

## INTRODUCTION:

Grace\* was sexually trafficked as a young girl until the age of 22. Her first traffickers were her own family. It began with sexual abuse and moved to exploitation in child pornography. Soon after this, she was sold for sex in her suburban neighborhood. Her family sold her to friends and then eventually to complete strangers. Her father would have people brought into her home and at times she was taken to other homes. Sold, commodified, used, for the purpose of power and pleasure. Eventually she was also sold at motels and hotels and taken out of the country by another trafficker. At the young age of 17, she was trafficked for both sex and labour.

During the time she was being trafficked, she did not receive adequate education. She was told that she was too stupid to do anything but be a prostitute. To add to the horrific details of this story, her family called themselves Christians and used the Bible as a weapon, telling her that children are to obey their parents and if they did not it was considered disobedience to God. Years later after escaping, she sought refuge in a church community. A woman befriends her and says she will become new family for her, a promise to meet a need, and contribute to her healing. Soon this woman would also betray her, recruiting to sell her to a sex trafficker.

Grace's story is one example of hundreds of thousands of cases of sex trafficking, when someone, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion, is brought into the commercial sex industry and sold for an exchange of goods or money (Department of State, 2020). If someone is under the age of 18 and in the commercial sex industry, they are considered victims of sexual exploitation, without proving force, fraud, or coercion. (USA Law)

Furthermore, her story is also an

\*name changed to protect identity

# Complex Trauma and Post-traumatic Growth:

## the impact and healing journey of survivors of sexual trauma

by Dr. Heather Evans, LCSW

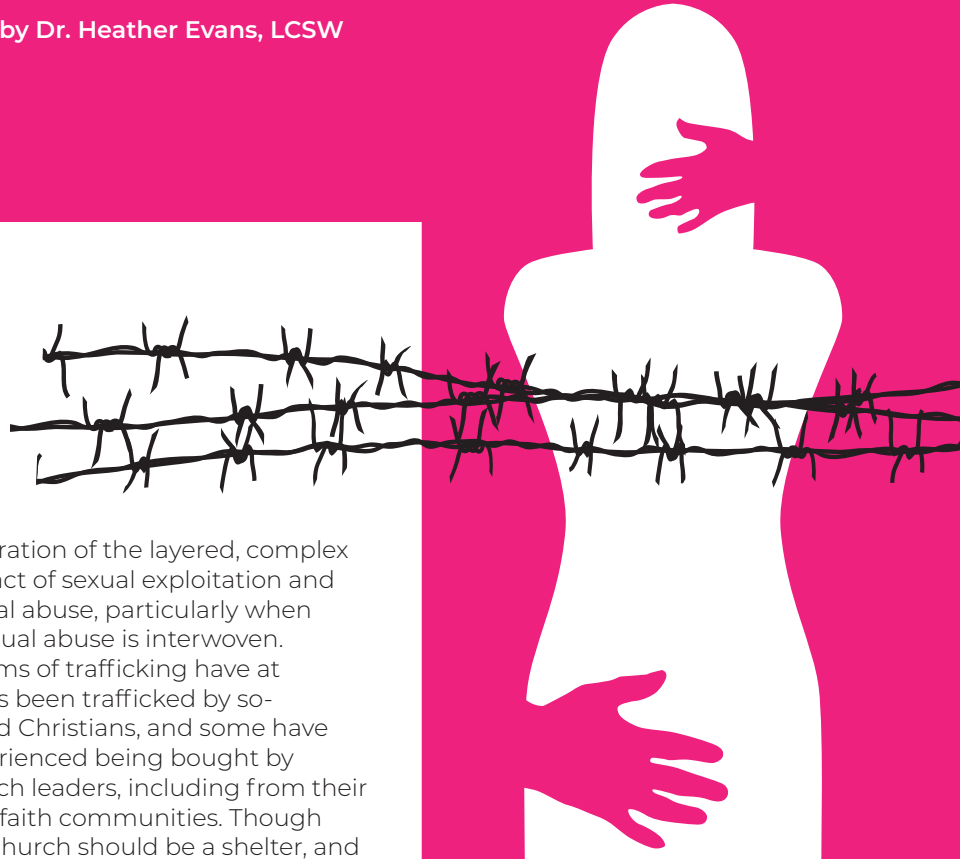


illustration of the layered, complex impact of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse, particularly when spiritual abuse is interwoven. Victims of trafficking have at times been trafficked by so-called Christians, and some have experienced being bought by church leaders, including from their own faith communities. Though the church should be a shelter, and those in positions of leadership and authority should protect, care for and lead, too often the church is a setting for devastating damage, at times occurring within its doors.

### THE #METOO/#CHURCHTOO CRISIS:

Emily Joy Allison, credited as serving as a catalyst for the #churchtoo movement, is another example, groomed and abused by a youth leader. On November 21, 2013 she types this tweet on social media platform, Twitter:

"I certainly didn't know that a romantic relationship between a teenage girl and an adult mentor

in a religious setting was illegal in several states and unethical in all of them. I trusted him explicitly. He was a godly man who had my best interests at heart. He told me that so many times (Allison, 2021, p.8)."

Her tweet was in the wake of the #metoo movement, a social movement against sexual abuse and sexual harassment where people publicise allegations of victimisation. The phrase 'me too' was initially used in this context in 2006 by survivor and activist, Tarana Burke. It was reignited in 2017 after widespread sexual abuse allegations against Harvey

Weinstein. Millions of individuals followed the lead of Weinstein's victims, sharing their own stories of assault and abuse. Soon dozens of languages translated #metoo, making it a global movement.

The church was not immune to these stories of abuse of power. Thus, Emily's tweet quickly went viral and served as a catalyst for other survivors of abuse in church or ministry environments to share their stories, advocate, and connect with one another using the hashtag #churchtoo. In the USA, The Report I of the 40th Statewide Investigating Grand Jury (2018) revealed 300 abusive priests from six diocese in Pennsylvania, describing story after story of sexual and spiritual abuse of children. Boz Tchividjian of Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment (GRACE) reported data gathered from top insurance providers for protestant churches who received 260 reports a year of minors being sexually abused by church leaders or church members (Demuth, 2019). Unfortunately, in many cases of abuse within the church, too often the perpetrator is protected at the expense of victims, who may not be believed and responded to, or may be blamed or forced to confront or forgive perpetrators.

### THE COMPLEX AND COMPREHENSIVE IMPACT OF ABUSE:

What is the cost and impact of this abuse of power? Trauma is a response to a threat to one's physical or mental wellbeing, resulting in one feeling helpless and fearful (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Many victims develop symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. They relive the experience through flashbacks, dreams, images, and sensations. They may avoid reminders of the trauma, such as thoughts, feelings, memories, people, or environments, which may lead to dysregulation of emotion and reliving the trauma. They may be perpetually waiting for danger

(American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Trauma impacts decision-making and emotions, often leading to depression, anxiety, or other mental disorders. Females who are sexually abused are three times more likely to develop psychiatric disorders than females who are not sexually abused. Among male survivors, more than 70% seek psychological treatment for issues such as substance abuse, suicidal thoughts, and attempted suicide (Rhode, et al., 2008; Dube, et al., 2007; Waldrop et al., 2007; Kendler et al., 2000; Voeltanz et al., 1999).

The trauma of sexual exploitation and ongoing sexual abuse can be accurately described as complex trauma, a term formulated to capture trauma that is extreme, chronic, repetitious, interpersonal, and premeditated (Spinazzola, J, Blaustein, M, Kisiel, C, Van der Kolk, B., 2001)

Complex trauma emphasises alterations in six areas: regulation of affect and impulses, attention or consciousness, self-perception, relations with others, somatisation, and systems of meaning (Spinazzola, et al., 2001).

#### Regulation of Affect and Impulses:

Victims of complex trauma may have difficulty managing their emotions, as if they are living on a level of survival. Trauma overwhelms one's system, so one may appear to have extreme reactions to neutral or mild stimuli, and may have difficulty with self-regulation. Victims may appear as restless, angry, reactive or defensive. This 'survival mode' shifts the focus of the brain and body from learning, discovery and openness to anticipate, prevent or protect against damage. This hijacks development, thwarts growth and distracts from healing and freedom (Courtois & Ford, 2009). Trauma is not always visible, and may be hidden by symptoms, which are in fact forms of coping and often destructive, such as substance abuse or dependency, self-injury, or eating disorders.

#### Disturbances in Attention or

**Consciousness:** Individuals experiencing complex trauma, such as abuse or exploitation, report that they have coped using dissociation, or an involuntary separation from these experiences. When an experience becomes overwhelming, various elements (visual, somatic, emotional) may be involuntarily and reflexively split off from one another and from the individual's personal narrative. These 'split off' parts of the experience are typically perceptual or sensory in nature. This means they have only been able to access some information related to the trauma. It is a form of survival, but it thwarts integration of memory, identity and perception (Spinazzola et al., 2001; Ross, et al., 2003) and may become an ongoing reflexive habit.

Victims of complex trauma may be seen as numb, disconnected or emotionally shut down. It may be confusing to someone who doesn't understand this aspect of trauma, because they may have gaps in their memory when explaining their trauma history to law enforcement, family members, or counsellors. There may be changes in their verbal narrative from meeting to meeting. Their facial expressions and affect may not match the horror of what they are sharing. These are indicative of dissociation, but may be misinterpreted as deception, denial or resistant behaviour (TC Institute, 2014).

#### Disturbances in Self-Perception:

To experience trauma is to be given lenses which change one's view of everything, including others, God, and one's self. Abuse victims experience guilt and shame. They may minimise their experience and believe that no one will understand it. They may see themselves as damaged, undesirable and hopeless (Spinazzola, et al., 2001). It impacts identity. In a study of sex trafficking survivors, when asked how the exploitation impacted their identity, the majority of them hesitated and had



difficulty answering this question, acknowledging that identity had been so lost or damaged, handed over to someone who remade them into commodities to be sold for someone else's pleasure. They describe the ongoing journey that took time and effort to rebuild, including discovering their interests, hobbies and values (Evans, 2019).

#### **Disturbances in Relationships:**

Abuse shatters trust, particularly because the majority of victims know their offender (Department of Justice, 1997) and relationship and trust are used as tools of the

abuser (Evans, 2019). When a victim tries to get help, they may not be believed or supported, thus further confirming the mistrust. While relationship and community are among their greatest needs, to a victim they may be experienced as threatening, overwhelming and re-injuring. Our good intentions of helping at times perpetuate lost voice and power when we assume we know what they want and need and act on their behalf. Our vocabulary such as 'I care about you. You are safe here' may mean nothing to them because their categories for what safe and care mean have been shattered.

#### **Biological Self-Regulation:**

Trauma invades on a biological level. Spinazzola et al. (2001) explain that many who have experienced chronic trauma suffer persistent physical complaints, some without medical explanation or intervention. Chronic exposure to stress results in a dysregulation of hormones produced in the stress response system. These hormones prepare the body to mobilise resources to respond to threat. In addition, trauma exposure affects the limbic system and its role in evaluation of emotion perception as well as encoding of memory.

Trauma victims have general difficulties adjusting their level of physiological arousal, which can be described by having overactive sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system. An example of this is an involuntary, exaggerated startle response. An overproduction of some hormones results in general feelings of anxiety, signs of hyperarousal, such as hypervigilance or difficulty sleeping. On the other hand, an underproduction of other hormones, such as serotonin, leads to increased reactivity and emergency responses. In summary, this loss of modulation may appear as heightened irritability, impulsivity, and aggression (Spinazzola et al. 2001).

Some common complaints among individuals with a history of trauma include: Irritable Bowel Syndrome, chronic pelvic pain, headaches, and gastrointestinal challenges (Spinazzola, 2001). Van der Kolk (1996) also has brought attention to the loss of ability to put words to traumatic experiences and therefore, physical symptoms provide trauma survivors with a 'symbolic way of communicating their emotional pain' (Spinazzola et al., 2001).

#### **Disturbances in Meaning Systems:**

Spinazzola et al. (2001) highlight that many who have experienced chronic trauma have a change in their worldview that leads to loss of belief in life having meaning

or purpose. They may question spiritual belief or experience a profound sense of helplessness and loss of hope (TC Institute, 2014). These can significantly impact the capacity to formulate solutions, make choices, act on one's own behalf or implement change in one's life (Spinazzola et al., 2001).

Herman (1992) describes the impact on beliefs for those who have experienced prolonged captivity, such as sexual exploitation. She states victims may be preoccupied with shame, self-loathing and a sense of failure. These alterations in the self and in relationships inevitably results in the questioning of basic tenets of faith. Furthermore, while some have a faith that remains intact or strengthened, the majority of people experience 'the bitterness of being forsaken by God' (p.94). This loss of belief contributes to depression that is prevalent amongst trauma survivors.

**Spiritual Impact:** Trauma has capacity to shape and to shatter meaning. When abuse is perpetrated by a spiritual authority figure, there is devastating impact on the victim and the victim's relationship with God. How can a child think of a heavenly Father

as good and safe if that same child is abused by a 'Father' or spiritual authority at their church or school? They will inevitably see God through the lens of abuse.

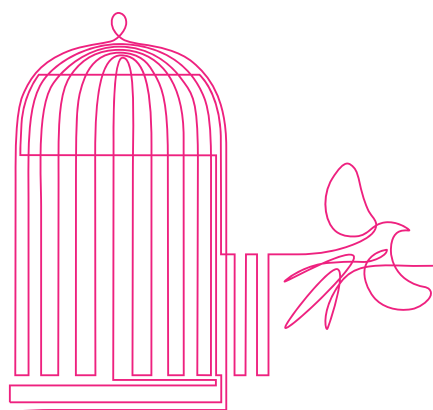
In a study interviewing sex trafficking survivors about the impact of trauma, almost all of the participants mentioned faith or religion. Half of participants credit faith/spirituality as a form of coping or means of survival during the time of being trafficked. More than half described how spiritual beliefs were a part of their healing process after the trafficking experience, describing additional spiritual growth as a result of the trauma. The majority also described struggles and questions related to their faith, including questions and doubts about God's presence and purposes in their experiences. Some of them experienced exploitation at the hands of church leaders and so-called Christian parents, while some of them had experiences of re-traumatisation and re-exploitation within faith communities after they had been trafficked (Evans, 2019).

For the individuals sitting in pews and Bible studies, how do they receive messages about God's love? How do they understand

concepts such as power, submission, and headship? What do they do when they hear God described as Father or hear sermons on forgiveness? What does he think when he hears that God is a refuge in times of trouble and will never abandon us? Or how does she feel when she never hears sexual violence or abuse referenced in teachings?

Many victims believe they must be an exception to the promises of Scripture. They may want to believe in the Scriptures, but truth does not register because it is perceived as contradictory to their experiences. They come to the conclusion that these truths must not apply to them. They must not be worthy of God's care, love, protection, and promises. The betrayal of abuse and the impact of trauma are barriers to Scripture, to Christian community, and to relationship with God. They may be wracked with shame, fear, guilt, hopelessness, or worthlessness, hindering them from Christian fellowship. Therefore, we must see the courage and desperation that it takes for survivors to show up at church services and activities. For those who experienced abuse within a church context, they have been taught lies about God.





What then is our response? Our response has the capacity to perpetuate these lies or demonstrate truth that leads to freedom and healing.

### **THE HEALING JOURNEY:**

In *Counseling Survivors of Sexual Abuse*, Langberg (2003) describes how abuse destroys the image of God—expressed through voice, power, and relationships—in human beings. Abuse silences voice, renders one helpless, and destroys the fabric of trust in relationship. Therefore, the healing of abuse must be the reversal of its impact. It must restore voice and power in the context of a safe, healing relationship. This means that everything we do and say, as institutions, leaders, and as loved ones, must be the reversal of the trauma and abuse of power.

If trauma silences, then we promote voice, by asking, listening, believing and bearing witness, repeatedly and for as long as it takes. If trauma misuses power and results in helplessness, we empower those who have been victimised, by offering choice, promoting relational safety, not assuming we understand need but coming alongside them in ways that help them increase agency. We become a student of survivors, asking them what they need, connecting them with resources, and being willing to accompany them physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

If the trauma of abuse shatters relationship, we represent God accurately in truth, love, grace, mercy, and compassion. We care more for the protection of survivors, than the reputation of a person or organisation. We become representatives of God to the survivor. Our work is to teach in the seen that which is true in the unseen. Our words, tone of voice, actions, body movements, response to rage, fear, failure all become ways that the survivor learns about God. We try to represent God, as the survivor struggles with questions about God (Langberg, 2003).

Experts in complex trauma have outlined a three-phase treatment model that provides a foundation for trauma healing intervention. The safety and stabilisation phase is the foundation of treatment and a phase returned to repeatedly. Memory work is when a silenced voice is recovered and one begins to make meaning and find truth in the trauma narrative. Reconnecting or reintegration implies how a person recovers and lives after enduring the trauma (Spinazzola et al, 2001; Herman, 1992, Langberg, 2003).

### **POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH**

Grace spent two years at a residential program for survivors of sex trafficking. It was here that she learned the definition of human trafficking and that 'choice was not a choice.' She learned about trauma, and began learning to

regulate her emotions, stating it took at least five year to reach safety and stabilisation, the first stage of addressing complex trauma. She reports they had a dog, and she was able to first connect to the dog before she could connect with people. She was encouraged to get her education. Initially doubtful, she now has her master's degree and is in a doctoral program, attributing education as giving her a reason to live. She got married, and is working through how to build trust and intimacy with another person. She needed medical intervention due to extensive issues resulted from the abuse. She describes being numb, dissociative, self-destructive, angry, resistant.

The healing journey is slow, incremental, repetitious, intentional work. It requires a community, not just one professional, but a comprehensive team of support. Among other survivors, when Grace is asked what was most helpful, she describes relationships, those who believed in her and encouraged her towards her gifts and talents, those who helped her discover her identity and goal and dreams, and then promoted her to reach them, and those who served as models for what healthy relationship should include.

Grace is also an example of post-traumatic growth (PTG), defined as positive psychological change experienced as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances. PTG does

not mean a return to 'normal' or baseline after experiencing trauma, but an experience of growth that for some may be deeply profound. It is distinct from the term resilience, which can be defined as 'the power or ability to return to original form or positive after being bent, compressed or stretched' (Calhoun, L. G., & Tedeschi, R. G., 2006, p.11), where PTG describes a growth from where one was at before experiencing trauma. It is not necessarily a lessening of distress or symptoms, but rather that those who have experienced trauma are living richer, fuller, more meaningful lives. In a study of domestic sex trafficking survivors, all participants reported aspects of post-traumatic growth (Evans, 2019).



## While the impact of trauma is complex and multi-faceted, there is often great evidence of posttraumatic growth

The five domains of PTG include personal strength, new possibilities, relating to others, appreciation of life, and spiritual change (Calhoun, L. G., & Tedeschi, R. G., 2006).

Personal strength refers to an individual identifying and being surprised by his/her power or strength. The phrase to summarise this area of growth is 'vulnerable yet stronger' or 'I am more vulnerable than I thought, but much stronger than I ever imagined' (p.5). Survivors learn to find voice, set boundaries in relationships and move from survival to living, set on their goals and dreams.

New possibilities include the development of new interests, sometimes related to the trauma they experience. Grace has many

examples, including discovering her interests, learning photography, receiving an education, and starting a nonprofit organisation to help other survivors.

Relating to others refers to a greater connection to other people and increased compassion for those who suffer. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2006) report in their qualitative data that this increased experience of compassion translates into a greater degree of frequency of altruistic acts. It is common for survivors of abuse to desire to help others at some point in their healing journey, which seems to be a part of their own healing. Grace attributes the relationship with a couple, who became their adopted families, as the reason she was able to eventually trust and connect to her husband.

An increased appreciation for life or a changed sense of what is of most importance may occur for those who have experienced threat or danger in their suffering. Survivors express a deeper appreciation even for the ordinary, overlooked aspects of life, a change in perception where they have a greater capacity to see and appreciate beauty, which seems to become a defiance against the dark, ugliness of sexual trauma.

Finally, some individuals who have experienced trauma report increased spiritual or existential meaning in their lives (Little, S. G., Akin-Little, A, Somerville, M. P

(2011). In fact, Tedeschi and Calhoun report that it is in this domain that they observe the most significant PTG. This growth reflects a greater sense of purpose and meaning in life, greater satisfaction, and greater clarity with answers given to fundamental existential questions. Grace acknowledges the ongoing journey of detangling her faith and spiritual beliefs from the sexual and spiritual abuse she endured, but attributes her faith as one major source of healing.

### CONCLUSION:

While the impact of trauma is complex and multi-faceted, there is often great evidence of posttraumatic growth, particularly seen in individuals' deep appreciation for life, ability to see beauty and perceive deeply and finding greater meaning in experiences of life, particularly helping others. Furthermore, while relationships are most significantly impacted from abuse, they are also considered the greatest instrument of healing, through offering long-term commitment and belief in the individual. Finally, while there is significant loss for those who have endured abuse and exploitation, including trust, voice, power, identity and relationships, there is evidence of finding and utilising their voice and power in significant ways.



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### Dr Heather Evans, LCSW

#### About the author

Heather will be at ACC's "Four Winds" Online Conference in November 2021. Dr. Heather Evans is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker with a private group counseling practice in Coopersburg, Pennsylvania, with 20 years' experience providing therapy, particularly specializing in sexual trauma and sex trafficking. Heather has authored two books from her research on complex trauma and posttraumatic growth in sex trafficking survivors. She is Co-Founder of Valley Against Sex Trafficking in Pennsylvania and adjunct professor of Global Trauma Recovery Institute, traveling internationally to train trauma healing caregivers.

