

# Trauma, Recovery, and Growth

Positive Psychological Perspectives on Posttraumatic Stress

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## CHAPTER 6

# Broken Vows: Divorce as a Spiritual Trauma and Its Implications for Growth and Decline

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**A**N ENDURING WONDER of human nature is that many people respond to tragic events by experiencing posttraumatic growth (Linley & Joseph, 2004). They often become stronger personally and deepen their connections to other people as well as their faith life. Individuals commonly attribute such psychological, social, and spiritual growth to spiritual resources, such as having a loving relationship with God, engaging in spiritual exercises, or obtaining support from fellow believers (Pargament & Ano, 2004). However, traveling down a spiritual road to triumph over profound stressors is not necessarily straightforward or easy. Such a journey can be thwarted when spirituality itself creates roadblocks. One such roadblock occurs when traumatic events are interpreted as a violation or a loss of something sacred to the individual. Individuals who view stressful events not only as unpredictable and devastating, but also as negative spiritual experiences suffer what we refer to as a *spiritual trauma*. On the one hand, spiritual trauma can mire people in painful spiritual struggles, as illustrated by a divorcee who is unable to move beyond feelings of betrayal by God for the loss of a once sacred marriage. On the other hand, the deep discomfort created by spiritual traumas and struggles may push people to seek out new, or draw on well-worn, spiritual resources rather than turn away from the spiritual realm altogether. Such efforts may facilitate longrange psychological as well as spiritual growth in the healing Pft) "cess.

In this chapter, we elaborate a dynamic model of spiritual coping to help scholars and practitioners appreciate spirituality's potential to facilitate growth when disaster strikes, as well as many of the pitfalls in this process. Our hope is to move researchers beyond simplistic views on spirituality's role in trauma and to help therapists guide clients out of spiritual quagmires and toward growth when faced with devastation. We focus on divorce to illustrate the model's clinical usefulness in applied settings and we relay new findings about spiritual coping with divorce to inspire researchers interested in spirituality and trauma.

Divorce is well suited to our purposes because, like other traumatic events, it can unexpectedly occur and severely disrupt every aspect of an individual's life. Studies have long documented the psychological problems that can accompany this life transition such as depression, anxiety, emotional distress, and identity crises (e.g., Bloom, Asher, & White, 1978; Kitson & Raschke, 1981; Weiss, 1975). Furthermore, divorce unfolds against a backdrop in which marriage has been elevated to the position of a paramount sacred institution (Mahoney & Tarakeshwar, 2005). Divorce causes marital relationships to fall from this sacred pedestal and thus may often be appraised in an intensely negative spiritual light. Furthermore, religious institutions offer divorcing individuals little in the way of spiritual teachings, scriptural stories, or rituals that could facilitate effective spiritual coping responses with this painful transition. This was highlighted by Smith and Smith (2000) who found that the religious organizations of 343 laypeople living in the greater New York area did not provide much support and assistance specific to coping with divorce. As a result, divorce can leave people mired in spiritual struggles, unable to find healthy spiritual responses to this event. Nevertheless, those who can turn to their faith in positive ways may reap rich rewards.

Remarkably, the complex interplay of divorce and spiritual coping has received little empirical scrutiny. We located only three published studies that directly examine this topic. Greeff and Merwe (2004) studied resiliency factors as reported by either one parent or one adolescent from 98 divorced families. In 51% of the cases, faith was identified as an important coping resource, especially by parents. Blomquist (1985) and Nathanson (1995) each qualitatively interviewed a handful of divorcing individuals about spirituality's role in divorce, and both found that spirituality facilitated postdivorce adjustment and growth. Given these initial findings as well as estimates that nearly half of the roughly 90% of married Americans with a religious group affiliation are likely to divorce (Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2001), spirituality's role in facilitating or hindering divorce adjustment merits far more attention (Ladd & Zvonkovic, 1995). With this goal in mind, we recently conducted a study of 100 adults who had filed for divorce within the past 6 months and collected both quantitative data and qualitative written comments about their views of their divorce (Krumrei, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2007). In this chapter, we highlight findings from this initial effort to examine spiritual coping with divorce. Because of the scarcity of research aimed directly at this topic, we also offer many clinical examples to flesh out our conceptual model, hoping that others will follow suit by researching these ideas.

#### MODEL OF SPIRITUAL COPING WITH TRAUMA AND SUBSEQUENT GROWTH: DIVORCE AS AN ILLUSTRATION

We begin by offering our basic definition of *spirituality*. We conceptualize spirituality as "the search for the sacred" (Pargament & Mahoney, 2002). Concepts of God, divinity, and transcendent reality are at the center of our definition of the sacred. However, virtually any aspect of life can become part of the sacred by its association with, or representation of, divinity (Pargament & Mahoney, 2002, 2005). Therefore, spirituality includes the many means that people use to incorporate the sacred into their lives, including the beliefs, experiences, rituals, and communities that they associate with supernatural forces.

In turn, *spiritual coping* integrates the search for the sacred into Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) classic tripartite theory of coping consisting of (1) primary and secondary appraisals of a stressor, (2) cognitive or behavioral strategies to deal the event, and (3) sought-after outcomes of coping. The concept of the sacred sets spiritual coping apart from secular forms of coping because a spiritual dimension is folded into the other elements. This conceptualization reflects Pargament's definition of *religious coping* as "a search for significance in times of stress in ways related to the sacred." Pargament (1997) theorized that life events can be interpreted in spiritual terms (spiritual coping appraisals), that unique spiritual pathways are available to cope with stress (spiritual coping processes), and that the destinations people strive to reach through coping processes can be imbued with sacred significance. Although Pargament has previously labeled this process as religious coping, we use the term spiritual coping here for two reasons. First, the field of the psychology of religion has increasingly deemphasized the role of formal, institutional religion in peoples' lives and, second, modern people are increasingly pursuing nontraditional routes as well as traditional pathways in their searches for the sacred.

#### SPIRITUAL TRAUMAS AND NEGATIVE SPIRITUAL APPRAISALS

##### *Parameters of a Spiritual Trauma*

Naturally, a person must experience a traumatic event to cope with it and then grow. The first question is, what constitutes a traumatic event? Consistent with prior research, we adhere to Calhoun and Tedeschi's (2006, p. 3) view of the terms "trauma, crisis, major stressor, and related terms as essentially synonymous expressions to describe circumstances that significantly challenge or invalidate important components of the individual's assumptive world." Such events profoundly disrupt the ability of people to understand, predict, or control their life. The more pervasive the implications of the event, the more traumatic it is. Divorce is a potentially traumatic event. Few get married with the expectation that their marriage will fail, despite recent Census Bureau estimates that as many as 50% of married individuals who are now in their 40s will or have experienced divorce (Kreider, 2005). Further, most couples build a life together, with the accompanying personal sacrifices in career, personal, or home life, based on the premise that the relationship will be permanent. Divorce violates such expectations, bringing with it widespread changes in assumptions people have about the course of their entire life. In addition, divorce usually triggers major disruption, at least temporarily, across multiple domains of life including social, financial, parental, residential, and vocational (e.g., Amato, 2000; Brown, Felton, Whiteman, & Manela, 1980; Kitson, Barbri, Roach, & Placidi, 1989; Walters-Chapman, Price, & Serovich, 1995).

Of particular interest here are the ways that life crises such as divorce challenge or invalidate certain spiritually based assumptions about how the world operates. Extending Calhoun and Tedeschi's view of trauma, we propose that a spiritual trauma occurs when an event severely disrupts the individual's spiritual orienting system, which refers to a generalized set of spiritual beliefs, practices, and relationships. Further, we extend Lazarus and Folkman's premises that a person's appraisals of an event shape the degree to which that event is experienced as traumatic. Thus, a spiritual trauma occurs to the degree to which an event is viewed as threatening and damaging to an individual's core spiritual values and goals (primary coping appraisal), accompanied by an appraisal of spiritual resources available to manage the stressor (secondary coping appraisal). A sufficiently distressing event provokes subsequent spiritual coping methods to reestablish an individual's spiritual foundation. In our model, we have identified two spiritual appraisals of stressful events that constitute a serious challenge or invalidation of spiritual expectations and that would intensify the

perceived threat and damage by the event: sacred loss and desecration. To set the stage for a discussion of these pernicious spiritual appraisals, we must first review the meaning of another concept-sanctification.

*Sanctification* The term *sanctification* refers to perceiving an aspect of life as having divine character and significance (Mahoney et al., 1999; Pargament & Mahoney, in press). Two such processes have been identified in pro .. research. *Theistic* sanctification refers to viewing an aspect of life as being a manifestation of one's images, beliefs, or experience of God. *Nontheistic* sanctification occurs without reference to a specific deity and takes place when an aspect of life is imbued with divine qualities such as boundlessness, ultimate value, and transcendence. One study found that most husbands and wives view their marriage through a spiritual lens (Mahoney et al., 1999). Sanctification extends the realm of the sacred beyond concepts of God, the divine, and transcendence and embeds seemingly mundane aspects of life within a rich spiritual landscape. Events that shatter the web of beliefs woven around sacred objects, especially family relations, may be particularly threatening and damaging (Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank & Murray-Swank, 2003; Pargament & Mahoney, 2005).

*Sacred Loss and Desecration Appraisals* Sacred loss and desecration both consist of a negative primary spiritual appraisal wherein an event takes on a powerful spiritual meaning because it is seen as adversely affecting a sanctified aspect of life (Pargament, Magyar, Benore, & Mahoney, 2005). Sacred loss appraisals occur when one perceives the loss of something once viewed as a manifestation of God or invested with sacred qualities. Here are examples of such appraisals: "Something I held as sacred is no longer present in my life"; "Something of sacred importance in my life disappeared when this event took place"; "I lost something I thought God wanted for me"; and "Something that connected me to God is gone." Desecration appraisals refer to perceiving a sanctified aspect of life as having been violated (Pargament et al., 2005). Examples are "A part of my life that God made sacred was attacked"; "Something that was sacred to me was destroyed"; "This event ruined a blessing from God"; and "Something that was sacred to me was destroyed."

Although both sacred loss and desecration appraisals involve the dissolution of a perceived point of connection between the human and transcendent reality, the two types of appraisals differ in an important respect. Desecration appraisals incriminate someone or something as being responsible for violating the sacred. In contrast, sacred loss appraisals do not necessarily involve attributions of blame since a loss can be perceived as accidental, inevitable, or outside human or divine control. Nevertheless, in many instances, the two types of appraisal may go hand in hand. Divorce appears to be a case in point. In our study of 100 adults who filed for a divorce in the past 6 months, we found a very high covariation of these appraisals ( $r = .82$ ; Krumrei, et al 2007). Further, three-quarters of divorcees indicated that descriptions of sacred loss and desecration applied to their divorce to some degree.

### *Psychological Impact of Sacred Loss and Desecration Appraisals*

The next question is whether perceived sacred losses and desecrations exacerbate posttraumatic distress. Three lines of reasoning suggest this could be the case. First, assumptions that people make about sanctified aspects of life represent critical ingredients of their worldview (Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). Sacred objects, such as marital bonds, may often be presumed to be everlasting and deserving of absolute commitment, sacrifice, and reverence. Others may assume that sanctified objects hold a special power and are guarded by divine forces that will prevent their loss or harm. Even if only held implicitly, threats to such assumptions can be psychologically powerful. Infidelity may be terribly shocking because it shakes profound spiritual assumptions about marriage. Listen to this woman: "I could not comprehend the level

of ongoing purposeful deceit on the part of my significant other. [It was] unimaginable that an 'upstanding, prominent, religious, moral, preaching' person could be so utterly deceitful in so many ways for such an extended period of time" (48-year-old woman after discovering that her partner had been maintaining 3-year affair with a mutual friend; Pargament et al., 2005).

Second, the sacred may be central to the stories and themes people live by. Narrative theorists have described how people lend meaning to their lives by structuring their experiences into "macronarratives," encompassing life stories, and "micronarratives," smaller stories (Neimeyer & Levitt, 2001, p. 48). Narratives that are interwoven with a sacred dimension may be particularly compelling. In the case of marriage, many may believe that finding their spouse fulfills a long sought-after hope to find a soul mate. The marital ceremony may often be seen as transforming this bond into an eternal, transcendent union that reflects a larger spiritual plan for one's life. The loss or violation of such sacred narrative themes is likely to disrupt the flow of one's life. Events like divorce may be even more painful when individuals cannot find religious teachings that help them make sense of the shattering of the old sacred story line or enable them to construct a new tale.

Third, research indicates that people work harder to preserve and protect, and derive greater benefits from that which they perceive as sacred. Husbands and wives who sanctify their marriages tend to be more protective of their relationships; they respond to conflict with better problem solving strategies such as more collaboration, less verbal aggression, and less stalemating. In terms of benefits, greater sanctification of the marriage is tied to greater marital satisfaction and more commitment (Mahoney et al., 1999). Similar findings regarding investments and benefits associated with sanctification have emerged for major life strivings, parenting, physical well-being, and the environment (Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). Overall, sanctification appears to raise the psychological and spiritual stakes tied to an aspect of life. Though people may have much to gain by sanctifying their marriages, they also have more to lose when the marriage fails.

#### *Empirical Evidence on Links between Spiritual Trauma and Distress*

Consistent with these lines of reasoning, emerging research indicates that people who view their tragedies through a negative spiritual lens are likely to report higher levels of distress. Higher perceptions of sacred loss and desecration have been linked to greater psychological and spiritual distress for college students recently hurt in a romantic relationship (Magyar, Pargament, & Mahoney, 2000), for adults reflecting on the most negative event in their lives in the past 2 years (Pargament et al., 2005), and for coeds from Ohio and New York in response to the 9/11 terrorists attacks in the United States (Mahoney et al., 2002). Our recent study (Krumrei et al., 2007) on divorce reinforces that experiencing a spiritual trauma is tied to greater distress. The more divorcing individuals viewed their divorce as a sacred loss or desecration, the greater their experience of depression, posttraumatic anxiety, anger, and spiritual distress. Qualitatively, participants also relayed in their own words that viewing their divorce through a negative sacred lens heightened their distress. One person conveyed feelings of sadness, anger, and spiritual turmoil in this way: "I feel ashamed to even go to Church.... I feel like a failure to my ex and to God and to my family and to every human on the planet. I feel like I have done something unforgivable to my ex-spouse. This sometimes angers me."

## SPIRITUAL TRAUMA AND SPIRITUAL STRUGGLES

### *Three Types of Spiritual Struggles*

Spiritual traumas often disrupt an individual's spiritual orienting system, or generalized set of spiritual beliefs, practices, and relationships. Spiritual struggles can be defined as signs of a spiritual orienting system under stress; the struggles represent efforts to conserve or transform a spirituality that has been threatened or harmed (Pargament, Desai, & McConnell, 2006). Based on research using a 100-item, multidimensional measure of religious coping (the RCOPE), Pargament and others have reliably identified seven distinct spiritual struggles experienced by adults (Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998). For the purposes of this chapter, we group these methods into three categories of spiritual struggles: divine, intrapersonal, and interpersonal.

### DIVINE SPIRITUAL STRUGGLES

Divine spiritual struggles center on an individual's relationship, thoughts, and feelings toward God. Any traumatic event can pose a threat to views of God as an all-loving, omnipotent being who ensures that good things will happen to good people. In response to a crisis, the individual may feel abandoned or betrayed by God, feel angry with God, punished by an angry God, or question God's power. These struggles may be especially potent for spiritual traumas that bring expectations about God under fire. A divorcing person may wonder how God allowed a sacred aspect of life to be lost or violated, followed by turmoil for what this means for the person's relationship with God. Listen to the anguished words of one divorcee: "Equating the union of marriage with the union with God can be devastating for people going through a divorce. If the marriage has been a metaphor for union with God, then the obvious sequel is that the divorce symbolizes separation from God. The broken relationship with spouse is experienced as broken relationship with God" (Livingston, 1985, p. 246). Divorced individuals may also reason that because they could not be perfectly accepting, giving, and healing to one another in their marriage, they deserve to be cut off from the presence of God (Livingston, 1985) and redefine the divorce as a divine punishment. As one participant in our study said about his ex-wife, "I am so sorry I hurt her the way I did. I know that God was not and is not looking out for me." In addition, those who take a passive spiritual stance with God may feel painfully bewildered, questioning why God ignored their pleas for divine intervention to save their marriage. Finally, individuals may reappraise God's power, coming to see God as less able to control or intervene than previously assumed.

### INTRAPERSONAL SPIRITUAL STRUGGLES

Intrapersonal spiritual struggles refer to internal questions, doubts, and uncertainties about spiritual matters. Although any crisis may trigger intrapersonal struggles, perceptions of sacred loss and desecration may exacerbate spiritual struggles within the self. One intrapersonal spiritual struggle focuses on questions about one's ultimate purpose in life. People may enter marriage believing they are wisely following an inner spiritual voice toward their highest spiritual destiny, particularly if this decision was preceded by much spiritual reflection. A subsequent divorce would raise serious doubts about the soundness of their inner spiritual compass and leave these people existentially adrift, wondering where they should have been headed and where to go next. Another intrapersonal struggle involves conflicts between desires to gratify human appetites and desires to be virtuous (Exline, 2002). In the case of divorce, a person may desperately want to exit a lifeless marriage in hopes of fulfilling unmet needs for sexual gratification, emotional intimacy, or financial security with a different partner down the road. Such desires, however, clash with the premise that a sacred marriage demands lifelong perseverance despite personal costs. Significant guilt may ensue as the person wrestles to



spiritually justify ending a marriage for these reasons. Intrapersonal struggles may also focus on religious systems of belief and practice. Those who violate the parameters that they believe surround a sacred marriage may be unable to forgive themselves for breaking their vows to be sexually or emotionally faithful.

**INTERPERSONAL SPIRITUAL STRUGGLES** Interpersonal spiritual struggles involve spiritual tensions and conflicts with family, friends, congregations, and communities, and may be especially prominent during interpersonal crises. Interpersonal spiritual struggles can occur when members of one's social system disagree with that person's spiritual interpretation of, or response to, trauma. Interpersonal disagreements may be especially toxic when people perceive the sacred in different ways. Less spiritually oriented family members may be unable to grasp that a divorcee experiences the breakup of a marriage as a sacred loss or desecration, and then fail to express appropriate levels of empathy. Alternatively, an individual who feels alienated from a religious institution that condemns divorce may also end up feeling alienated from family members or fellow believers who urge the use of spiritual resources (e.g., participation in worship services or traditional religious rituals) that are no longer meaningful to the individual. On a related note, divorced individuals are more likely to apostatize their religion than nondivorced people (Lawton & Bures, 2001). Thus, for some, divorce means not only cutting ties to one's spouse but also one's religious community.

Another set of interpersonal spiritual struggles can occur when the individuals feel blamed or judged for the divorce by their religious community. Various participants in our study (Krumrei et al., 2007) said things such as, "I felt that there was a lot of judgment on the part of the church toward my divorce and no support or grace . . . . Friends from the church could not see past the scripture of divorce being a sin... If there's one message I would want to communicate, it's that those going through a divorce need compassion and grace, not judgment, from the church." Some may also experience spiritual penalties as a consequence of getting divorced. Some religious institutions exclude divorced individuals from religious rituals (e.g., divorced Catholics who do not seek or are not granted an annulment are technically barred from receiving communion) or the community altogether (e.g., religious shunning of divorcees). Finally, interpersonal spiritual struggles can occur when the perpetrator of the trauma is viewed as being influenced by supernatural evil forces. We have labeled such an attribution as "demonization of the perpetrator." This involves believing that the individual(s) deemed responsible for a sacred loss or desecration wittingly or unwittingly operated under the influence of the devil or possesses demonic (e.g., satanic, demonic, evil) qualities. In the context of divorce, an individual may believe that actions of the self or the partner that precipitated the divorce were influenced by evil forces. Demonizing an ex-spouse could have a polarizing effect on already painful negotiations that are necessary to finalize a divorce or to manage ongoing custody arrangements that require minimal trust in the moral integrity of one's ex-spouse. Demonizing oneself in relation to an ex-partner could lead one to accept a blatantly unfair divorce settlement or to abdicate parental rights and responsibilities out of a sense of worthlessness, which then jeopardizes healthy parent-child relationships after the divorce.

#### **INTERPLAY AMONG SPIRITUAL STRUGGLES**

Despite useful conceptual distinctions, the three highlighted types of spiritual struggle are likely to cooccur and interact in complex ways. Divorces marked by desecrations that break religiously rooted wedding vows raise a host of intersecting spiritual dilemmas. Individuals whose spouses persist in

infidelity, substance abuse, or domestic violence may struggle with how much God wants them to sacrifice their own well-being to remain married (divine struggle). Such individuals may also feel inner turmoil about whether to follow perceived mandates from God or their religious community to remain married, especially if these directives clash with their inner spiritual intuitions (intrapersonal struggle). Further, offending spouses may accuse partners who refuse to tolerate desecrations of being spiritually inferior for not being unconditionally forgiving (interpersonal struggle). Even more difficult dilemmas may occur when the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable behavior on the part of a spouse are ambiguous, such as instances in which the individual feels chronically emotionally abandoned or neglected by his or her spouse.

### *Empirical Research on Spiritual Struggles and Divorce*

Studies have shown clear and consistent links between the three types of spiritual struggles reviewed previously and indicators of distress. Ano and Vasconcelles (2005) conducted a meta-analysis of 49 studies of religious coping and reported that divine spiritual struggles were consistently tied to greater psychological maladjustment. Furthermore, divine struggles have been longitudinally related to poorer medical and psychological functioning (Pargament et al., 2006; Pargament, Koenig, Tarakeshwar, & Hahn, in press). While studied less often, intrapersonal and interpersonal spiritual struggles also correlate with more distress (e.g., Exline, Yali, & Sanderson, 2000; Krause, Ingersoll Dayton, Ellison, & Wulff, 1999; Pargament et al., 1998). Little research has involved spiritual coping with interpersonal stressors, such as divorce, or events that are perceived as spiritual traumas. Further, although some anecdotal evidence (e.g., Spaniol & Lannan, 1985) and small qualitative studies suggest (Blomquist, 1985; Nathanson, 1985) that divorce elicits spiritual struggles, study appears to be the first to examine this issue quantitatively. Notably, 71% of our participants reported experiencing some type of spiritual struggle over their divorce. Further, higher levels of spiritual struggles were strongly tied to greater depression, anger, and posttraumatic anxiety symptoms, even after taking into account demographics and access to adaptive spiritual and nonspiritual coping resources (Krumrei, et al 2007).

### **SPIRITUAL TRAUMAS AND SPIRITUAL RESOURCES**

Ample research shows that adaptive use of spiritual resources (positive spiritual coping methods) offer unique benefits to people, even after controlling for other resources, when they face a host of life stressors. This includes the death of a loved one, terminal illness, major surgery, imprisonment, physical abuse, war, racism, flooding, car accidents, and adjustment to college (Pargament et al., 2006). Over time, such strategies decrease emotional stress, and increase well-being and spiritual growth (Pargament & Ano, 2004; Pargament, Koenig, Tarakeshwar, & Hahn, 2001; Pargament et al., 1998). Spirituality can likewise be a vital perhaps even the most relevant, place to turn to recover from spiritual traumas. However, cross-sectional research reveals an important paradox about spiritual resources. At the time of a crisis, greater use of spiritual resources is often linked with greater psychological distress (e.g., anxiety, depression, and anger) and spiritual struggles (e.g., anger or doubts about God). This effect has been coined a *stress mobilization effect*. Nevertheless, even at the time of a crisis, greater positive spiritual coping is tied to self-reports of stress related psychological and spiritual growth (the individual's perception that a particular stressor has been helpful in making positive changes in life). Taken together, these findings indicate that psychic and spiritual struggles motivate many people to turn to their faith as a means to grow through their pain. We now discuss specific spiritual resources that could facilitate postdivorce adjustment.

## *Spiritual Resources to Cope with Sacred Traumas*

Pargament and others have reliably identified 10 distinct spiritual coping strategies employed by adults that predict desirable functioning (Pargament et al., 1998). For the purposes of this chapter, we group these methods into three categories that parallel our discussion of spiritual struggles: divine, intrapersonal and interpersonal.

### ADAPTIVE DIVINE/ GOD-ORIENTED SPIRITUAL COPING METHODS

This set of spiritual coping strategies directly centers on an individual's relationship, thoughts, and feelings toward God. One such strategy involves proactively seeking a sense of control and relief through building a partnership with God (collaborative spiritual coping). Listen to this woman's description of collaborating with God to sort through her emotions and thoughts about her divorce: "Coping for me came through spending time alone journaling and praying honestly to God . . . I have learned a lot about judging others, and I have discovered a great insight into myself." A related strategy is making a conscious decision to relinquish control over a situation to God after doing all in one's power to influence the situation (active spiritual surrender). Divorcing persons might have sought counseling, read self-help books, tried to bargain and negotiate with their spouse, and made all compromises short of those violating their core personal integrity, but still have been unable to stop a divorce. Here it could be adaptive to give control up to God, saying "I have done my best and must leave the rest up to God." Another God-centered strategy is to search for comfort and reassurance through God's love and care. One participant spoke of growing closer to God through the divorce saying, "God has been present in my life for many years ... but I've never felt closer to Him than I do now .... Sometimes I feel like God is the only one who can help me now." Finally, an individual may reinterpret a stressful situation in a positive spiritual light (referred to as *benevolent spiritual reappraisal*). This strategy may be especially useful to combat perceptions of sacred loss and desecration. An individual might try to view the divorce as part of God's plan and means by which God is trying to strengthen the person. The following comment from one of our participants illustrates this process: "My divorce was swift, not my choice, and has broken my heart. But praying and believing that God, or some higher power, has a hand in this and there is a grand plan for my life, has helped me focus, even in my darkest hours."

### ADAPTIVE INTRAPERSONAL POSITIVE SPIRITUAL COPING METHODS

Another set of spiritual resources centers on people's attempts to discover, access, or reestablish elements of their internal spiritual orienting system beyond a God figure (although God may still be relevant). Individuals can engage in spiritual activities to shift focus from the stressor. In the case of divorce, they may engage in prayer, private spiritual rituals, or public worship services to get their mind off problems and transcend feelings of anger, hurt, and fear. Efforts to seek spiritual purification constitute another way to regroup interior spiritual life, particularly if individuals feel some responsibility for the sacred trauma. A person may choose to confess to oneself, clergy, fellow believers or God personal failings that contributed to the divorce and resolve to avoid similar transgressions in the future. This may free the person from debilitating guilt and reestablish a sense of spiritual integrity. Another strategy is to seek out a sense of connectedness **with** forces that transcend the self as a means to free oneself from suffocat

**ing** isolation. In a di:-rce, one can se-k spiritual intimacy with others (e.g., share feelings of spmtual trauma with another), attempt to feel part of a larger, transcendent force (e.g., nature walks) or search for a closer connec tion with a higher power (e.g., meditation).

The preceding methods may often reflect much used tools within a wellintegrated spiritual orienting system. However, trauma can also open people to reformulate their sense of spiritual meaning, direction, and purpose. Divorcing individuals may come to believe that their commitment to their marriage led them astray from their deepest values. Chronic conflict over issues that often lead to divorce (e.g., money, sex, religion, morals, childrearing) can be rooted in fundamentally differing visions between partners of what is spiritually desirable (Mahoney, 2005). Being freed from a spouse who pushes against or discourages the other partner's spiritual values could be experienced as a wonderfully liberating opportunity to return to, or discover anew, one's core spiritual vision for life.

On a related note, some divorcing individuals may undergo a spiritual conversion marked by a radical shift in what constitutes their highest priorities in life (Mahoney & Pargament, 2004). One such spiritual conversion fits the classic Christian motif where a prideful focus on one's power and superiority is replaced by humble recognition that the sacred should be at the center of one's existence. A divorce may cause a person who had taken arrogant pride in constructing a "perfect marriage" to see the sacred not as superfluous, but of central importance. Another type of spiritual conversion, rooted in Christian feminism, involves replacing an excessive need of others' approval with a healthy sense of empowerment rooted in bonding with the sacred. A divorce may help a person realize that unchecked emotional dependency on the ex-spouse led to abuse and helped create a failed marriage. A divorce may draw the person inward, searching for a sense that the sacred resides both within and outside the self, which then provides a fundamental sense of worthiness.

#### INTERPERSONAL POSITIVE SPIRITUAL COPING

Family, friends, congregations, and communities play a central role in this set of spiritual resources. One method is to search for comfort through the love and care of congregation members and clergy. Here two of our divorcing participants describe seeking spiritual support from others, with one saying: "the [church] members have supported and helped me immensely," and another noting: "I work in a religious facility and have turned to the Sisters here for much support. ... The Sisters here have been my biggest connection to God." Conversely, some cope with trauma by attempting to provide spiritual support and comfort to others. In the case of divorce, one may pray for or with friends or family members who are affected by the divorce, and try to give them spiritual strength by being a healthy, spiritual role model and listening compassionately to their spiritual struggles. Finally, one may seek out spiritually based forgiveness for wrongdoing by the ex-partner or self in the marriage. This includes using spiritual rituals and God as a resource to let go of anger, resentment, and bitterness. One participant told us, "I have a long way to go before I can heal from this. But by the grace of God, I will heal and forgive-one day." *Empirical Research on Use of Religious Resources and Divorce Adjustment* Our Furt] vidui ated Di how Point struc tualr findings about positive methods of spiritual coping to deal with divorce mirror those found for other major life stressors. Consistent with stressmobilization effects discussed earlier, greater use of positive religious coping methods was cross-sectionally related to higher levels of posttraumatic anxiety, depression, anger, and negative spiritual appraisals and spiritual struggles. However, the more participants turned to their faith in healthy ways to cope with the divorce, the more they reported experiencing posttraumatic and spiritual growth (Krumrei et al., 2007). Thus, the more individuals feel distressed by their divorce, the more they may mobilize their spiritual resources, which are tied to greater growth. It is also important to note that positive religious coping strategies partially or fully accounted for associations between sacred loss and desecration appraisals, and spiritual struggles. This implies that access to adaptive forms of spiritual coping can help resolve the troubling spiritual doubts or concerns that divorce engenders. Longitudinal research with divorcing individuals is needed to confirm this sequential chain of events that has been found for other major life stressors. Finally, we found that spiritual coping makes a difference for personal growth beyond any such benefits gained by using nonspiritual coping.

## SUMMARY

In this chapter, we have presented a conceptual model on the role that spirituality plays in promoting trauma-related growth. We have argued that a potentially traumatic experience, such as divorce, can be experienced as a sacred loss or desecration. Such perceptions and feelings reflect a unique and additive dimension of an already intensely stressful experience, rendering it a spiritual trauma. Spiritual traumas may often trigger painful spiritual struggles, but such perceptions can also facilitate long-range psychological and spiritual growth. Many individuals may be highly motivated to grow rather than entirely abandon a spiritual frame of reference.

Further, spirituality offers numerous adaptive resources to help an individual recover from spiritual traumas and overcome the suffering associated with spiritual struggles.

Divorce may often raise profound spiritual issues that are relevant to how a person construes and adjusts to divorce. The following Summary points provide sample questions for clinicians who are helping clients constructively resolve spiritual struggles and capitalize on past or new spiritual resources.

### Summary Points

- Gain background information about clients' spiritual frame of reference:
  - First obtain basic information about clients' current spiritual orienting system. Three opening questions are, "In what ways, if any, do you see yourself as a spiritual or religious person?" "Do you believe in God or a Higher Power? If so, how do you envision or think about God?" and, "Are you affiliated with a religious denomination and how active are you in that group?" Many individuals will elaborate on their spiritual backgrounds from these questions. After acquiring a basic understanding of a client's spirituality, the clinician can focus on the intersection of divorce and spirituality.
- Gain information about clients' spiritual frame of reference for their marriage and divorce: -Ask neutral global questions about the role of spirituality in the divorce. An example is, "Has your spirituality, or your religious beliefs or background, entered into your thoughts or feelings about your divorce?"
- Ask questions about positive spiritual appraisals individuals may have had about their marriage. A nontheistic question is, "Have you ever experienced your marriage as a spiritual experience or sacred in any way?" A theistically oriented question would be, "Have you ever believed that your marriage was somehow connected to God or a Higher Power?"
- Help clients articulate if and how much they experience their divorce as a spiritual trauma: -Help clients identify and express feelings of sacred loss or desecration in connection with their divorce. "Sacred loss" and "desecrations" probes could be, respectively, "How much do you feel you lost something of spiritual importance because of the divorce?" and "How much did your divorce violate your expectations of the spiritual nature of your marriage?"