LEARN RELIGION THERAPY · 3.0 CE HOURS

Understanding and Unraveling Emotional Neglect Through Religion

Recognizing what was missing in high-demand religious systems

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BEFORE WE BEGIN

This is not about leaving or staying

- Clients who stay: Healing can happen inside a faith that still matters to them
- Clients who question: Doubt is part of development, not a symptom
- Clients who left: Leaving does not erase what was learned

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OUR TIME TOGETHER

Today’s agenda

- 0:00 Welcome and framing
- 0:15 What emotional neglect is
- 0:30 Neglect in high-demand religion
- 0:50 Adult clinical presentations
- 1:05 Conditional worth and core beliefs
- 1:30 Break
- 1:45 Passing it down
- 2:00 Assessment and mapping
- 2:30 Clinical interventions
- 2:55 The therapist’s seat
- 3:05 Integration and Q&A

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of today you will be able to

1. Define high-demand religion and religion as culture
2. Describe four forms of emotional neglect
3. Identify how emotional neglect is experienced in high-demand communities
4. Recognize adult clinical presentations
5. Explain how conditional worth becomes a core belief
6. Describe attachment rupture with self

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of today you will be able to

7. Describe how conditional worth passes across generations
8. Use reflective assessment questions without pathologizing faith
9. Map beliefs, emotional rules, protectors and unmet needs
10. Separate religious identity from emotional neglect
11. Apply interventions for shame, grief, loyalty and identity
12. Identify how our own history shapes the work

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Religion is culture

- Religion shapes values, family roles, emotion rules and identity
- It deserves the same multicultural humility
  we bring to race, ethnicity or gender
- Hays's ADDRESSING framework names Religion
  and spiritual orientation as a core identity
- Religion intersects with gender, sexuality, race, family of origin, age,
  socioeconomic status, disability, indigenous heritiage, and more

Cohen, 2009; Hays, 2022; Comas-Díaz et al., 2019

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OBJECTIVE 1

What makes a system high demand

Conformity: Strong expectations for how to act, look and believe

Belonging: Love and community feel tied to meeting those expectations

Cost: Questioning or leaving carries a real relational cost

Authority: Leaders or doctrine define the inner life, not just behavior

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Religion lives on a spectrum



Flexible/Structured

- Questions and doubt are allowed
- Feelings are welcome, not judged as spiritual failings
- Belonging doesn’t depend on behavior or belief

High Demand

- Heavy expectations for time, behavior, belief and appearance
- Feelings are labeled as sin or weak faith
- Belonging is conditional on meeting expectations

High Demand

- Expectations are enforced through surveillance and punishment
- Contact with outsiders is limited or cut off
- Leaving costs family, community and identity

> A religion, a family, a sect or one form of a faith can sit anywhere on this line.

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THE FAR END OF THE SPECTRUM

IBLP and FLDS

IBLP: Institute in Basic Life Principles.

FLDS: Fundamentalist LDS Church.

Shared: authority over nearly all of family life.

For a child: obedience over the inner world.

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ASK, DON’T ASSUME

Traditions to ask about

- Adventist
- Anabaptist
- Buddhist
- Catholic
- Evangelical
- Hindu
- Jehovah’s Witness
- Jewish
- Latter-day Saint
- Muslim
- Orthodox Christian
- Pentecostal
- Sikh
- Spiritual or nonreligious

> Ask where the family sat on the spectrum, not just which faith.

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PAUSE AND REFLECT

What did you learn about feelings growing up?

Which feelings were welcome?
Which ones were not?

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PART ONE

What is emotional neglect

Objective 2 · 15 minutes



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THE CORE REFRAME

Stop asking: “What happened?”

Start asking: **“What was missing?”**

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OBJECTIVE 2

Emotional neglect is an act of omission

- A child's emotional needs go consistently unmet: comfort, attunement, validation and help making sense of feelings
- It is not a single event
- Caregivers can be loving, present and well-intentioned
- Professionals give neglect lower priority than other maltreatment, especially emotional neglect



Gibbs et al., 2024

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OBJECTIVE 2

Four forms of emotional neglect

Absence: No one is emotionally there when the child needs them

Dismissal: Feelings are minimized, redirected or brushed aside

Misattunement: The response does not match the child’s actual need

Emotional rules: Spoken or unspoken rules about which feelings are allowed

Based on Glaser, 2002

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OBJECTIVE 2

Misattunement in a moment

A child is scared

↓

She needs comfort

↓

She is told to pray harder

↓

She learns fear means she is failing

The caregiver responded. The response did not match the need.

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OBJECTIVE 2 · RESEARCH

How parents respond to a child's feelings

SUPPORTIVE

- Encourage it: "It's okay to cry."
- Comfort the feeling
- Help solve the problem

NON-SUPPORTIVE

- Minimize it → dismissal
- Punish it → emotional rules
- Get distressed by it → misattunement

Markoulaki et al., 2025

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OBJECTIVE 2 · RESEARCH

Love does not cancel dismissal

- In the research, warm and supportive moments did not offset minimizing or punishing ones
- A loving, faithful family can still dismiss feelings
- Clients often defend their parents with the good memories

Both are true: the love and what was missing

Markoulaki et al., 2025

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OBJECTIVE 2

Why it is so hard to see

- Quiet distress: Internalizing kids draw less attention than disruptive ones
- Lasting effects: Childhood neglect has enduring effects on the developing brain
- No story to tell: Clients describe a loving home and cannot name what hurt

Baer et al., 2026; Teicher & Samson, 2016; Sulstarova et al., 2025

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PART TWO

Emotional neglect inside high-demand religion

Objective 3 · 20 minutes



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OBJECTIVE 3

The unspoken contract

Act a certain way

↓

Look a certain way

↓

Believe a certain way

↓

Receive love, worth and belonging

Meeting those expectations can mean setting aside parts of the self.

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OBJECTIVE 4

Children make meaning

A need goes unmet

↓

The child explains why

↓

The explanation is about her

↓

It becomes a belief

Children rarely conclude “My parents could not meet this need.”
They conclude “Something is wrong with me.”

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OBJECTIVE 3

Needs that go unseen

- Attention goes to obedience, worthiness and image
- The child’s inner world gets less attention than her behavior
- Grief is redirected: “Have more faith” instead of comfort
- Family and church needs come first; her needs feel selfish



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OBJECTIVE 3 · RESEARCH

Culture decides what counts as neglect

Community responsibility: Who is supposed to notice the child?

Gender roles: Mothers are often judged more harshly

Kinship and lineage: Whose child is this, and whose job?

Obedience and respect: Withdrawal can be called discipline

Abdullah & Thattengat, 2025

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OBJECTIVE 3 · RESEARCH

When withdrawal is called discipline

- Withdrawing care after disobedience was often not seen as neglect
- Some children read punishment as a sign of love
- Some could not name what was wrong: “I don’t understand”

In high-demand systems, withdrawn love can be called righteousness

Abdullah & Thattengat, 2025

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OBJECTIVE 3 · PATTERNS

Same patterns, many traditions

- Scrupulosity
- Purity culture
- Worthiness and performance
- Identity conflict
- Loss of belonging
- Spiritual bypassing

> **As a system moves toward high demand, the same patterns appear across traditions. They overlap. None belongs to one faith.**

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HIGH-DEMAND PATTERN

Scrupulosity

AS A CHILD

- Confessing “sins” over and over
- Fear of being unworthy
- Praying or repenting to feel safe

AS AN ADULT

- Intrusive guilt and moral anxiety
- Constant reassurance seeking
- Cannot rest without earning it

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HIGH-DEMAND PATTERN

Purity culture

AS A CHILD

- Body and desire framed as dangerous
- Girls made responsible for others
- No words for curiosity or consent

AS AN ADULT

- Shame or numbness around sex
- Disconnected from the body
- Fear of their own desire

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HIGH-DEMAND PATTERN

Worthiness and performance

AS A CHILD

- Approval follows obedience
- Happiness as proof of goodness
- Sadness read as failing

AS AN ADULT

- Perfectionism, overfunctioning
- Worth tied to output
- Hides struggle to look okay

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HIGH-DEMAND PATTERN

Identity conflict

AS A CHILD

- Learns part of self is sin
- Hides who they are
- Belonging feels conditional

AS AN ADULT

- “If I’m fully me, I lose my people”
- Chronic hiding and loneliness
- Rupture with self or family

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HIGH-DEMAND PATTERN

Loss of belonging

AS A CHILD

- Sees what happens to those who leave
- Learns love can be withdrawn
- Keeps doubt secret

AS AN ADULT

- Grieves people still alive
- Expects rejection everywhere
- Higher risk of depression and PTSD

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HIGH-DEMAND PATTERN

Spiritual bypassing

AS A CHILD

- “Have more faith” instead of comfort
- “Everything happens for a reason”
- Pain treated as the problem

AS AN ADULT

- Rushes past grief
- Forgives before processing
- Guilt for struggling at all

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PAUSE AND REFLECT

Where does your client's family sit on the spectrum?

And where does your client's own experience of it sit?

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OBJECTIVE 3

The common thread

Absence: Busy serving, busy praying, busy being good

Dismissal: “Count your blessings”

Misattunement: A scripture or lesson when comfort was needed

Emotional rules: Feelings sorted into righteous and sinful

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OBJECTIVE 3 · RESEARCH

Where neglect becomes abuse

- Emotional neglect: needs that go unmet
- Spiritual abuse: coercion and control using religious authority
- Many clients experienced both
- Researchers note a clear definition is still needed

Oakley et al., 2018

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PART THREE

From the child’s beliefs to the adult in your office

Objective 4 · 15 minutes



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OBJECTIVE 4

Children make meaning

- A need goes unmet
- The child explains why
- The explanation is about her
- It becomes a belief

> **Children rarely conclude “My parents could not meet this need.”**
> **They conclude “Something is wrong with me.”**

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OBJECTIVE 4

What the child learns

AS A CHILD	THE BELIEF THAT FORMS	AS AN ADULT
Anger, doubt or sadness is called sinful	“My feelings are wrong.”	Numbness, anxiety, trouble naming emotions
Love follows obedience and worthiness	“I am loved when I am good.”	Perfectionism, shame after mistakes
Questions are treated as rebellion	“I cannot trust my own mind.”	Scrupulosity, decision paralysis, deferring to authority

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OBJECTIVE 4

What the child learns, continued

AS A CHILD	THE BELIEF THAT FORMS	AS AN ADULT
Family and church needs always come first	“My needs are selfish.”	People pleasing, hyper-independence, cannot ask for help
Grief is redirected to faith	“Sad means I am failing.”	“I’m fine,” hidden depression, performing okay
Belonging depends on fitting in	“If I am fully me, I lose my people.”	Hiding parts of self, fear of rejection, chronic loneliness

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OBJECTIVE 4

How it shows up in the room

- Shame: Chronic sense of being not enough
- Perfectionism: Worth tied to performance
- People pleasing: Reading the room before herself
- Numbness: Cannot say what she feels
- Hyper-independence: Never asks, never leans
- Unknown needs: “I don't know what I want”

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OBJECTIVE 4 · RESEARCH

What the research shows

- 30 studies: Systematic review and meta-analysis, childhood through adolescence
- More dysregulation: With rejecting, harsh, punitive and psychologically controlling parenting
- Less dysregulation: With warmth, support and authoritative parenting

> **Dysregulation includes suppression, avoidance and rumination, not just big emotions.**

Goagoses et al., 2023

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OBJECTIVE 4

Protectors, not pathology

- Perfectionism kept her worthy
- People pleasing kept her safe and included
- Hyper-independence protected her when needs were treated as a burden
- Numbness kept forbidden feelings out of sight

Every one of these strategies made sense once.

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OBJECTIVE 4

Religious and spiritual struggles

Divine: Anger or disappointment toward God

Demonic: Fear of the devil or evil forces

Moral: Guilt about falling short

Doubt: Distress about beliefs

Ultimate meaning: Questioning life’s purpose

Interpersonal: Conflict with people or institutions

Exline et al., 2014

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PAUSE AND REFLECT

Which belief from these slides do you hear most often in your office?

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PART FOUR

How conditional worth becomes a core belief

Objectives 5 and 6 · 25 minutes



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Conditional regard

- Affection given when a child meets expectations and withdrawn when she does not
- Children comply, but through introjection: an inner sense of “I have to”
- Self-esteem rises and falls with performance
- Resentment toward parents and lower well-being

Assor et al., 2004; Haines & Schutte, 2023

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OBJECTIVE 5

The developmental questions spiral

Relational safety: “Will you come when I need you?”

Autonomy and competence: “Can I be my own person?”

Repair and conflict: “If we disagree, are we still okay?”

Meaning and belonging: “Do I belong as I am?”

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OBJECTIVE 5

From experience to belief

Repeated experience

↓

Emotional rule

↓

Core belief

↓

Organizes adult life

“I am loved when I am good.” “My needs are a burden.” “I cannot trust myself.”

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OBJECTIVE 6

Attachment rupture with self

- A disconnection from one’s own emotions, needs and identity that develops when parts of the self are set aside to maintain belonging
- The child keeps her attachment to family, community and God

The cost is her attachment to herself

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OBJECTIVE 6

From the outside,

it looks like emotional neglect.

From the inside,

it is an attachment rupture with self.

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A CLIENT’S VOICE

When the self goes quiet

“I don’t know what I want.
I only know what I’m supposed to want.”



Composite client statement

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BREAK

15 minutes

Notice what you need right now.
Then give yourself that.

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PART FIVE

Passing it down

Objective 7 · 15 minutes



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OBJECTIVE 7 · RESEARCH

Attachment passes across generations

- A real link: Caregiver attachment and child attachment are meaningfully associated
- A transmission gap: Part of how it passes is still unexplained
- Conditional regard repeats: Mothers who experienced it were more likely to use it

Verhage et al., 2016, 2018; Assor et al., 2004

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OBJECTIVE 7

How conditional worth passes down

- Primarily through misattunement, not doctrine alone
- A parent’s own nervous system and beliefs shape the response
- Most parents are acting out of love and fear for their child

What was never given is hard to give

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OBJECTIVE 7

When one generation steps out

- Family rupture often follows a child who questions or leaves
- Leaving can mean losing family, friends and identity at once
- Loss with a living person is a real grief
- Cycle breakers need support, not just courage



Ransom et al., 2022; Levi-Belz & Yalon, 2023; Goagoses et al., 2023

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PART SIX

Assessment and case conceptualization

Objectives 8 and 9 · 30 minutes



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OBJECTIVE 8

Reflective assessment questions

- “When you were sad or scared as a child, what happened next?”
- “Which feelings were welcome in your home? Which were not?”
- “What did you learn you had to do to belong?”
- “Who could you go to with doubt?”
- “What did your faith mean to you, and what did it cost you?”
- “When you cried, did someone comfort you, fix it, get upset or tell you to stop?”

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OBJECTIVE 8

Assess without pathologizing faith

ASK ABOUT

- What was missing
- What she learned about feelings
- What belonging required
- What faith gives her now

AVOID

- Assuming she wants to leave
- Labeling her family or faith
- Debating doctrine
- Rushing to forgive or to rage

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OBJECTIVE 9

The mapping framework

Symptoms → Belief system → Emotional rules → Protectors → Unmet needs

Core question: What belief is organizing this system?

Beliefs organize every layer. Context surrounds it all: family, gender, culture, religion, neurotype and generational patterns.

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CASE VIGNETTE

Meet Maya

- 34, raised in a high-demand faith community
- Comes in for anxiety and
  “not being able to rest”
- Describes a close, faithful, loving family
- Recently stepped back from church;
  her parents are hurt
- Apologizes when she tears up;
  asks how your week is going



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CASE VIGNETTE

Mapping Maya

Beliefs:	My worth depends on being good. My needs are selfish.
Emotional rules:	Be grateful. Don’t question. Don’t complain.
Protectors:	Perfectionism, people pleasing, over-functioning, numbing
Unmet needs:	Comfort, being seen, permission to doubt, belonging as she is

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SMALL GROUPS · 15 MINUTES

Map a client together

- Use Maya or a de-identified client of your own
- Name the symptoms, then the organizing belief
- Add emotional rules, protectors and unmet needs
- Ask: where did she learn this?

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PART SEVEN

Clinical interventions

Objectives 10 and 11 · 25 minutes



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OBJECTIVE 10

Separate faith from the wound

HER RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

- Values she chooses
- Spiritual practices that nourish her
- Community that feels safe now
- Her own relationship with the sacred

THE EMOTIONAL NEGLECT

- Conditional worth
- Feelings labeled as sin
- Needs that went unseen
- Belonging that required hiding

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OBJECTIVE 10 · RESEARCH

Watch for spiritual bypassing

- Using spiritual beliefs or practices to avoid difficult feelings
- Pushing forgiveness before the hurt is processed
- “Everything happens for a reason” too soon

Clients may bypass; so can therapists

Fox et al., 2017

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INTERVENTION 1 · OBJECTIVE 11

Trace the belief to where it was learned

“When did you first learn your needs were a burden?”

“What did that younger you need in that moment?”

Offer now what was missing then

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INTERVENTION 2 · OBJECTIVE 11

Make room for grief

Community and identity

Family closeness, as it was or as it could have been

The childhood she needed and did not have

Certainty, meaning and a sense of home

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INTERVENTION 3 · OBJECTIVE 11

Hold loyalty and hurt together

“Your parents loved you, and you needed more.”

Loyalty is not denial; it is attachment

Both/and replaces either/or

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INTERVENTION 4 · OBJECTIVE 11

Build self-compassion and an emotional vocabulary

Name feelings without a moral label

Practice what she missed: encourage, comfort, help solve

Resilience after childhood maltreatment is possible

Deitz, 2024; Fares-Otero et al., 2025

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PART EIGHT

The therapist’s seat

Objective 12 · 10 minutes



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OBJECTIVE 12 · RESEARCH

Our history comes with us

- Helpers carry histories: ACEs are reported more often among health and social care workers than the general population
- It shapes the calling: Most clinical MSW students said their own mental health history shaped their career choice

Mercer et al., 2023; Cuseglio, 2026

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OBJECTIVE 12

Two common risks

IF YOU LEFT A HIGH-DEMAND RELIGION

- You may unintentionally push clients toward leaving

IF YOU REMAIN DEVOUT

- You may unintentionally minimize harm

Your history shapes which client beliefs feel familiar, threatening or easy to dismiss.

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PAUSE AND REFLECT

What does your own history pull you toward in this work?

Stay, leave, rescue, defend, avoid?

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INTEGRATION

What to take with you

- Emotional neglect is what was missing, not what happened
- Children turn unmet needs into beliefs about themselves
- Those beliefs organize the adult in your office
- Separate faith from the wound; never make faith the problem
- Your own history is in the room too

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CLOSING

Healing does not require leaving.
It requires coming home to yourself.

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Stay in Touch

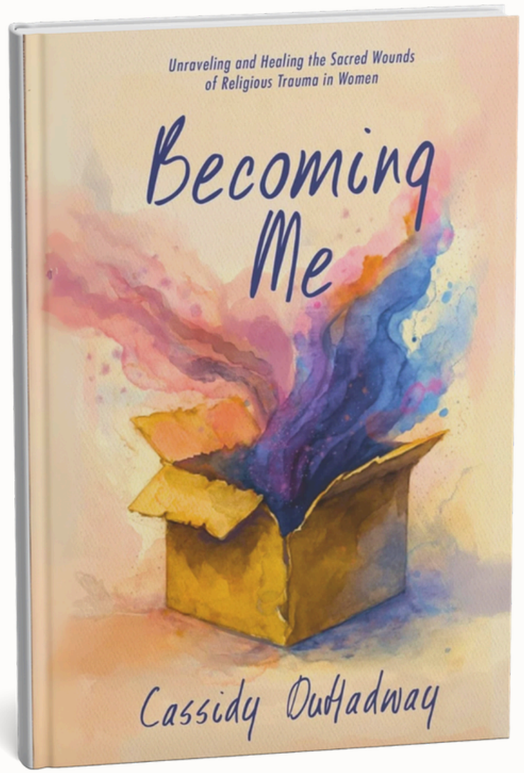
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Becoming Me

Unraveling and Healing the Sacred Wounds of Religious Trauma in Women

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