine. Individuals raised in strict or high-demand religious environments are particularly vulnerable, as their entire identity may be intertwined with their religious affiliation, making it incredibly difficult to disentangle themselves from harmful dynamics without experiencing a profound sense of loss and disorientation.

Recognizing the signs and symptoms of religious trauma is a critical step toward healing. These can manifest in various ways, often mirroring symptoms of other forms of trauma. Common indicators include anxiety, depression, panic attacks, and a pervasive sense of guilt or shame, particularly around questioning or deviating from religious norms. Individuals may experience a loss of faith, not necessarily in a divine being, but in the religious institution or its teachings. This can lead to difficulty trusting others, especially those in

positions of authority, and a profound sense of social isolation as they may feel alienated from their former religious community or from society at large.

Identity confusion is another significant symptom, as individuals may struggle to reconcile their past religious identity with their emerging authentic self. This can extend to areas like sexual dysfunction, eating disorders, or substance abuse, as individuals may have internalized harmful messages about their bodies, desires, or coping mechanisms. In severe cases, religious trauma can even lead to suicidal ideation, highlighting the critical need for compassionate and informed support.

The distinction between faith and religion is paramount in the context of healing from religious trauma. Religion, in this context, refers to the organized systems of beliefs, rituals, and practices, often with established hierarchies and doctrines. Faith, on the other hand, is a more personal and intrinsic connection to the divine, a sense of meaning, purpose, and hope that transcends institutional boundaries. While religion can be a vehicle for faith, it is not synonymous with it. Many who experience religious trauma find that their faith remains intact, or even deepens, once they are able to separate it from the harmful aspects of their religious upbringing or community.

A trauma-informed approach to healing is essential because it acknowledges the profound impact of these experiences on the brain, body, and spirit. It moves beyond simply addressing symptoms to understanding the root causes of distress, recognizing that past religious experiences have shaped an individual's worldview and coping mechanisms. This approach emphasizes safety, trustworthiness, peer support, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural, historical, and gender issues. By adopting a trauma-informed lens, we can create a space for healing that validates the individual's experience, fosters resilience, and empowers them to reclaim their narrative and forge a path toward authentic spiritual

well-being.

Way 2: The Compassionate Heart of God: Scripture as a Source of Healing

For those who have experienced religious trauma, scripture can often feel like a double-edged sword. It may have been used to control, condemn, or justify harmful practices, leaving a bitter taste and a sense of aversion. However, when approached with a trauma-informed lens, scripture can be a profound source of healing, revealing a God whose heart is deeply compassionate and intimately acquainted with suffering. It is about rediscovering the divine narrative of love, comfort, and restoration that often gets obscured by rigid interpretations and human failings.

One of the most comforting truths found in scripture is God's empathy for the brokenhearted. Psalm 34:18 beautifully articulates this: "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit." This verse offers a powerful counter-narrative to the idea that God is distant, punitive, or indifferent to our pain. Instead, it portrays a God who draws near to those who are hurting, whose presence is a source of solace and salvation in moments of deep despair. This understanding can be particularly healing for individuals who have been made to feel that their suffering is a sign of spiritual failure or divine displeasure.

The theme of comfort in suffering is woven throughout the biblical narrative. 2 Corinthians 1:3-5 speaks directly to this: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our

comfort abounds through Christ." This passage highlights a divine cycle of comfort: God comforts us in our affliction, not only for our own sake but also so that we might extend that same comfort to others. It reframes suffering not as a solitary burden, but as an experience through which we can connect more deeply with God and with fellow human beings, fostering empathy and communal healing.

Furthermore, scripture reveals a God who is intimately present in our pain, a stark contrast to the isolating experience of religious trauma. Isaiah 53:3-4, describing the suffering servant, resonates deeply with those who have felt despised or rejected: "He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering..." This passage, often understood as a prophecy of Jesus, speaks to a divine solidarity with human suffering. It assures us that God understands pain, not from a detached perspective, but from a place of shared experience. Similarly, Hebrews 12:2-3 encourages us to fix our eyes on Jesus, "the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart." These verses offer a powerful image of resilience and perseverance, reminding us that even in the face of immense suffering, there is hope and a divine presence that sustains us.

Approaching scripture as a tool for reframing and healing involves a conscious shift in perspective. It means seeking out passages that affirm God's love, grace, and justice, rather than those that have been used to instill fear or control. It involves engaging with the text not as a rigid rulebook, but as a living narrative that speaks to the human condition and offers pathways to liberation and wholeness. This process may require

guidance from trauma-informed spiritual leaders or therapists who can help to deconstruct harmful interpretations and illuminate the restorative power of God's word. By doing so, scripture can transform from a source of pain into a wellspring of hope, guiding individuals toward a deeper, more authentic relationship with the divine and fostering profound healing from the wounds of religious trauma.

Way 3: Unburdening the Soul: Forgiveness and Release

One of the most challenging, yet ultimately liberating, aspects of healing from religious trauma is the journey of forgiveness. For many, the idea of forgiveness can feel like condoning the harm that was inflicted, or letting the perpetrators off the hook. However, true forgiveness, particularly in the context of trauma, is not about excusing harmful behavior. Instead, it is a profound act of self-liberation, a conscious decision to release the emotional burden of anger, resentment, and bitterness that can keep one tethered to past pain. This is especially true when the trauma has been inflicted in the name of faith, making the act of forgiveness feel like a betrayal of one's own suffering.

The burden of unforgiveness is heavy. It can manifest as chronic stress, anxiety, depression, and even physical ailments. Holding onto resentment is akin to drinking poison and expecting the other person to suffer. For survivors of religious trauma, this burden can be particularly insidious, as the pain is often intertwined with spiritual concepts of sin, judgment, and eternal consequences. The pressure to forgive, often imposed by the very religious systems that caused the harm, can exacerbate the trauma, leading to further guilt and self-blame if one struggles with this process.

Scripture, when approached with a compassionate and trauma-informed understanding,

offers a nuanced perspective on forgiveness. Matthew 6:14-15 states, "For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." This passage is often misinterpreted as a conditional demand for forgiveness, implying that one's own salvation is dependent on it. However, a deeper reading reveals that it speaks to the transformative power of forgiveness on the forgiver. It is about releasing the chains that bind us to our past, allowing us to move forward in freedom and peace.

Forgiving oneself is often as crucial, if not more so, than forgiving others. Survivors of religious trauma may carry immense guilt and shame, believing they are somehow responsible for the abuse they endured, or that their questioning of religious authority is a moral failing. Releasing this self-blame is a vital step in the healing process. It involves recognizing that the abuse was never their fault, and that their inherent worth and dignity are not diminished by the actions of others. This self-compassion is a powerful antidote to the self-condemnation often instilled by rigid religious teachings.

Releasing resentment and anger does not mean forgetting what happened or denying the validity of one's pain. Instead, it means acknowledging the pain, processing it, and then consciously choosing to let go of the emotional grip it has on one's life. This can be a gradual process, often requiring professional support from trauma-informed therapists. It may involve grieving the losses incurred—the loss of innocence, the loss of a trusted community, the loss of a particular worldview. But through this process, the individual can reclaim their emotional landscape, no longer allowing the past to dictate their present or future.

Ultimately, forgiveness, understood as a journey of release, becomes a powerful path to freedom. It is a testament to the resilience of the human spirit and the

transformative power of faith. By choosing to unburden the soul, survivors of religious trauma can create space for new growth, new relationships, and a renewed sense of spiritual well-being, free from the shackles of past hurts.

Way 4: Building a New Foundation: Trust and Healthy Community

One of the most devastating consequences of religious trauma is the shattering of trust. When spiritual leaders or communities, who are supposed to be beacons of integrity and love, inflict harm, it can leave an individual feeling profoundly betrayed and wary of all relationships, especially those with a spiritual dimension. Rebuilding trust after such a profound breach is a long and arduous journey, but it is an essential step towards holistic healing and the cultivation of a healthy spiritual life.

The process of rebuilding trust begins internally, with oneself. Religious trauma often instills a deep sense of self-doubt and self-blame, leading individuals to question their own judgment and perceptions. Reclaiming one's inner voice, validating one's experiences, and trusting one's own intuition are foundational to extending trust outwards. This involves recognizing that the abuse was not a reflection of one's worth, but rather a failure of those who perpetrated the harm.

Identifying healthy spiritual communities is a critical, yet often challenging, aspect of this healing journey. For many, the instinct after religious trauma is to abandon all forms of organized religion, and for some, this may be the healthiest path. However, for others, the desire for spiritual connection and communal support remains. In such cases, it is vital to seek out communities that prioritize safety, transparency, accountability, and genuine love.

These are communities where questions are welcomed, diversity is celebrated, and individual autonomy is respected. They are characterized by leaders who are humble, empathetic, and committed to the well being of their congregants, rather than to power or control.

The importance of belonging and support cannot be overstated. Humans are inherently relational beings, and a sense of connection is vital for well-being. After the isolation often experienced in religious trauma, finding a community where one feels seen, heard, and valued is profoundly healing. This doesn't necessarily mean finding a new religious institution; it could be a support group, a secular community with shared values, or a network of trusted friends and family. The key is to cultivate relationships where authenticity is encouraged, and where there is mutual respect and genuine care.

Creating safe spaces for vulnerability is paramount within these new foundations. For individuals who have been shamed or punished for expressing doubts, questions, or emotions within a religious context, the ability to be truly vulnerable without fear of judgment or reprisal is revolutionary. This requires intentional effort from both the individual and the community. It means fostering an environment where difficult conversations are not only tolerated but encouraged, where mistakes are seen as opportunities for growth, and where grace abounds. In such spaces, the healing process can deepen, allowing individuals to shed the protective layers they have built and embrace a more authentic and integrated self. Building a new foundation of trust and healthy community is not about replacing what was lost, but about constructing something new and resilient, rooted in genuine connection and unconditional love.

Way 5: Embracing Your Authentic Self: Discovering Your God-Given Gifts

Religious trauma often leaves individuals with a distorted sense of self, particularly regarding their inherent worth and unique abilities. In many rigid religious environments, conformity is prized above individuality, and personal gifts or talents that don't fit within prescribed roles may be suppressed or even condemned. This can lead to a profound disconnect from one's authentic self, as individuals learn to prioritize external validation over internal truth. Healing from religious trauma involves a crucial step: rediscovering and embracing the unique, God-given gifts that reside within each person.

Scripture offers a rich understanding of spiritual gifts, emphasizing their diversity and their purpose in building up the community. 1 Corinthians 12:4-31, Romans 12:4-8, and Ephesians 4:11-13 all speak to the variety of gifts bestowed by the Holy Spirit, ranging from prophecy and teaching to service and administration. These passages highlight that every believer is uniquely gifted, and that these gifts are not for personal glory but for the common good. This biblical perspective stands in stark contrast to environments where gifts are narrowly defined or used to control and manipulate.

Understanding spiritual gifts in a trauma-informed context means recognizing that these gifts are an intrinsic part of who you are, not something you earn or that can be taken away. They are expressions of your authentic self, divinely imprinted and intended for your flourishing and the flourishing of others. Identifying these personal talents and passions may require a process of introspection and exploration, especially if they have been stifled or devalued in the past. This could involve reflecting on what brings you joy, what you are naturally good at, what problems you feel compelled to solve, or what causes ignite your

passion. It's about listening to the quiet whispers of your soul, rather than the loud pronouncements of external authorities.

Making space for your unique contributions is an act of defiance against the narratives of suppression and control. It means creating an environment, both internally and externally, where your gifts can flourish. This might involve pursuing new hobbies, engaging in creative expression, volunteering for causes you care about, or simply allowing yourself to be authentically you in your daily interactions. It's about recognizing that your unique perspective, your particular skills, and your individual passions are not only valuable but necessary for the world to be whole.

Ultimately, using your gifts for healing and service becomes a powerful testament to your journey of recovery. When you embrace your authentic self and deploy your God given talents, you not only contribute to the well-being of others but also reinforce your own sense of purpose and worth. This act of giving, flowing from a place of wholeness rather than obligation, can be deeply restorative. It transforms the narrative from one of brokenness and suppression to one of empowerment, creativity, and divine collaboration, demonstrating that faith, when untainted by harmful religion, truly makes space for all that you are meant to be.

Way 6: Cultivating Inner Peace: Mindfulness and Spiritual Practices

For those who have experienced religious trauma, the inner landscape can often be a turbulent place, filled with echoes of past pain, anxiety, and a pervasive sense of unease. Traditional spiritual practices, which for many are sources of peace and connection, may be tainted by negative associations, making it difficult to find solace within familiar frameworks.

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In this context, cultivating inner peace requires a gentle, trauma-informed approach, often incorporating practices like mindfulness that can help regulate the nervous system and foster a sense of safety within one's own being.

Mindfulness, at its core, is the practice of bringing one's attention to the present moment, without judgment. For trauma survivors, this can be incredibly challenging, as the mind often revisits past hurts or anticipates future threats. However, when introduced gently and with proper guidance, mindfulness can be a powerful tool for regulating emotions, reducing anxiety, and creating a sense of groundedness. It helps individuals observe their thoughts and feelings without being overwhelmed by them, fostering a sense of detachment from the internal chaos that religious trauma can create. Practices like mindful breathing, body scans, and sensory awareness can help reconnect individuals with their bodies in a safe and empowering way, reclaiming a sense of agency over their internal experience.

Prayer and meditation, when re-envisioned outside of rigid religious structures, can also become profound avenues for inner peace. For many, prayer may have been associated with rote recitations, fear-based petitions, or a performance for divine approval. Meditation might have been seen as an esoteric practice or even forbidden. However, at their heart, both are practices of intentional connection—with oneself, with the divine, and with the present moment. Reclaiming these practices involves stripping away the layers of dogma and expectation, allowing for an authentic, unscripted dialogue with the sacred. This might involve contemplative prayer, where one simply rests in God's presence, or silent meditation, where one cultivates inner stillness and listens for the quiet voice of wisdom.

Connecting with God beyond religious structures is a crucial aspect of this journey. For survivors of religious trauma, the image of God may have been distorted by the actions

of human institutions. Healing involves disentangling the divine from the flawed human interpretations, allowing for a more expansive and loving understanding of the sacred. This might mean finding God in nature, in art, in music, in acts of compassion, or in the quiet moments of daily life. It is about recognizing that the divine is not confined to church buildings or specific rituals, but is immanent and accessible in all of creation.

Developing personal spiritual disciplines, tailored to one's unique needs and preferences, is key to sustaining inner peace. This is not about adhering to a prescribed set of rules, but about intentionally cultivating practices that nourish the soul and promote well-being. These might include journaling, creative expression, spending time in nature, engaging in acts of service, or simply creating moments of quiet reflection throughout the day. The goal is to build a spiritual life that is authentic, life giving, and resilient, one that is not dependent on external validation or institutional approval. By embracing these practices, survivors of religious trauma can cultivate a deep well of inner peace, transforming their inner landscape into a sanctuary of healing and spiritual growth.

Way 7: Living a Life of Purpose: Sharing Your Story and Helping Others

The journey of healing from religious trauma, while deeply personal, often culminates in a powerful desire to transform pain into purpose. For many survivors, sharing their story becomes not just an act of catharsis, but a profound way to contribute to the healing of others and to create a ripple effect of hope. This final way emphasizes the outward expression of an inner transformation, demonstrating that even from the ashes of brokenness, a life of profound meaning and impact can emerge.

The power of personal testimony is immense. When individuals bravely share their experiences of religious trauma and their journey toward healing, they break the silence and isolation that often surround such pain. Their stories validate the experiences of others who may be suffering in silence, providing a sense of recognition and reducing feelings of shame and loneliness. A personal testimony is not about dwelling on the past, but about highlighting the resilience of the human spirit and the transformative power of faith, even when religion has caused harm. It offers a beacon of hope, demonstrating that healing is possible and that one is not alone in their struggle.

Transforming pain into purpose involves a conscious decision to leverage one's past experiences for the greater good. This doesn't mean that the pain disappears, but rather that it is integrated into a larger narrative of growth and contribution. For some, this might involve becoming an advocate for religious trauma awareness, speaking out against spiritual abuse, or supporting organizations dedicated to helping survivors. For others, it might manifest in more subtle ways, such as cultivating greater empathy in their personal relationships, choosing professions that align with their values of compassion and justice, or simply living a life that embodies the principles of authentic faith.

Helping others on their healing journey can take many forms. It could be through formal mentorship, leading support groups, or offering informal guidance to friends and family. It might involve creating resources, writing, or engaging in artistic expression that speaks to the experience of religious trauma and healing. The act of helping others not only provides a sense of meaning and fulfillment but also reinforces one's own healing. As you offer support and guidance, you often gain new insights into your own journey, solidifying your understanding and strengthening your resolve.

Creating a ripple effect of hope is the ultimate outcome of this transformative process. When one individual heals and then extends that healing to others, it creates a chain reaction of positive change. It challenges the prevailing narratives of fear and control, replacing them with messages of love, liberation, and authenticity. This ripple effect can extend beyond individual relationships, influencing communities, institutions, and even broader societal conversations about faith, spirituality, and well-being. It is a testament to the profound truth that even when religion breaks, faith can heal, and that from the deepest wounds, the most powerful purpose can emerge.

Conclusion

The journey from religious trauma to authentic faith is not a linear one, nor is it without its challenges. It is a path marked by courage, vulnerability, and a deep commitment to personal and spiritual integrity. Throughout this journal, we have explored seven transformative ways in which faith, when disentangled from the confines of rigid and harmful religious structures, can become a powerful force for healing and wholeness.

We began by understanding the nature of religious trauma, recognizing its profound impact on the mind, body, and spirit, and distinguishing it from a mere crisis of faith. We then delved into the compassionate heart of God, discovering how scripture, when approached with a trauma-informed lens, can serve as a balm for wounded souls, revealing a divine presence that is intimately acquainted with suffering and always draws near to the brokenhearted.

The path to healing also requires the unburdening of the soul through forgiveness— not as

an act of condoning harm, but as a radical act of self-liberation that releases the heavy chains of resentment and bitterness. We explored the vital process of building a new foundation, one rooted in trust and healthy community, where authenticity is celebrated, and vulnerability is met with grace and acceptance.

A crucial aspect of this journey is embracing your authentic self and discovering your God-given gifts. By recognizing and utilizing your unique talents, you not only contribute to the world but also affirm your inherent worth and reclaim the individuality that may have been suppressed. We then turned our attention to cultivating inner peace through mindfulness and spiritual practices, learning to connect with the divine beyond institutional boundaries and to nurture a spiritual life that is deeply personal and restorative.

Finally, we recognized that true healing often culminates in living a life of purpose, sharing your story, and helping others. By transforming your pain into a platform for hope, you create a ripple effect of healing that extends far beyond your own experience, becoming a beacon for those still navigating their own journey out of religious trauma.

As you continue on your path, remember that healing is a process, not a destination. There will be good days and challenging days, moments of clarity and moments of doubt. Be patient with yourself, extend grace, and trust in the inherent capacity of your faith to guide you. Embrace the freedom that comes from knowing that your relationship with the divine is personal, unconditional, and always available. May you continue to walk in courage, embracing a faith that heals, empowers, and illuminates the path to your most authentic and purposeful life.

Reflection Space:

How has religious trauma manifested in your life? What specific experiences come to mind?

What are the key differences you perceive between "faith" and "religion" based on your experiences?

What signs and symptoms of religious trauma resonate most with you?

Reflection Space:

How has scripture been used in your past experiences, both positively and negatively?

Which biblical passages resonate most with you in your healing journey, and why?

How can you approach scripture in a way that promotes healing and avoids re-traumatization?

Reflection Space:

What feelings arise when you consider forgiving those who caused you religious trauma?

What does forgiveness mean to you in the context of your healing? How can you practice self-compassion and release self-blame in your journey?

Reflection Space:

What are your current feelings about trust, especially in spiritual or communal settings?

What qualities would a healthy spiritual community possess for you?

How can you begin to rebuild trust, both internally and externally?

Reflection Space:

What are some of your natural talents, passions, or unique abilities?

How might religious trauma have suppressed or distorted your understanding of these gifts?

In what ways can you begin to embrace and utilize your God-given gifts for your own healing and the benefit of others?

Reflection Space:

What spiritual practices, outside of traditional religious structures, bring you a sense of peace and connection?

How can mindfulness help you navigate difficult emotions related to religious trauma?

What does connecting with the divine mean to you, beyond the confines of organized religion?

Reflection Space:

What aspects of your story are you ready to share, and with whom?

How do you envision transforming your pain into purpose?

What steps can you take to help others on their healing journey, even in small ways?

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