THE PROCESS OF RESOLVING SPIRITUAL STRUGGLE

FOLLOWING ADULTHOOD TRAUMA

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THE PROCESS OF RESOLVING SPIRITUAL STRUGGLE

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ABSTRACT

THE PROCESS OF RESOLVING SPIRITUAL STRUGGLE

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Spiritual struggle has been described as a disruption in religious practice and spirituality resulting in questioning beliefs, experiencing discord within religious communities, decreasing spiritual practices, and experiencing painful cognitions such as the belief that one is being punished by God. This study used constructivist grounded theory to explore how women identifying as Protestant Christians at the time of the traumatic event resolve their spiritual struggles. Eleven conceptual categories, which are presented in a stage model, emerged from the data. The stages were Experiencing an Event Discordant with Beliefs, Emotional Reaction (following the traumatic event), Questioning (of beliefs, suffering and identity), Disconnection (From God and Others), Seeking Resolution (as a priority), Seeking and Gaining New Understanding, Selectively Seeking Support, Reconnecting with Beliefs, Reconnecting Emotionally with God, Feeling Resolved, and Maintaining Resolution. A definition of spiritual resolution was also constructed. Resolution of spiritual struggle was revealed to be an ongoing process partially simultaneous with spiritual struggle.

This dissertation is available in open access at AURA, http://aura.antioch.edu/ and Ohio Link ETD Center, https://etd.ohiolink.edu/etd.

Keywords: spiritual struggle, resolution, trauma, spirituality

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I dedicate this massive accomplishment to all people who struggle to connect to God following the unfortunate reality of our world, trauma. I hope this effort aids in your journeys of recovery.

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Background

Many people question their ideas about the inner workings of the universe after a traumatic or unexpected event. Spirituality can be affected through a person's struggling to reconcile their faith and tenants of their faith with questions and perspectives that developed following the trauma. The literature refers to this problem as negative religious coping, or more recently, spiritual struggle (A. N. Bryant & Astin, 2008; McConnell, Pargament, Ellison, & Flannelly, 2006; Pargament, Murray-Swank, Magyar, & Ano, 2005), and documents its occurrence well. The presence of spiritual struggle has been linked to higher levels of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety (Harris et al., 2007; McConnell et al., 2006).

This study explores the process through which a person might resolve spiritual struggle following traumatic experiences such as sexual assault, threats to a person's life, survival from a motor vehicle accident, natural disaster, and other events extremely distressing to the individual. This is an important issue because spiritual sequelae are not often discussed as a consequence of trauma, and as spiritual struggle has been linked with worsened suffering, this neglect needs to be corrected.

It is possible that treatment of other symptoms of trauma seen in PTSD or depression may be complicated by these spiritual symptoms, and without addressing them, recovery may be slowed. There is little to no research on the topic of spiritual struggle resolution, nor is there a working definition from which to draw. In addition, existing research on treatment for spiritual struggle has limitations due to assumptive methodology and insensitivity to differing spiritual cultures. Thus, a large gap in the literature exists. This dissertation research used constructivist grounded theory to explore the psychosocial process of resolving spiritual struggle in Protestant

Christian women following severe adulthood traumas. A definition for spiritual struggle was also constructed from the data obtained in this study.

Review of the Literature

Most people experience unpleasant events in their lifetime. Some negative events can be described as traumatic, and can encompass a broad range of events and experiences. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Fifth Edition* (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013), has further identified particular traumas that qualify as potential precipitants of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). These types of traumas can include a threat to one's life, such as natural disasters, assault, terrorist attacks, military combat, motor vehicle accidents and other types of accidents, and threats to one's personal integrity such as rape, sexual abuse, domestic violence, etc. Many people experience these types of trauma in their lifetime, and a subset of these people develop PTSD as a result (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Several risk factors for the development of PTSD have been identified such as previous mental health conditions, female gender (although males are more likely to experience a traumatic event), exposure to multiple traumas, and poor social support (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Gil, 2015). The events most likely to lead to PTSD are rape (for both men and women), threat with a weapon, childhood sexual abuse, and combat (Resnick, Monson, & Rizvi, 2008).

Spiritual practices such as prayer, reading of religious texts, attending spiritual gatherings, and other methods of spiritually related coping, such as finding meaning or a sense of hope through one's faith, have been shown to be a strong source of resiliency for many (Toussaint, Webb, & Keltner, 2012). One definition defined spirituality as "that aspect of humanity that refers to the way individuals seek meaning and purpose by connecting to the

moment, to self, to others, to nature, to significant experience, or to the sacred" (Chow & Nelson-Becker, 2010, p. 315). Another definition states spirituality is "the search for purpose and meaning involving both the transcendent (the experience of existence beyond the physical/psychological) and immanence (the discovery of the transcendent in the physical/psychological), regardless of religious affiliation" (Decker, 1993, p. 34), and differentiates religion as, "the part of the process when spiritual impulses are formally organized into a social/political structure designed to facilitate and interpret the spiritual search" (p. 34).

Religion has also been defined and differentiated from spirituality as "an organized system of spiritual beliefs, behaviors, and values which is shared by a community and is passed on over time" (Chow & Nelson-Becker, 2010, p. 315). However, many authors do not differentiate spirituality from religion when writing about struggle with spirituality or religion and appear to use the terms interchangeably (Bowland, Biswas, Kyriakakis, & Edmond 2012; Exline, Yali, & Sanderson, 2000; Krumrei & Rosmarin, 2012; Murray-Swank, 2003; Pargament, Koenig, Tarakeshwar, & Hahn, 2001; Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998).

The literature suggests that some people have reported utilizing spirituality after a traumatic event as a helpful method of coping, and some have reported questioning their spirituality as an unhelpful method of coping after a trauma (Krumrei & Rosmarin, 2012). The literature categorizes these uses of spirituality into "negative religious coping" and "positive religious coping" (Krumrei & Rosmarin, 2012, p 248). Positive coping in the context of spirituality includes those things which are regarded as helpful and which maintain or strengthen the spiritual connection. Examples of positive religious coping include meaning making, forgiveness, seeking spiritual support, and having the belief that God is in control (Ai & Park, 2005; Bryant-Davis et al., 2012; Peres, Moreira-Almeida, Nasello, and Koenig, 2007).

Negative religious coping is regarded as a disruption or a decrease in spirituality. Examples of negative religious coping include being angry with God, avoidance of prayer, questioning God's power, and having the belief that one is being punished (Ai, et. al, 2005; Harris et al, 2008). More broadly, the term negative religious coping has been used interchangeably in the literature with the phrase spiritual struggle (Krumrei & Rosmarin, 2012; N. Murray-Swank, & A. Murray-Swank, 2012), which encompasses all types of doubts and questioning about one's religion, relationship with God, or understanding of good and evil (McConnell et al., 2006; Pargament, Koenig, & Perez, 2000; Pargament et al., 2005). Spiritual struggle not only encompasses the cognitive aspects of negative religious coping, but also the participatory and action oriented aspects, such as withdrawing from the faith community, decrease in prayer, and decrease in other religious activities.

This spiritual struggle has also been referred to as 'the dark night of the soul' in Christian theological writings, a reference to a 16th century poem by St. John of the Cross of the same title (Durá-Vilá, Dien, Littlewood, & Leavey, 2010). Spiritual struggle has been defined as "efforts to conserve or transform a spirituality that has been threatened or harmed" (Pargament et al., 2005, p. 245).

Spiritual struggle has been discussed so often in the literature that some prominent spiritual struggle researchers have attempted to condense the various ways in which a person spiritually struggles into common categories. One of the most prominent spiritual struggle researchers, Pargament et al. (2005), grouped them into three categories: troubled relationships with God, interpersonal or negative encounters with coreligionists, and intrapsychic struggles with chronic religious doubting. In this way, spiritual struggle can be thought of as disrupting the relationship with God and other members of the faith community as well as the disruption of a

person's own beliefs and sense of self.

Spiritual struggle appears to be common and does not only occur during times of trial. A. N. Bryant and Astin (2008) examined a sample of 3,493 undergraduate college students from several different universities in the United States. This sample of students was 53% female and 47% male. It consisted mostly of White (84%) participants, but also included 5% Black, 4% Asian, 4% Latino/a, and 2% American Indian participants, as well as 2% who identified as other. The sample was also comprised of mostly self-identified Protestant Christians (48%), but also included 31% who self-identified as Roman Catholics, 2% who identified as Jewish, and 1% who identified as Islamic. In addition, 2% of the sample identified as other and 12% stated no religious preference.

The authors found that 21% reported that they frequently struggled to understand suffering and evil, 18% reported that they frequently questioned their religious beliefs, and 6% reported that they were frequently angry with God. Forty percent of the students reported occasional anger at God or disillusionment with religious upbringing. Spiritual struggle was significantly more likely in participants who perceived God in less tangible and personal ways such as "divine mystery" (r= .12, p < .01), and "universal spirit" (r= .06, p < .01), whereas participants who described God as "beloved," (r= -.05, p < .01) or "protector" (r= -.07, p <.01) had significantly less spiritual struggle (A. N. Bryant & Astin, 2008, pg. 15)

This survey indicates that cognitions and emotions consistent with spiritual struggle are common. The results also indicate that certain views of God are related with higher or lower levels of spiritual struggle. However, all the correlations were small, and therefore, while significant, may not be that meaningful. The results also may not be generalizable outside of the population of college students, who may be expected to have more questions about identity and

beliefs, artificially inflating the rate of spiritual struggle.

It is hard to assess how the relationship between certain views of God and spiritual struggle would differ if the percentage of Jewish, Islamic or other/no religious identified participants shifted. The questions themselves were biased toward Christian perspectives and may not have incorporated the types of spiritual struggle cognitions experienced in faiths other than Christianity. In addition, the 12% who did not identify as any religion may not think about these topics as much, and thus, would have less spiritual struggle, artificially deflating the prevalence.

Spiritual Struggle and Traumatic Events

Several authors have found that many people report a change in spiritual beliefs following a traumatic event (Falsetti, Resick, & Davis, 2003; Kennedy, Davis, & Taylor, 2000). One study comprised of female survivors of sexual assault examined reported changes in spirituality (Kennedy et al., 2000). The 70 participants were between the ages of 19 and 46 in New York City. The researchers reported that 68% of their sample identified as African American, 16% identified as Hispanic, and 12% identified as White.

The authors measured spiritual changes using five Likert style questions regarding spiritual changes. The questions were scored with negative ratings (-2, -1) indicating decreases in spirituality and positive ratings (+1, +2) indicating higher spirituality. A lack of change in spirituality was indicated by 0 on the scale. Twenty percent of the participants reported decreased spirituality, 60% reported an increase, and 20% reported no change in their spirituality post assault.

Well-being was measured using adapted questions from unnamed measures in the Medical Outcomes Study (Stewart & Ware, 1992). Well-being was also measured on a scale

with 0 indicating no change in well-being, positive ratings indicating increases in well-being, and negative ratings indicating decreases in well-being. The authors found a large, significant positive correlation between changes in well-being and changes in spirituality (r= .54, p < .0001).

To determine if specific sub-groups of participants had significant changes in their scores, they used a single-mean t-test to compare the groups' mean scores to a hypothetical group that had no change in well-being (mean = 0). Using this method, participants who reported increased spirituality were not significantly more likely to have a change in their well-being scores (mean= .19, sd = .85). In other words, increased spirituality and well-being were not significantly linked for participants who reported increased spirituality. The authors then compared participants who reported no change or a decrease in their spirituality. They found that participants who reported no change or decreases in their spirituality were significantly more likely to have lower well-being scores (t= -3.81, p < .0007). Taken together, these results indicate that only a lack of change or decreased spirituality were associated with changes in wellbeing.

This study is correlational in nature, so it is not possible to determine causation, only that a relationship exists between changes in spirituality (specifically decreased spirituality) following sexual assault, and decreases in well-being. In addition, the results may not be generalizable beyond female survivors of sexual assault. Therefore, the results may not apply to men or to victims of other types of trauma. The authors also did not provide psychometric descriptions of their measures, nor were they very clear about the measures' adaptation and formulation. Therefore, the validity of the measures are unknown.

Falsetti et al. (2003) examined data collected from 120 participants from within the DSM-IV field trial study dataset (Kilpatrick et al., 1998). The sample consisted of 66.9% women and 32.2% men who had all experienced a criterion A trauma (most commonly reported were sexual assault and natural disasters) per DSM-III criteria (American Psychiatric Association, 1980). However, the authors did not indicate whether these experiences occurred in childhood or adulthood. The sample was 81.8% Caucasian and 17.4% was African American, with a combined mean age of 37.57.

The authors used the Changes in Religious Beliefs Scale which was previously developed by an author of the study, and is comprised of both open-ended and forced choice items regarding changes in spiritual belief (Falsetti, 1992). Overall, 30.3% of participants who reported only one trauma, also reported that their religious beliefs had either increased or decreased since the trauma as measured by the Changes in Religious Beliefs Scale. Fifty-eight percent of participants who experienced two or more traumatic experiences reported a change in their religious beliefs and practices, and 31% of participants with two or more traumas reported that this change occurred following the first trauma, but did not change after the second trauma. For participants who did experience a change in religiosity following the second event, 19% reported that they became more religious after the trauma and 8% reported that they became less religious.

When the sample was divided into participants who developed PTSD and participants who did not, the percentage of increased and decreased religiosity changed. For participants who had experienced only one trauma, 30% of the participants in the PTSD group reported that they were less religious than before the trauma, compared to only 6% of the participants in the non-PTSD group. However, the effect appears to be mirrored, because, 20% of the PTSD group

reported increased religiosity following the trauma, compared to only 9% of the non-PTSD group. This indicates that PTSD diagnosis is associated with increased or decreased religiosity. Analysis using odds ratio found that increased changes in religiosity significantly predicted a participant's membership in the PTSD group (OR= 5.44, CI = 1.67-17.73). However, for participants who had experienced multiple traumas, change in religious belief was not significantly associated with PTSD status.

Descriptive statistics revealed that participants in the PTSD group reported more changes in their religiosity. A greater percentage of participants reporting only one trauma in the PTSD positive group reported experiencing changes in their spiritualty (50%) than participants in the non-PTSD group (15%), but the authors did not evaluate the statistical significance of this difference. These results indicate that changes in religiosity can be found after trauma, whether one develops PTSD or not, but they may be more likely to occur with PTSD and may be more likely to result in decreased religiosity.

As this study was primarily descriptive and correlational, it is impossible to say if changes in religious beliefs cause changes in symptoms of PTSD, and vice versa, or if other unknown variables are involved and affected both the symptoms of PTSD and changes in religious beliefs. The results of this study do suggest that religiosity in people with PTSD is more likely to change than for people without PTSD. Likewise, it is difficult to tell if the religious beliefs decreased due to the trauma, due to the symptoms of PTSD, or due to another unknown factor. One limit of this study is that the group with PTSD was comprised of over 80% women, while the non-PTSD group was more gender balanced, and thus it is possible that this gender difference accounted for some of the difference between the groups.

The results of this study seem to match the findings of Kennedy et al. (2000) in that many

of the participants experienced changes in their spiritual/religious beliefs, although the researchers found almost three times as many of their overall participants reporting a change. Differences in the percentage of the sample who experienced changes in their spirituality or religiosity between these two studies may be due to the type of trauma endured or the different methods of measurement. Both studies found that changes in spirituality or religiosity were associated with changes in mental health (either well-being or PTSD symptomology).

Specific forms of spiritual struggle in trauma victims have also been correlated with PTSD (Harris et al., 2007; McConnell et al., 2006). For example, Harris et al. (2007) studied Catholics who had experienced trauma, and found that participants who reported more positive religious coping as measured by the Religious Comfort and Strain Scale (RCSC) also reported more posttraumatic growth as measured by the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory [PTGI] (r= .37, p < .01). Conversely, participants who reported more religious strain on the RCSC also reported more symptoms of PTSD as measured by the PTSD Check List, Civilian Version [PCL-C] (r= .41, p < .01). Specifically, participants who reported more feelings of alienation from God (r= .27, p < .01) and more religious fear and guilt (r= .32, p < .01) also tended to score higher on the PCL-C. However, neither negative religious coping, nor the specific aspects of alienation from God and religious fear and guilt were significantly associated with posttraumatic growth. Positive religious coping was also not significantly associated with scores on the PCL-C.

These findings would indicate that for the participants in this study, positive religious coping was associated with more posttraumatic growth following a trauma, but not less PTSD symptomatology. Likewise, negative religious coping after a trauma was associated with higher scores of PTSD symptomatology, not with lowered rates of posttraumatic growth. Again, with correlational results, the cause of changes in scores on the PCL-C or PTGI is not known. These

results only indicate that a positive and significant relationship exists between positive religious coping and PTGI scores, and that a positive and significant relationship exists between negative religious coping and PCL-C scores. It is possible that another variable may be linked with both positive and negative religious coping and PTGI and PCL-C scores. What this research can indicate is that spiritual struggle and PTSD are related, but spiritual struggle and posttraumatic growth are not related.

Bradley, Schwartz, and Kaslow (2005) examined a group of 134 African American women between the ages of 18 and 64 who had experienced interpersonal violence and sexual assault. They found a link between PTSD symptoms and self-esteem, negative religious coping, and spiritual social support.

The women were administered the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ), Index of Spouse Abuse (ISA), Davidson Trauma Scale (DTS), Taylor Self-Esteem Inventory (TSEI), Multidimensional Profile of Social Support (MSPSS), and the Religious Coping Scale (RCOPE). A significantly positive correlation was found between negative religious coping and PTSD symptoms ($r=.34$, $p < .001$). A significantly negative correlation was found between negative religious coping and self-esteem ($r= -.37$, $p < .001$) and between negative religious coping and levels of spiritual social support ($r= -.33$, $p < .001$). They also found that both levels of self-esteem ($\beta= -.37$, $p < .001$) and levels of spiritual struggle ($\beta= .34$, $p < .001$) mediated the link between PTSD and abuse history, meaning that African American women who reported lower self-esteem and more negative religious coping methods were more likely to develop PTSD.

A large percentage of the women (66%) had experienced childhood abuse, and therefore a sample that experienced trauma only as adults may not have the same results. The correlational nature of the study also prevents us from inferring that spiritual struggle causes PTSD symptoms,

lower self-esteem, or less spiritual social support. There may be other variables involved, and although spiritual struggle was found to mediate the link between childhood abuse and PTSD symptoms, there may be other variables which are also involved.

This study is consistent with other findings such as Kennedy et al. (2000) which found that well-being was negatively correlated with spiritual struggle and demonstrates a link between PTSD and negative religious coping or spiritual struggle. This study is unique in that it links spiritual struggle and the development of PTSD after abuse rather than simply affecting symptom severity.

Witvliet, Phipps, Feldman, and Beckham (2004) studied 213 male military veterans diagnosed with PTSD. The men were 50.8 years old on average and the sample consisted of 132 African Americans, 70 Caucasians, 1 Hispanic, 1 Asian American, 1 Pacific Islander, and some participants who did not report their ethnicity. The participants were administered the Clinician Administered PTSD Scale-Diagnostic Version, Forgiveness of Others and Forgiveness of Self-Scales, and the Brief Religious Coping Scale. They were also administered sections of the Davidson Trauma Scale for PTSD (DTS), Mississippi Scale for Combat-Related PTSD, Beck Depression Inventory (BDI), and the State-Trait Anxiety Scale. The authors found that negative religious coping was positively and significantly correlated with PTSD symptoms ($r=.25$, $p < .0001$) depression symptoms ($r=.29$, $p < 0001$), and both state anxiety ($r=.25$, $p < .0001$) and trait anxiety ($r=.16$, $p < .05$). However, these correlations were small. Positive religious coping was mildly but significantly correlated with higher scores on the DTS ($r=.16$, $p < .05$), and negative religious coping was also mildly but significantly associated with scores on the DTS ($r=.17$, $p < .05$) indicating that both positive and negative religious coping are possible reactions to trauma. Neither positive nor negative religious coping were significantly correlated with combat trauma

exposure.

These results indicate that negative religious coping is linked with, but does not necessarily cause PTSD symptoms, depression symptoms, or state/trait anxiety in male military veterans. The correlations were also small and therefore the link is not very strong. There may be other unknown variables which explain the links. In addition, it is unknown if female veterans would significantly differ, or if men who were not veterans would show a similar link.

These findings that both positive and negative religious coping are linked with trauma are consistent with studies by Kennedy et al. (2000) and Falsetti et al. (2003). They are also consistent with the previous studies which have found small, but significant correlations between spiritual struggle/negative religious coping and PTSD symptom severity. Witvliet et al. (2004) are among the few, however to have a sample which had all been diagnosed with PTSD.

A study conducted by Wortmann, Park, and Edmonson (2011) was comprised of 142 undergraduate students (58% women and 42% men) aged 17 to 23 years with 69.4% identifying as White, 4.9% as Hispanic, 4.1% as Black, 3.7% as Asian/Pacific Islander, .8% as American Indian, and 15.5% who did not specify ethnicity. Religious affiliation was not reported. The authors administered the PCL-C and the RCOPE to measure trauma and PTSD symptoms at the beginning of the school year and at the end of the school year. They also measured baseline exposure to traumatic events with the Traumatic Life Events Questionnaire (TLEQ). Participants that endorsed a traumatic event and the response of "helplessness or horror" (Wortman et al., 2011, p. 444) were put into the trauma group (n= 48) and participants who either did not report a traumatic event or did not report helplessness or horror in response to the event were placed in the non-trauma group (n=197).

Participants in the trauma group had significantly more spiritual struggle than participants in the non-trauma group (t= -2.12, p < .05). Overall, trauma exposure between time 1 and time 2 was significantly and positively correlated with spiritual struggle (r=.16, p < .05). Spiritual struggle was also significantly and positively correlated with PTSD symptoms at time 2 (r= .23, p < .001). Specific aspects of spiritual struggle were also significantly correlated with PTSD symptoms at time 2. Belief in punishment from God (r=.25, p < .001), questioning God's power (r=.21, p < .001) and spiritual discontent (r = .21, p < .01) were all positively correlated with PTSD symptoms at time 2.

Wortman et al. (2011) found that increased symptoms of PTSD from time 1 to time 2 were partially but significantly mediated by higher scores of spiritual struggle (R²= .12), beliefs in punishment from God (R²= .14), negative reappraisals of God's power (R²= .11), and feelings of spiritual discontent (R²= .12) as measured by the RCOPE. Attribution of the trauma to demonic forces, however, was not a significant mediator between PTSD and trauma.

The results of this study indicate that participants who experienced traumatic events with feelings of helplessness and horror were more likely to experience aspects of spiritual struggle than participants who either did not experience a traumatic event with feelings of helpless and horror. The results also indicate that certain cognitions consistent with spiritual struggle such as that one is being punished by God or that God is not in control are linked with more PTSD symptoms, and that spiritual struggle, reappraisal of God's power, spiritual discontent, and belief in being punished by God were partially accounted for the link between trauma exposure and PTSD symptoms.

The results of these studies suggest that spiritual struggle/negative religious coping are associated with symptoms of PTSD, depression, anger, and anxiety, and that specific cognitions

are more associated with them than others. These results are not surprising as many of the cognitions involved in spiritual struggle (i.e., God is punishing me, God does not love me, God is not all powerful) are similar to the types of cognitions common in PTSD such as guilt, shame, and negative beliefs about the world (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Spiritual Struggle and Other Correlates of Mental Health

Spiritual struggle has been linked to more than PTSD. Using a large, national dataset from The Spirituality and Health 2004 National Study of Religion and Health, McConnell et al. (2006) examined 1,629 predominately White (90.4%) participants with an average age of 49.1 years. In the sample, 50.1% were men and 49.9% were women. Three quarters of this sample (75.3%) identified as Christian (33.6% as Protestant, 21.5% as Catholic, 9% as Orthodox, and 19.3% other), 4.6% as Jewish, .6% as Muslim, 1.2% as Eastern Religion [*sic*], and 12% reported no religious preference. Negative religious coping as measured by the RCOPE was significantly and positively correlated with several variables and was presented by the authors using R^2 coefficients rather than r coefficients. Negative religious coping was significantly correlated with anxiety ($R^2 = .23$, $p < .001$), depression ($R^2 = .33$, $p < .001$), obsessive compulsive traits ($R^2 = .17$, $p < .001$), and somatic symptoms ($R^2 = .15$, $p < .001$) as measured by the Symptom Assessment-45 Questionnaire (SA-45).

Although this indicates that spiritual struggle was associated with obsessive compulsive, anxious, somatic, and depressive symptoms, the connection between spiritual struggle and these symptoms was not very strong. There may be other variables associated with both these symptoms and spiritual struggle. Nevertheless, the results are consistent with Witvliet et al. (2004) in that spiritual struggle/negative religious coping was linked with depression and anxiety.

Some researchers have looked at specific aspects of spiritual struggle and their association with depression and anxiety (Exline, Park, Smyth, & Carey, 2011; Exline, Yali, & Lobel, 1999). For example, Exline et al. (1999) found that current difficulty in forgiving God (measured with three Likert scale questions) was associated with higher levels of depression and anxiety in a group of 200 college students who reported a variety of stressful events, some of which were severe enough to be precipitants of PTSD. The sample was composed of 51% Caucasian, 23% Asian, 16% African American, and 7% Latino students. A majority (65%) of the sample identified as Catholic, 19% identified as Protestant, 15% as "born again" (Exline et al., 1999, p. 368), and 1% as Eastern Orthodox. Eight percent of the sample did not have a religious affiliation.

Using Likert scale questions regarding feelings toward God, Exline, et al. (1999) found that participants who reported difficulty forgiving God for painful events in their lives (deaths, traumatic events, etc.) also reported significantly higher scores on the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) (r= .31, p < .001), Beck Anxiety Inventory ([BAI] r=.22, p < .01), and scores on the State Trait Anger Scale (r=.32, p < .001). Additionally, feelings of alienation from God were significantly correlated with higher BDI scores (r=.32, p < .001) and State Trait Anger Scale (r=.29, p < .001), but not with higher BAI scores.

Higher levels of forgiveness were associated with lower BDI scores (r=.37, p < .05), but were not significantly correlated with BAI scores or scores on the State-Trait Anxiety Scale. Exline et al. (1999) also conducted a hierarchical regression analysis and found that feeling alienated from God was able to predict higher scores on the BDI (β= .22, p< .05). Current difficulty in forgiving God was also a significant predictor (β=.20, p < .05) for BDI scores. They

concluded that alienation from God partially mediated the link between forgiveness and depression (R^2=.04, < .05).

In the Exline et al. (1999) study, current difficulty in forgiving God was significantly linked to symptoms of anxiety, anger, and depression. Also, feelings of alienation from God were significant predictors of a change in reported depression symptoms even though difficulty forgiving God was not a predictor. Lastly, less difficulty in forgiving God was significantly linked with lower depression symptoms, but not lower anxiety and anger symptoms.

These results are correlational, which means that difficulty forgiving God and alienation from God are not causes of anxiety, anger, and depression symptoms, nor are those symptoms causes of difficulty forgiving God or feelings of alienation from Him. Predictors are not the same as causes, but are simply how much of a change can be predicted in one variable when a change occurs in the other. There still may be, and likely are other variables which are affecting psychological symptoms, feelings of alienation, and current difficulty forgiving God.

The study conducted by Exline et al., (1999) is congruent with previously mentioned studies such as McConnell et al. (2006) which also linked spiritual struggle (which would include feelings of alienation from God and difficulty forgiving Him) with increased symptoms of anxiety and depression. The sample populations in each study were quite different in regard to religious affiliation and age. McConnell et al. (2006) had a sample with many different types of religious affiliations and an average age of 49 years, and Exline et al. (1999) had a sample composed mostly of Catholics who were college age. This lends to the generalizability that aspects of spiritual struggle are linked with symptoms of depression and anxiety.

In a different study, Exline et al. (2011) found that participants who believed that God was cruel or responsible for their suffering, experienced less meaning making, and reported more

anger towards God than who did not view Him this way. Their sample consisted of 446 undergraduate students in Ohio of whom 228 were men and 218 were women, aged 19 years on average. The sample was predominately White (61%), and 22% were Asian, 8% were African American, 3% were Hispanic, and 4% were Middle Eastern. Religiously, the sample predominately identified as Protestant Christian (32%), but also included 24% Catholic, 6% Jewish, 6% Hindu, 3% Muslim, 2% Buddhist, 2%, Eastern Orthodox Christian, 12% atheist or agnostic, and 7% identified with no reported religious affiliation.

Participants were asked to share difficult circumstances in their life for which they felt God was responsible or events which caused them to question His existence (or would question His existence if they believed in Him) as well as their reactions, thoughts, and emotions to the events. Depressive symptoms were measured using the Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression Scale which is a self-report measure of symptoms associated with depression in the past week.

Many negative incidents were reported such as bereavement, illness or injury to self or a loved one, abuse, divorce, and unspecified accidents. Many of the participants reported that they had anger at God after a negative incident (87%), but no incident was more likely than another to produce anger. Feelings of anger toward God were significantly and positively correlated with depressive symptoms ($r=.31$, $p < .01$). Additionally, participants who reported anger towards God were more likely to see Him as cruel ($r= .75$, $p < .01$), to blame Him ($r=.26$, $p < .01$) and to report less meaning making ($r= -.38$, $p < .01$) according to self-report.

This study found a large and significant correlation between anger towards God and seeing Him as cruel. These specific feelings about God were also linked with lower levels of meaning making and higher levels of depression. Anger, blame, and feelings that God is being

cruel or responsible for suffering are aspects of spiritual struggle. Therefore, this study is consistent with McConnell et al. (2006) which also found a link between depression and spiritual struggle, and with Witvliet et al. (2004) which also found links between spiritual struggle and depression and anxiety. Exline et al. (1999) also found consistent links between difficulty forgiving God, feelings of alienation, spiritual struggle and depression, anxiety, and anger.

Difficulty forgiving God and feeling that God is responsible/blaming Him for suffering (as in Exline et al., 2011) may be parts of the same variable. Their connection is not known, but they have both been linked to anger and depression symptoms, and it makes logical sense that believing God is responsible for suffering would lead to difficulties with forgiveness.

The studies reviewed here demonstrate a link between PTSD, anger, depression, anxiety, and spiritual struggle. Further understanding of how these variables interact and how resolution of spiritual struggle occurs is a worthy undertaking. Spiritual struggle is not simply a spiritual problem best left to the religious leaders to address, but is a common problem with potential ramifications for the mental health and wellbeing of many. However, the problem of spiritual struggle is not easily answered due to a dearth of information on spiritual resolution in the literature. However, some direction may be found in the literature on posttraumatic growth.

Spiritual Struggle and Posttraumatic Growth

There have been several articles focused on studying spiritual struggle, but few if any on spiritual struggle resolution. Some studies (Flowers, 2014; Gerber, Boals, & Schettler, 2011; Harris et al. 2008) cite posttraumatic growth or mention that participants experienced spiritual resolution, but resolution was not defined, and was not the main topic of their study.

Posttraumatic growth (PTG) and stress related growth (SRG) are changes which are considered positive, and occur in the wake of severe stress and trauma. PTG has been defined as

"the experience of positive change as a result of the struggle with a major life crisis" (Lindstrom, Cann, Calhoun, & Tedeschi, 2013, p. 50), and SRG has been defined as "the extent to which an individual's perspectives and behaviors have positively changed because of a traumatic event" (Moore, Varra, Michael, & Simpson, 2010, p. 93). This type of growth is said to occur when a person can conceptualize worldviews that are more adaptive in their posttraumatic world (Gerber et al., 2011).

Gerber et al. (2011) examined trauma and PTG using the Traumatic Events Questionnaire (TEQ) and the brief version of the RCOPE with a sample of 1,106 undergraduate students, of which 67% were female and 33% were male, and were 20.18 years of age on average. The sample was 62% Caucasian, 13% African American, 7% Hispanic, 14% Asian, and 4% Native American or other. Religious affiliations were not reported, nor was the number or percentage of students who reported trauma. Participants who did not report any traumatic events on the TEQ were asked to list the "most traumatic thing to happen to you" (Gerber et al., 2011, p. 300). The most frequent reported trauma by the participants (349 reported) was in the "other" category which encompassed traumas which would not be precipitants to a PTSD diagnosis, followed by the second most frequent trauma reported, learning of the death or serious injury of someone close to them (193 reported). Other types of traumas included sexual/physical assault (183 reported), natural disasters (67 reported), threatened death (51 reported), and car accidents (85 reported).

The authors found that higher scores on the Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory were significantly and positively correlated with levels of both positive religious coping ($r=.28$, $p < .001$) and negative religious coping ($r=.12$, $p < .001$). The correlation between positive and negative religious coping was also significant ($r=.17$, $p <. 001$). This indicates that there is a

positive link between both positive religious coping and negative religious coping with the amount of PTG reported. These results also indicate that negative religious coping and positive religious coping are linked, or may both be linked with a third variable.

This study's generalizability is limited in that it was correlational in nature. Positive and negative religious coping were both associated with PTG and indicated a positively correlational relationship. Although the correlation between positive religious coping and PTG was higher than between PTG and negative religious coping, the authors did not indicate it this was a significant difference. Again, this data is correlational and not causal, meaning that it is unknown if PTG occurs alongside these variables, is affected by them, or if PTG affects the levels of positive and negative religious coping. However, what is indicated is that there is a moderate, but significant relationship between the processes occurring in PTG and the processes affecting both types of religious coping.

PTG and SRG have also been found to be positively correlated with seeking spiritual support. In the previously mentioned study by Harris et al. (2008), scores on the PTGI and positive religious coping as measured by the RCSS were significantly and positively correlated (r= .37, p < .01), whereas negative religious coping measured by the RCSS, and PTG measured by the PTGI scores were not significantly related. This contrasts with the results found by Gerber et al. (2011) which indicated a significant relationship between PTG and both negative and religious coping.

Harris et al., (2008) also used a hierarchical regression model to explore the impact of spiritual support as measured by the MOS Social Support Survey on PTG. They found that seeking spiritual support was a significant predictor of posttraumatic growth (β= .47, p < .001). General social support was also found to be a significant predictor of PTG, but was not as robust

(β= .11, p < .02). It is unknown how PTG may or may not be associated with the absence of social support, but seeking spiritual support may be more beneficial than seeking general support.

Werdel, Dy-Liacco, Ciarrochhi, Wicks, and Breslford (2014) examined whether specific aspects of positive religious coping were associated with PTG. They looked at a sample of 174 participants between 17 and 80 years of age. Eighty percent were Caucasian and 74.6% were female. Nearly half (56.8%) of the participants identified as Christian. The authors did not provide additional demographic information. Participants were administered the short form version of the Faith Maturity Scale (FMS), the RCOPE, Perceived Stress 4 Item Version (PSS), Perceived Social Support Scale – Friends (PSS-Fr), and the Stress Related Growth Scale – Short Form (STGS).

The authors found that greater faith maturity as measured on the FMS was significantly and positively correlated with SRG (r=.39, p < .001). Social support was also significantly correlated with SRG (r=.29, p < .001) Additionally, the absence of believing that God was bestowing punishment, or the absence of feeling abandoned by God was associated with higher levels of SRG (r=.40, p < .001). In other words, participants who did not report beliefs that God was punishing them or had abandoned them were more likely to have higher SRG scores. They also found that spiritual struggle as measured by the RCOPE was not significantly associated with SRG. In other words, SRG was not found to be linked with spiritual struggle, but was found to be correlated with the absence of some spiritual struggle cognitions.

These results indicate that faith maturity, an aspect of positive religious coping, is associated with SRG, and also that specific aspects of spiritual struggle such as disconnection with God may interfere with SRG. This is consistent with the research by Harris et al. (2008) in

which spiritual struggle was not associated with the related concept of PTG, and contrasts with the results of Gerber et al. (2011) in which both negative and positive religious coping were found to be correlated with PTG. Werdel et al. (2014) also found that social support was positively correlated with SRG, which is consistent with the 2008 study conducted by Harris et al. (2008).

This study (Werdel et al., 2014) is correlational and so the causality of the relationship cannot be determined. Also, only 56.8% of the participants identified as Christian, so the relationship between religious affiliation and faith maturity is unknown. The authors did not examine correlations between religious affiliation or age with faith maturity even though these variables may have an effect which could change the relationship between SRG and faith maturity.

One doctoral dissertation (Flowers, 2014) using hermeneutic phenomenology explored the role of spirituality in PTG in a sample of 10 veterans (four women and six men) between the ages of 39 and 46 who had been out of active duty for at least two years. All of the veterans had some type of trauma (related either to combat or sexual assault). Nine of the ten participants identified as Christians (one identified as spiritual). Six of the participants were Black, one was Latino, and three were White.

Flowers (2014) explored the question, "What is it like for veterans to experience posttraumatic growth in the aftermath of trauma, through Christian spirituality?" (p. 17). However, not all the participants identified as Christian, nor did they all report that they had spiritual struggles.

This study was focused only on PTG and not on resolution per se, nor even on spiritual struggle and PTG. However, there were findings of the study which are useful in the search for

information on spiritual struggle resolution. The author found several patterns of PTG through Christian spirituality among the veterans' answers. Six themes, which were made up of patterns, were found including, Spirituality Integration, Intrusive Thoughts, Cognitive Reframing in PTG, Recovery PTG, Emotional Healing, and Existential Development. Each theme included two or more patterns.

The first theme, Spirituality Integration, included the patterns: Spiritual Development, Spiritual Growth/Religion as a Coping Mechanism, Spiritual Experiences, Faith Strengthened, and Realization that Suffering Contributes to Gaining Purpose in Life.

The second theme, Intrusive Thoughts, included the patterns Suicidal Ideation, and Emotional Disclosure. The third theme, Cognitive Reframing in PTG, included one pattern: Learning/Change in Thought Process which was more related to trauma related cognitions about the self vs. God or spiritual struggles. The fourth theme, Recovery PTG, included the patterns: Change in Behavior, Change in Perception/Optimism, and Greater Personal Strength/New Possibilities.

This study suggests that PTG in Christian spirituality (which was not defined by the author) involves changes in perception, thoughts about the trauma, positive religious coping including strengthening of faith, and finding meaning through the suffering. Therefore, resolving spiritual struggle or at least certain aspects of it may be not only important for decreasing suffering, but also facilitating growth and meaning making. However, not all of the participants in this study reported having spiritual struggle. It is also possible that even faith focused posttraumatic growth is a different process than resolution of spiritual struggle.

Taken together, these studies on PTG and SRG indicate that PTG and spiritual struggle resolution may be related or parallel processes, and that PTG may be associated with positive

religious coping. Negative religious coping/spiritual struggle was found to be associated with PTG in Gerber et al. (2011), but only links between PTG and positive religious coping, not links between PTG and negative religious coping were replicated through other research studies (Harris et al., 2008; Werdel et al., 2014). Some cognitions common to spiritual struggle were also linked with lowered amounts of PTG (Werdel et al., 2014). Therefore, positive religious coping may not be just a parallel process that tends to occur alongside trauma (as does PTG) but something that also occurs as a different process from negative religious coping.

Treating Spiritual Struggle

A few researchers have attempted to address aspects of spiritual struggle by creating therapeutic interventions (Bowland, 2008; Harris et al., 2011; Murray-Swank, 2003). One example is a group therapy designed for military veterans experiencing spiritual struggle entitled *Building Spiritual Strength* (Harris et al, 2011).

Participants in the Harris et al. (2011) study consisted of 48 men and 6 women. The average age of participants was 45 years. A majority of the participants were Caucasian (74%), 18% were African American, .05% were Hispanic and .01% were Asian American. The veterans had served in a variety of military eras including Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom, Vietnam, Post-Vietnam and World War II. Within the sample, 61% identified as Protestant, 22% identified as Catholic, and 16% were categorized as "other" which included Buddhism, unknown/unnamed religious affiliation, Eckankar, and Judaism.

The therapy consisted of eight group sessions. In the first group, participants shared personal history and goals for the therapy. The second and third group sessions consisted of prayer and meditation exercises, along with a discussion about divine response to these prayers. Group four focused on the problem of evil. Group five worked to develop personal prayer and

meditation practices, while groups six and seven focused on forgiveness and conflict resolution with the individual's higher power. The final group session involved future planning and the termination session.

Participants were divided into a treatment group (n=29), and a control group (n=26) which consisted of no treatment (a wait-list for treatment). Demographics were not reported broken down by group, but no significant differences on any aspects were found between groups. Overall, prior to any treatment, 65% of all participants scored above the clinical cutoff on the PTSD checklist. The average number of traumas reported by the treatment group was 11.61 (sd=10.65), and the average number of traumas reported by the control group was 14.55, (sd=10.59). Average baseline scores on the PCL for the treatment group were 41.34, (sd=17.44), and in the control group the average baseline PCL score was 49.45, (sd=16.81). These differences between the control group and intervention group were not found to be statistically significant.

After completing *Building Spiritual Strength*, 69% of the control group still met criteria for PTSD, but only 46% of the treatment group still met criteria for PTSD ($F (1, 46) = 55.93$, $p<.02$). Average scores on the PTSD checklist were significantly reduced from baseline after the completion of therapy for the treatment group ($F (1, 46) = 531.56$, $p<.001$). This suggests that spiritually targeted interventions may be effective in reducing PTSD symptoms in military veterans experiencing spiritual struggle.

However, there are limitations to this study. First, the sample was not representative of women as only six participated in the study. Second, the control group did not receive any type of placebo treatment, and were instead placed on a waitlist. It is possible that the interaction with

a therapist or other veterans accounted for the change in the treatment group, and not the treatment itself.

Bowland (2008) also studied the effects of a spiritually targeted intervention group. The participants were 43 women aged 55 and older who identified as Christian and had experienced trauma. Eighty-four percent were Caucasian, 14% were African American, and one participant was Eastern Indian. Religious affiliations of the women included 30% Catholic, 14% Presbyterian, 9% Lutheran, 5% Episcopalian, 9% Baptist, and 14% nondenominational Christian. All of the women were all either suffering from depression, PTSD, or anxiety as measured by the Geriatric Depression Scale (GDS), Posttraumatic Stress Diagnostic Scale (PDS), and the Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI), respectively. Participants participated in 11 weeks of group therapy. Group one focused on spiritual and trauma histories. Group two focused on spiritual gifts. Group three explored spiritual coping strategies, and group four explored anger and its relationship to the women's faith. Group five focused on feelings of fear and powerlessness, and groups six, seven, eight, nine, and ten focused on shame and guilt, loneliness, despair, forgiveness, and hope, respectively. The last session planned for the future and terminated therapy.

There were no significant symptom differences between the groups at baseline. The treatment group (n=21) showed significantly more decreases in scores on depression symptoms ($F_{(1, 41)} = 23.66$, $p < .0001$), anxiety symptoms ($F_{(1, 41)} = 8.42$, $p = .0059$), and physical health symptoms ($F_{(1, 41)} = 9.47$, $p = .0037$), than the control group (n=22). The women in the treatment group also had a significant decrease in PDS scores from pre-treatment to post-treatment ($t(41) = -3.86$, $p < .001$). This was not compared to the change in PDS scores in the wait-list group. The decreases in depression, anxiety, PTSD, and physical health symptoms

remained stable three months post-treatment as evidenced by no significant change between scores at the conclusion of treatment and 3 months after treatment.

These results suggest that treatment interventions aimed at reducing spiritual struggle could be helpful for older, Christian women who suffer from depression, anxiety, and PTSD. However, these results are limited by the fact that the control group was placed on a waitlist and did not receive any placebo treatment. Therefore, it is unknown if the social support and interaction of the intervention accounted for the positive religious coping or the reduction in symptoms, or if the treatment was responsible.

Solace for the Soul: A Journey Toward Wellness is another treatment for spiritual struggle specially developed for survivors of sexual assault, and was developed by N. Murray-Swank (2003). This therapeutic intervention was meant for individual therapy work, and was designed to meet the ideological needs of a people with a theistic worldview consistent with monotheistic religions. It combined mindfulness and spirituality exercises. Within eight sessions, seven themes were explored: images of God, abandonment/anger with God, spiritual connection with God, shame, body issues, and sexuality.

Using this therapy, N. Murray-Swank conducted a single case, interrupted, time series design (repeated four times) with five Caucasian women aged 28–49 who had survived sexual abuse in either childhood, adulthood, or both. Participants completed the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI), Trauma Symptom Checklist-40 (TSC-40), Multidimensional Sexual Self-Concept Questionnaire (MSSCQ), RCOPE, God Concepts Survey, God Image Scale, and a 31 item Daily Measurement Log created for the study that assesses psychological distress, traumatic symptoms, sexuality, religious coping, self-concept, and body disgust. All measures except for

the Daily Measurement Log were administered before the study, after the fourth session, after the study, and at one month follow-up.

The treatment consisted of eight individual therapy sessions with each session centering around a specific theme. The first session included information gathering. The second session focused on the participant's image of God. The third session focused on the participant's feelings about God's abandonment and their anger at God. The fourth session focused on the participant's spiritual connection with God. The fifth session targeted feelings of shame and letting go of it, and session six focused on feelings about the body. Session seven focused on sexuality, and the last session focused on discharge and termination of therapy.

Using time series analysis, four of the five clients showed significantly improved scores on the BSI by the end of the treatment. In addition, three participants showed significant decreases in anxiety symptoms after treatment and at follow-up. Two participants showed a significant decrease in sexual difficulty, and two participants showed a significant increase in their positive image of God as measured by the God Image Scale.

This treatment protocol focused on themes similar to those in *Building Spiritual Strength* and the intervention in Bowland (2008) such as focusing on specific cognitions about God's abandonment and punishment and focusing on building a spiritual connection with Him, but additionally focused on sequalae of sexual trauma. The results paralleled those of Harris et al. (2011) and Bowland (2008), with decreased client psychological distress and improved image of God.

This study (N. Murray-Swank, 2003) did have some limitations. First, it was a small sample size of five women so it is difficult to generalize the results, especially to men. People who experience non-sexually based traumas such as combat or natural disaster may not benefit

from the emphasis on sexuality and body disgust. It is also unclear if it was truly the treatment

protocol that was responsible for the improvement, or if the relationship with the therapist caused

the change, as there was no control group.

Across these examples of treatment for spiritual struggle, it is clear that aspects of

spiritual struggle can successfully be treated, and by treating it, reductions in psychological

distress can occur. However, with the exception of Bowland (2008), who studied only Christian

women, these treatments were designed to be a one size fits all approach for any religion, or at

best, any monotheistic religion. There are several issues with this approach, including that not all

religions are monotheistic.

Even among the monotheistic religions, there are large differences between their concepts

of God (Hunter, 2003; Jasper, 2003; Ridgeon, 2003; Wilkinson, 2010). For example, Christians

believe in a triune God made up of God the Father, God the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Neither

Judaism nor Islam share this idea, and their concepts of God are very different from each other

despite their sacred texts including some of the same characters and stories (Hunter, 2003;

Jasper, 2003; Ridgeon, 2003; Wilkinson, 2008). Another major difference in religious concepts

are the beliefs about good and evil. Judaism and Christianity both speak of sin and the devil;

however, the ramifications of these concepts and their impact on a person of that faith vary.

Islam also believes in the presence of a devil figure (*Iblis)* and evil spirits called *Jinn,* but their

role in everyday life is different than it is in Judaism and in many Christian circles. Even among

Protestant and Catholic Christians, there are important differences in theology, such as the route

to salvation, the ramifications of sin, and the response of God to the individual or community

(Hunter, 2003; Jasper, 2003; Ridgeon, 2003; Wilkinson, 2008).

Religion can be regarded as a culture (Cohen & Hill, 2007), and therefore, one size does not fit all. For example, Trakeshwar, Pargament, and Mahoney (2003) found that some aspects of spiritual struggle are not found in Hinduism such as the absence of struggles with demonic reappraisal (belief that negative life events are caused by the devil or demons) and the absence of major interpersonal religious issues. Much of this is not surprising based upon the differences in beliefs of Hinduism and beliefs of Christianity, and it would be expected that differences between monotheistic and polytheistic religions would create differences in how one relates to God and in the experiences of spiritual struggle. For instance, the religious community may be more important for certain religions, whereas other forms of spirituality may be practiced in a more individualistic manner. (Krumrei & Rosmarin, 2012; Wilkinson, 2010).

In a more specific instance, research on spiritual struggle in Judaism has suggested that practices may be more important than beliefs in this community, especially among non-orthodox Jews (Cohen & Hill, 2007; Rosmarin, Pirutinsky, Pargament, & Krumei, 2009). Sensitivity to values, practices, and beliefs must be taken into consideration in order to effectively address the individual's specific spiritual struggles. Therefore, a group which consists of diverse religions may not be as helpful as one in which members share a common belief system. Ideally, research on the specific spiritual struggles and paths to spiritual struggle resolution that each tradition experiences would be conducted and then applied, instead of using the research on Christian struggles as the primary model, but in the absence of enough knowledge, clinical judgement must be utilized to weigh the ratio of potential benefit to potential harm for treatment options.

Second, most of these treatments appear to work in a backward fashion. Research is done on the types of spiritual struggle that exist and treatment is based upon reversing these beliefs and increasing positive religious coping. However, resolving spiritual struggle may not be so

linear. Resolution might come in the form of returning to pre-existing beliefs, integrating new beliefs with old beliefs, or changing beliefs all together. Resolution might also consist of changing the way one copes religiously and how one views the importance of the religious practices they engage in. Positive religious coping and spiritual struggle may also not be inverses of each other and may be two separate processes that need to be addressed in parallel.

Research on the process of resolution of spiritual struggle must be done with people who have resolved their struggles to see the path more clearly. Treatments that are not based on this principle have been helpful, but they might be even more helpful if they incorporated knowledge from the study of how spiritual struggle resolution occurs.

Third, the majority of these treatments appear to be group based. It is possible that feelings of shame over a person's spiritual struggle might prevent them from attending group based treatment. Therefore, it may be important to have both individual therapy and group therapy available. It may also be helpful for therapeutic interventions addressing spiritual struggle to be integrated into the existing trauma therapy work, which occurs most often in individual therapy.

Resolving Spiritual Struggle

There is little known about the resolution of spiritual struggle. Decker (1993) proposed linear stages of spiritual resolution: "separation" (a disruption in beliefs), "sublimate" (rising above the trauma), and "calcination" (reconnecting). He also proposed a fourth stage which can occur anytime called "mortification," which is a stage in which the person's process is stagnant. It should be noted that this was a theoretical and theological framework and not based on research findings.

A few authors (Desai & Pargament, 2015; Durá-Vilá, Dien, & Littlewood, 2013; Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000) have partially explored spiritual resolution. Durá-Vilá et al. (2013) conducted an ethnographic study of five Spanish nuns between in their early 20s to mid-40s who had been sexually abused by priests between two and 20 years prior. Some of the abuse was reported as a single incident and some of it was reported to have occurred over years, and usually began or occurred when the women were first joining a monastery as novices.

Common reported responses to this trauma were a disruption of previous worldview and struggle with beliefs about the goodness of the Church. Based on their interviews, Durá-Vilá et al. (2013) proposed a stage model for these nuns' integration of their sexual assault experiences into their religious narratives. The first stage was shock and distress, followed by self-doubt in the reality of the event. The third state was anger and mistrust, followed by withdrawal and meditation, which was further followed by secrecy and disclosure. The sixth stage was community acceptance, followed by spiritual integration. In the spiritual integration stage, the nuns reported that they came to understand that Jesus was with them during the abuse, and was being abused as well. The nuns also reported that they viewed the abuse as a test of strength, and that this test was passed when they resisted the abuse. The final stage was labeled as posttraumatic growth.

This study suggests the spiritual struggle created by the priests' abuse may be partially resolved through a treatment model which integrates the nuns' trauma resolution narrative with their religious resolution narrative. However, this is a very specific type of trauma, and one that interferes very integrally with the nuns' spiritual lives. Their experience may not be generalizable to survivors of trauma which does not have a strong religious component.

Giesbrecht and Sevcik (2000) conducted a naturalistic grounded theory study of five evangelical women between the ages of 30 and 50 who were survivors of domestic abuse. The women had been out of the domestic abuse relationship for between two and ten years. They found that the women reported it was helpful to revise their ideas on God, their relationship to the church, and their meaning of Scripture. The women also reported that they reframed their understanding of God's perspective on domestic abuse (letting them feel that it had been acceptable for them to leave the relationship).

The women reported that healing steps included interactions with pastors supportive of their divorce, and a transition from relying on others for Scripture interpretation to interpreting Scripture themselves, suggesting that reinterpretation is a part of the process. The study focused on how these women moved past the abuse using their spirituality, and less on how they were reconciled to their prior belief system. This is similar to the ethnographic study involving nuns (Durá-Vilá et al., 2013) in which reinterpretation of the event and thoughts around the event were helpful in the healing process.

Desai and Pargament (2015) attempted to measure rates of spiritual struggle resolution, predictors of spiritual struggle resolution, along with positive religious coping, posttraumatic growth, and global distress. Web-based surveys were administered twice within 4-6 weeks of each other. Participants were 127 (71.7% female and 28.3% male) undergraduate students with an average age of 19 years. Religiously, the sample was 48.8% Protestant Christian, 34.6% Catholic, 1.6% Jewish, 2.4% "non-traditional religious affiliation," (Desai & Pargament, 2015, p. 36), 3.9% agnostic, and 5.5% unsure or no religious affiliation. No other demographic information was given by the authors. The participants all reported "a little" or a "moderate" degree of spiritual struggle.

The participants were first administered several measures including: the Negative Religious Coping Scale (NRCOPE), the Impact of Events Scale (IES), which measures severity of spiritual struggle, the Compartmentalized Religion Scale to assess religious history, the God Attachment Scale, Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS), Religious Support Scale, and the Positive and Religious Coping Scale (PRCOPE). In addition, participants were asked one Likert style question to assess meaning making.

Four to six weeks later, participants were administered several outcome measures including the PTGI, Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS), Spiritual Changes Questionnaire, and Brief Symptom Inventory. Additionally, participants were asked a single item Likert question to assess spiritual decline, and growth specifically related to spiritual struggle. Spiritual struggle resolution was measured using one self-report fill in the blank sentence: "I feel that my spiritual struggle has…" Answers available were: "been completely resolved," "been partially resolved," "not changed," or "become worse" (Desai & Pargament, 2015, p. 74).

At time 2 there were 53.5% of the participants who reported that their spiritual struggles were partially resolved and 3.1% reported that the spiritual struggles were completely resolved. Forty percent of the sample reported no change in their spiritual struggles, and 2.4% reported that their spiritual struggles were worse. Spiritual growth as a result of the spiritual struggle was also found to be prevalent as 48.8% reported they believed they had spiritually grown, but 26.8% reported both growth and decline in their spirituality from their spiritual struggle.

The study also examined predictors of feeling resolved. Several variables were found to be significant predictors. Meaning making, as measured with one Likert question, revealed a significant and positively predictive relationship to feeling resolved (r=.36, p <.001). Secure attachment with God measured by the Compartmentalized Religion Scale was also found to have

a significant and positively predictive relationship to feeling resolved (r=.22, p < .05). Several types of social support as measured by the MSPSS were significant predictors of feeling resolved including total religious support (r=.30, p < .001), congregational support (r=.24, p < .01), and support from God (r=.30, p < .01). Positive religious coping as measured by the PRCOPE was also found to have a significant and positively predictive relationship with feeling resolved (r=.34, p< .001).

This study indicates that the perception of spiritual struggle resolution may be affected by type of attachment to God (a measure of religious history measured by the Compartmentalized Religion Scale), which is consistent with research by Werdel et al. (2014) which found that faith maturity was correlated with PTG. Desai and Pargament (2015) also indicated that having social support and finding meaning may be important aspects of perceiving spiritual struggle resolution. These results are limited in that none of the participants reported severe spiritual struggle and there may be other factors which are needed for the resolution of severe spiritual struggle. Furthermore, the sample was religiously diverse, and it is unknown if other variables would have been found to be significant or insignificant if the sample had been more religiously homogenous. Lastly, four to six weeks is a short length of time, and it is possible that with more time, more participants would have experienced spiritual struggle resolution and predictors would have strengthened, or new predictors would have emerged. Despite all of this, the study provides the most relevant information on perceived spiritual struggle resolution available prior to the present study. However, these results were not available at the time of this study's design and implementation, and therefore the indication that spiritual struggle resolution could be perceived on a continuum, rather than an event, which could be achieved or not achieved, was not incorporated into the research questions asked of participants in the present study.

Taken together, these studies indicate that integration of new and old spiritual information and spiritual practices may be a key part to resolving spiritual struggle. They also indicate that having spiritual support is likely also important. These studies provide a glimpse into the process of spiritual resolution, but they do not fully reveal how a person resolves spiritual struggle. The authors did not define resolution, but their findings suggest that it might have something to do with reinterpretation. The results of Desai and Pargament (2015) also indicate, based on the participant's responses, that resolution may be perceived to have partially or mostly taken place (a continuous variable) versus having or having not taken place (a dichotomous variable).

Therefore, the question of what spiritual struggle resolution is, and how trauma victims resolve spiritual struggle following trauma are important and understudied areas. The questions are vast and difficult to formalize because the definition of resolution is not known and its conceptualization may differ depending on the teachings of a religion or the beliefs of an individual. A question such as this cannot be answered through quantitative methods as there are not proper dependent variables, nor can statistics seem to capture the experience of spiritual resolution. The aforementioned qualitative studies (Durá-Vilá et al., 2013; Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000) come closest to answering the question of the resolution process and providing a framework from which to develop and refine therapeutic interventions, but are not adequate for providing a definition of spiritual struggle resolution or determining how it is achieved.

This study examines the process of spiritual resolution following trauma by asking the question, how do Protestant Christians who have been through a trauma as an adult and experienced spiritual struggle, understand resolution, and by what process did that resolution occur?

Methodology

Within this chapter, I will address the levels of research inquiry which led me to my chosen methodology. Research worldview, research philosophy, research approach, research type, and research strategy, as well as data collection and data analysis will all be addressed and related to the topic of the resolution of spiritual struggle.

Research Worldview

There are several worldviews which might inform a researcher. The worldview subscribed to in this project is interpretivism, also known as antipositivism. This worldview is interested in the understanding and interpretations of research participants, with the acknowledgement that each participant's interpretation of events or phenomena will be unique to them (Creswell, 2007). Interpretivist theory is more interested in the participant's understanding of their process rather than how that understanding came to be (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). Likewise, any type of research will be interpreted through the lens of the researcher's bias, prior experience, and belief system. This interpretive nature of the research is viewed as being unavoidable, as one cannot truly set aside their bias, prior experience, and beliefs. Therefore, understanding of the data and construction of theories will be filtered through the researcher's perspective (Charmaz, 2006).

Similarly, the researcher is aware that participants also cannot set aside their biases, past experiences, and belief systems. Therefore, the researcher may come across multiple realities regarding the same phenomena or psychosocial process. As this study looks at spirituality and its relationship to trauma, the participant's religious beliefs and background cannot be, nor should they be, divorced from the participant's understanding of trauma, struggle and resolution. Differing religious communities undoubtedly have different opinions and teachings about the

reality of mental illness (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), the impact of trauma, and the occurrence of spiritual struggle, and these belief structures most likely have an impact on the participant's view of their own feelings and experience. This is also why it is important to limit the array of belief systems in the sample pool in order to find a clearer picture of the resolution process without too many confounding variables.

Additionally, I, as the researcher, have my own belief system and ideas about spiritual struggle which will unavoidably act as a filter through which I view the data. This cannot be set aside any more than gender or age can be set aside. However, I have attempted to be aware of my biases and have attempted to decrease their influence. Member validity checks, a form of validity checking in which the researcher takes the results to the participants and seeks their views of the theory's fit can further reveal a theory which has been forced by the researcher's bias rather than allowed to emerge from the data. This validation process was utilized in this study.

Research Philosophy

Just as there are several worldviews, there are several research philosophies. The worldview of interpretivism is very similar to, and is a natural groundwork of social constructivism, the research philosophy identified for this study. Social construction focuses on meaning which is derived from experiences (Creswell, 2007.) Social constructivism purports that meaning is something that is both individualistic and collectivist at the same time. What is meant by this, is that meanings are socially constructed. Language is a prime example. The meaning of words, even within the same language, can vary according to region, cohort, context, and perspective. For example, slang words often have one meaning in a younger cohort than they do for the larger society. For instance, the word "peace" is often understood as "a state in which

there is no war or fighting" (Merriam-Webster, 2014, peace, para. 1), but is also a slang parting phrase (Urban Dictionary, 2014, peace, para. 1). Society has constructed different meanings for the same word in different contexts.

Another example is jargon. Words such as alopecia (loss of hair) or abbreviations which are used in certain professional circles are commonly understood only by people who reside in the context in which these terms are commonly used. Like language, the meaning of experiences can also be socially constructed. They may be shaped by public opinion, prior experiences, reactions of others, etc. The researcher's perception of meaning is also subject to the influence of society. The interpretation of the data may be filtered through the social climate of the time, the researcher's socially constructed perception and beliefs, the work of other researchers, or conversation with people in similar or differing contexts. All of these influences may shape the way in which the researcher interprets meaning.

Additionally, through the publication of their research, the researcher will participate in creating social constructs where there are none, or in building upon constructs already explored in the scientific community. The language of researchers begins to define words such as gender, trauma, spirituality, and so forth. Thus, the researcher must be aware of their own biases and modes of meaning making (Creswell, 2007).

Within qualitative inquiry the researcher will also participate in this social construction, therefore, it is important to be aware of any bias which might steer the construction. This is partially mitigated by the use of memos, which are short, unstructured notes written by the researcher during various stages of data collection and analysis that allow the researcher to track the development of their ideas and the construction of a theory (Charmaz, 2014.) Memos have the added benefit of being a record of theory development in which to look for instances of

unintentional forcing of the data into preconceived categories by the researcher as the theory was developed.

A quest for knowledge beneath the social constructivist lens would not focus on the what and when, but the why and how, or the meanings that a participant ascribes to their experience. Objective, measurable data such as test scores and quantified behaviors are not representative of the participants' personal meaning and thus, their personal reality. The social constructivist researcher is interested in the reality and meanings that the participants might offer, as this is how the researcher will understand the complexity of human experience in their area of their interest (Charmaz, 2014).

In this study, the understanding of the process of resolution of spiritual struggle is dependent on the individual person's definition of resolution (as the definition may determine when the individual felt they had resolved their struggles, the importance of resolution, etc.) There is not as of yet a constructed definition of spiritual resolution, and so the meanings given to it by participants in the study will be important for construction of the term.

Research Approach

Deductive reasoning is used in many quantitative studies in which a researcher begins with a theory, drafts a hypothesis, and tests their hypothesis through experiments and observations to confirm or deny their theory. This is a top down approach in which research is driven by the theory, and thus the researcher's data becomes narrower in scope (Creswell, 2007). As there is no definition for spiritual resolution, there is no place to start from which to theorize and hypothesize. The understanding of resolution of spiritual struggle is so underdeveloped that it would be purely presumptive to create a theory and explore the topic through the current narrow amount of information available. The researcher may miss important pieces of data due

to the lack of appropriate questions being asked of participants because of the lack of knowledge currently in the literature. Therefore, a deductive method was not the most appropriate research approach for this study.

Inductive reasoning operates from a bottom up model in which the researcher begins with observation and gathering of data (Creswell, 2007). From this data, the researcher looks for patterns and connections in order to analyze the data as they further extrapolate information. From these patterns and themes, a theory is sculpted and created over time (Creswell, 2007). An inductive method casts a broad net and therefore, is able to catch much more data than a deductive method is able to catch. This method was deemed to be more appropriate for the exploration of resolution of spiritual struggle, and was used in this research.

Research Type

Due to the above stated issues with deductive reasoning, a method which is more open ended, such as qualitative inquiry, would allow for inductive inquiry and much more potential discovery in this area. Thus, qualitative inquiry was chosen for this study. There are several methods of qualitative inquiry, but they all utilize observation, and focus on the quality of the data versus the quantity. Creswell (2007) lists several characteristics which set qualitative study apart from quantitative study.

First, qualitative study takes place in a naturalistic setting. In other words, experimental conditions are not created, but the participants are interacted with directly and usually in a natural setting instead of in a lab. Participants are not seen as de-identified numbers, but as people with stories to tell.

Second, the researcher uses a more "hands on" approach and collects the information through interviewing or observation instead of relying on measures and contrived situations. The

researcher is also seen as part of the data, and therefore the researcher's worldview is important because it can inform and color the data. Third, qualitative research draws from several sources of information. Interviews, observations, and memos written by the researcher can all be used together to synthesize common themes and processes that reveal a theory.

Fourth, qualitative research relies on inductive reasoning. The participants themselves may also participate in the shaping of the theory and any validity checks of the theory. Fifth, meaning is built up from the data. This makes qualitative research helpful for issues in which there is no known or agreed upon meaning. Sixth, qualitative research is described as "emergent" (Creswell, 2007, p. 39). This means that the journey that was begun may not be the journey that was taken. In other words, theoretically, this means a researcher may change and mold their study as it evolves and reveals information. The question may change, more participants may be sought, or the methods may be altered. However, this is not always appropriate for a particular study and must conform to ethical standards and practical limitations.

Seventh, culture, context, and theoretical orientations are all taken into consideration and used to select the appropriate approach for the research. Eighth, the results are interpreted by the researcher. This is another reason that the researcher's worldview is important, as it will color the interpretation. Likewise, their knowledge, background, and experience will also change how they interpret the data. The reader of the research is also invited to make their own interpretations. This is also done to a degree in quantitative research, as the reader decides which statistical findings rise to the level of meaningfulness, and how and why the findings exist. However, the interpretation is always colored by and confined to the original theory and hypotheses. A qualitative researcher's interpretations are not as constrained as the quantitative researcher, but will be influenced by worldview, knowledge, background, etc.

Finally, qualitative research uses a holistic approach. The larger scope of the issue is what is sought after, versus a small portion of the issue as in quantitative research. The "why" and "how" questions are addressed to view the entire landscape, versus the "what" and "when" which seeks specifics. This is reflected in the inductive, bottom-up approach that makes up qualitative research.

Research Strategy

The type of qualitative inquiry chosen for this study is constructivist grounded theory in accordance with the methods proposed by Charmaz (2014). Grounded theory originally was introduced in 1967 by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss who developed this technique as they sought to understand the experience of death and dying. Glaser and Strauss proposed that instead of developing a hypothesis and fitting the data into a preconceived theory, that researchers take the data and seek the theory that emerges from it (Boychuk Duchscher & Morgan, 2004; Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Grounded theorists strive to keep their biases about the topic they are studying to a minimum in order to avoid forcing the data. Restraint from forming theories prior to collecting data is meant to keep their minds blank of preconceived ideas which may interfere or dictate the form of the data. This is balanced with "theoretical sensitivity" which is the idea that the researcher knows enough about a topic in order to study it (Charmaz, 2014). The researcher must be familiar with the world in which they will be exploring, so as to know which participants to seek, which questions to ask, and in order to aid in coding of the data. Similarly, research questions should be as vague as possible, as more or different questions may emerge in the data collection process (Charmaz, 2014; Cutcliffe, 2005).

There are four hallmarks of grounded theories: workability, modifiability, relevance, and

fit (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser, 1978, as cited in Bergkamp, 2010). Grounded theories should be workable in that the theory works. This means that the theory is practical in that it explains the research question well and accounts for variation in individual cases, but is also generalizable to differing contexts as an overarching theory. The generated theory should also be able to be modified when new data suggests that it should be modified. In essence, a grounded theory is never truly done evolving as more and more data will emerge with time and further research projects. This data should be absorbed and integrated into the theory as it emerges.

Similarly, a grounded theory should have relevance to the research question and the concerns and experiences presented by the participants. The theory should also fit the research participants' experiences. The categorical labels should accurately reflect the clusters of data that they were meant to represent (Bergkamp, 2010).

Grounded theory uses themes related to particular phenomena experienced by participants, and are coded by the researcher in various stages. The themes begin to give a clearer picture of the process by which the phenomena have been experienced. In fact, the purpose of grounded theory is to explore the resolution of a shared problem or phenomena (Boychuck, Duchscher, & Morgan, 2004; Charmaz, 2014), such as spiritual struggle.

Constructivism has been incorporated into qualitative research through Charmaz's (2014) application of it to grounded theory methodology. Grounded theory fits the social constructivist worldview well as it seeks the personal meaning of participants. Theory is not generated from a single researcher or team of researchers, but is constructed through data gleaned from participants.

Charmaz (2014) advocates that the guidelines of grounded theory should be approached as principles and not as rules. She proposes that the researcher constructs the meaning of these

principles because their assumptions are shaped by their own experiences. She further conceptualizes grounded theory methods as "social actions" which are "constructed in concert with others in particular places and particular times" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 129). In other words, Charmaz states that the researcher will be influenced by their own professors, past and current participants, institutions, and past experiences, and that these things will change and effect how the researcher applies methodology to a particular subject in a particular context.

This view of grounded theory methodology is referred to as constructivist grounded theory, and lies in the interpretivist tradition in that it purports that the theory is influenced by the researcher's viewpoint. In addition, the researcher is interested in how the participants came to the understanding and meaning that they did, and is concerned with the evolution of the theory, whereas objectivist grounded theorists (those who adhere to the positivist tradition and operate on the assumption that data is objective and knowable despite who the researcher is), are more concerned with the application of grounded theory methodology, as they believe that this will ultimately produce theoretical understanding (Charmaz, 2014).

This study was best suited for the method of constructivist grounded theory for several reasons. First, the very goal of grounded theory is to discover one or more processes of resolution, and the variables which dictate any diverging paths which may or may not exist. Second, resolution of spiritual struggle is not yet defined, and it is possible that it is conceptualized differently by different people. Thus, there may be variation in when a person feels that have resolved the struggle. Similarly, while a person may meet a pre-supposed definition of resolution, they may not feel resolved, or they may feel resolved prior to meeting such contrived categories. An understanding of the nature of resolution must be sought through the eyes of the struggler.

Third, the literature indicates that conceptualizations of spiritual struggle resolution are being applied without knowledge of what resolution means. While attempting to reverse the common forms of spiritual struggle has been shown to be helpful (Bowland, 2008; Harris et al, 2011; N. Murray-Swank, 2003) and is a place to start helping people who are struggling, it misses the fact that there may be several ways to experience resolution of spiritual struggle and that there may be several emotional aspects of spiritual struggle which are not being addressed. For example, perhaps spiritual struggle does not need to be remediated, but needs to be endured. It is also possible that spiritual struggle is not entirely negative and can be beneficial in some ways. Without knowing how the process unfolds from people who have lived it, important information may be missed and/or diminished that could be helpful. The data could even reveal counterintuitive information.

Data Collection in Grounded Theory

A structured interview, the method chosen for this study, is helpful because it allows for a greater quantity of data to be collected in a shorter amount of time. In addition, it allows the researcher to ask for clarification or for more information if given a short answer. This should be done with caution however, as asking questions which stray too far from the pre-determined interview structure can lead the researcher to "force" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 32) the data by unconsciously focusing on certain aspects of interest to them, while ignoring others. Therefore, clarifying questions such as, "Tell me more about that," and "What do you mean by," or "When you said ____, did you mean ____?" are allowed. Questions should be open ended and somewhat vague in order to allow the participant to share aspects of the topic that the researcher may not be aware of or would otherwise miss with a more directed and specific research inquiry (Charmaz, 2014).

In addition, it is especially important with this topic to end the interview with a closing question that allows the participant to focus on positive aspects of their experience. Charmaz (2014) recommends this for all interview based data collections. This topic originates in trauma and may be distressing for some participants, so the last question asked of participants focused on positives, lessons learned, and growth of the participant.

Data Analysis in Grounded Theory

Analysis of data in grounded theory depends mostly on coding of initially small clusters of data to reveal the psychosocial process of the research question. These codes are then re-coded, compared, and organized into an eventual theoretical integration; in this case, how one resolves spiritual struggle in the wake of trauma. Codes are words or short phrases which represent and define the meanings and actions in what the participant is reporting. The code is not meant to be specific to only the actions and events described by one participant, but to transcend to general meanings and actions which are similar across participants. Thus, coding is used across subjects, joining their experiences together under a unified theory (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2013; Urquhart, 2013.

There are several methods to coding under the umbrella of grounded theory. The methods consistent with Charmaz (2014) were followed in this study. She suggests that coding happen in two general phases. First, the researcher codes data in a preliminary fashion. This is often completed by coding line by line of the interview transcript, describing the main meaning or action in each line. This is known as initial or open coding (Charmaz, 2014). In this stage, more than one code may apply to a section of data as the larger section may be coded one way, while the lines of text within the section are coded more specifically. Codes within codes, or sub-codes may also occur in grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2013).

Initial/open coding aims to fulfill the fit and relevance criteria of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). Initial codes can be created from differing sizes of data. The researcher may choose word by word, line by line, or incident by incident coding. However small the data is, a major component of grounded theory analysis is constant comparison (Charmaz, 2014). This means that the data is always being compared with other data. In the initial analysis, the interview is data. The data is compared to other sections of the same interview, looking for consistencies and inconsistencies. Later, this data will be compared with subsequent interview data. The codes should always reflect on face value what the action is taking place in the data, and should not reflect the researcher's assumptions or biases (Charmaz, 2014).

Next, the researcher recodes in a much more selective way, picking out the most frequent codes and organizing them. This is known as focused or selective coding and is the first step toward theoretical integration (Charmaz, 2014). Focused coding aims to fulfill the modifiability and workability criteria of grounded theory, and is much more selective than initial coding. Here, data is not coded line by line or word by word, but the most frequent and significant codes from the initial stage are pulled out and applied to larger clusters and sub-clusters of data (Charmaz, 2014). Again, the codes are compared against one another for constant comparison. In this stage, the researcher should begin to identify the theoretical categories which are the categories of data which are frequent, related to all other categories and are the main themes of the data. The eventual theory will center around these theoretical categories (Bergkamp, 2010; Charmaz, 2014).

Charmaz (2014) also suggests axial coding take place after focused coding, but also does not deem it necessary, stating that it is optional based on the needs of the researcher and the data. She advises novices to use axial coding if they are uncomfortable with ambiguity, but does not

deem it a necessary part of the coding process as in her view, theoretical coding can supersede the purpose of axial coding. Axial coding is so named because it acts as an "axis" around the data that serves to bring concepts back together after the data has been chopped up in initial/open coding (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007).

Lastly, theoretical coding takes the codes and relates them to one another, examining their relationship (Charmaz, 2014). This is called theoretical coding because the theory is built from the relationships between the codes, as it reveals the psychosocial process. These relational and theoretical codes are compared to the rest of the data to ensure that they are indeed seen throughout and repeated in the data (Charmaz, 2014; Urquhart, 2013).

Throughout this process, the data is constantly being compared to itself, to the rest of the data, and to the current literature base. Memos, the written thoughts of the researcher, aid in this process by helping the researcher conceptualize and see connections and well as discrepancies between pieces of data. In addition to its usefulness in constant comparison and generation of theory, memoing also serves to help the researcher be accountable for their feelings and reactions during the entire process from data collection to data analysis to the initial literature review (Bergkamp, 2010; Charmaz, 2014; Creswell, 2007; Urquhart, 2013). This helps the researcher separate their feelings and biases from the raw data, at least as much as this can be done.

Another process for augmenting the emerging categories is to engage in theoretical sampling. Theoretical sampling can also refer to a technique used to saturate categories by focusing subsequent interviews on theoretical categories (Charmaz, 2014; Urquhart, 2013). This may also be where data is re-examined or participants are re-interviewed to further explore the theoretical variables. Theoretical sampling was not utilized in this study, but as part of the member validity check of the results with participants, theoretical categories were further

augmented.

Creswell (2007) cites criteria by which grounded theories are measured. First, he proposes that the key element of the theory should be a process, action or interaction. Second, the coding process results in a larger theoretical model beyond the scope of only these participants. Third, the theory can be presented in a diagram. Fourth, the categories are connected by a story line which also creates more questions for further study. Last, the researcher acknowledges their own biases.

The validity of a qualitative study is best conceptualized as credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness. The results may be deemed credible if the data gathered matches the claims of the theory both in conceptualization but also in logic, so that another reader would agree with the claims made after reviewing the data (Charmaz, 2014).

The results may be deemed original if the data provides a fresh view and is significant in the sense that it has social and theoretical implications for the field. Likewise, the theory can strengthen, challenge, or fine tune existing theories. The results may be deemed to have resonance if the categories capture the complexity and breadth of the data, have challenged colloquialisms and their inferred meanings, connect the data to the larger cultural or institutional context, and offer insight to others who may have experienced this phenomenon (Charmaz, 2013). The results may be deemed useful if the theory is applicable to the daily life of people, reveals a generic or generalizable process, asks questions for further study, and contributes to the existing knowledge base (Charmaz, 2014).

The methodology used in this study is constructivist grounded theory in accordance with the principles and data analysis guidelines proposed in Charmaz (2014). This study sought to answer how people who have experienced traumatic events as adults, and subsequently

experienced spiritual struggle, went on to resolve that struggle.

Procedure

Participants

Participants were recruited in Seattle, Washington and surrounding areas, and in San Antonio, Texas and surrounding areas according to where the researcher was living at that time. Participants were recruited through advertisement (Appendix A) in local mental health clinics, churches, *Facebook, Craigslist Seattle, Craigslist San Antonio,* and *Craigslist Austin.* However, several participants who participated stated they heard about the study through word of mouth.

Initially, participants were invited to participate in the study if they reported that all of the following criteria were met: (a) the participant personally experienced a traumatic event which would qualify as a potential precipitant of PTSD according to the DSM-5 (rape, physical assault, motor vehicle accidents, natural disaster, etc.); (b) the trauma occurred at age 18 or older; (c) they identified as a Protestant Christian (per participant report) prior to the traumatic event; (d) after the traumatic event, they experienced spiritual struggle as defined by the literature (N. Murray-Swank & A. Murray-Swank, 2012; Pargament et al., 2000); and (e) felt that their spiritual struggle had been resolved in whatever way they understand resolution.

Recruitment of the minimum number of participants needed was difficult as advertisement did not yield as many inquiries as hoped. Therefore, the criteria were expanded to include traumatic events which would not qualify as precipitants of PTSD. One participant who could have been included was excluded due to not experiencing a qualifying traumatic event prior to the expansion of the criteria.

The criterion of identifying with Protestant Christian faith prior to the traumatic event is based on literature which suggests that different religions tend to experience different types of spiritual struggle (Khan & Watson, 2006; Rosmarin et al., 2009; Trakeshwar et al., 2003), and

therefore may resolve spiritual struggle differently. However, participants could identify with any denomination, as long as they considered themselves to have fallen under the general umbrella of Protestant Christianity when the traumatic event occurred. The participants did not have to identify as Protestant Christian at the time of the interview because it was possible that resolution might include changing religious beliefs or withdrawing from religion entirely.

There was no time limit as to how long ago the trauma had occurred, but participants did have to have a minimum of six months post traumatic event. No maximum time limit was imposed because the timetable of resolution of spiritual struggle was not known. The minimum time limit criterion was imposed to allow participants to have some distance from the traumatic event, potentially have time to resolve their spiritual struggle, and as an effort to reduce vulnerability to abreactions in the participants by giving them time and distance from their traumatic experience. In addition, participants did not need to feel that they had resolved all aspects of trauma recovery, and the perception of spiritual struggle resolution itself was self-defined by the participants.

Participants were pre-screened over the telephone using a pre-screening script (Appendix B) designed to confirm that the potential participant met the criteria of the study, and also to informally screen for participants who might have been more likely to experience a high level of distress during the interview. This was determined to be evidenced by their inability to name their trauma over the telephone or by apparent low affect tolerance.

Ten participants were interviewed; four from the Seattle area and six from the San Antonio area. Although men were eligible to participate in the study, all who inquired and attended interviews were women. Two men inquired, but did not respond to invitation for the pre-screening interview. Participant ages ranged from 25 to 61 with the average age being 37.1

years. Seven of the participants identified as White or Caucasian, one identified as Hispanic, one identified as African American, and one identified as Asian American. The participants came from a variety of denominational backgrounds. Three participants did not list a denomination or simply identified as "Protestant," two identified themselves as "Non-denominational," two identified themselves as "Presbyterian," one identified as "Disciples of Christ," one identified as "Assemblies of God," and one identified as "American Baptist."

The participants reported a variety of traumatic experiences. Experiences included rape, sexual and physical assault, emotional abuse, murder of a family member, sudden and fatal illness of a family member, pressured abortion resulting in severe medical complications, motor vehicle accident and witnessing of family member being severely injured, and witnessing an episode of severe mental illness of a family member. Three of the participants reported traumatic events in both childhood and adulthood. These participants were instructed to answer the pre-screening questions and the interview questions in regard to their traumatic experiences in adulthood.

Data Collection

Interviews took place in a variety of secure locations, such as participant's homes, the researcher's office, and university classrooms. The consent form was explained and demographic information was obtained through a paper and pencil questionnaire, requesting information about age, gender, type of trauma, and specific religious affiliation (Appendix C).

Interviews were audio recorded and consisted of six pre-determined, open-ended questions, (Appendix D). Questions were designed to be as open-ended and as general as possible, with four specific follow-up questions which were used if necessary. Additional questions were limited to "tell me more about that" and other similarly vague and clarifying

questions. This was in accordance with the idea that asking additional questions might have distorted the data toward the researcher's bias and away from the natural revelation of data. No participants appeared to become overly distressed, and no interviews were terminated.

Data Analysis

The goal of this analysis was to construct a theory which explained the process of resolution of spiritual struggle in a Protestant Christian population. Each interview was transcribed into a Microsoft Word document which was stored on an encrypted flash drive. After each interview, and again after each transcription, memos were written to capture any initial reactions or thoughts. The data were coded in several stages and simultaneously analyzed.

The first stage of data analysis took place through line by line initial coding, meaning that each line of the transcript was coded with a word or phrase which explained the action occurring in the line of data. This method resulted in 686 individual codes.

The second stage of coding involved taking these 686 codes and sorting them into categories to assess their frequency, similarity or dissimilarity from other codes, and relationship between codes. Codes were sorted into 67 focused codes through the combination of similar actions expressed in the initial codes. Larger chunks of data were then coded again with these focused codes. Focused codes were revised when they did not fit the data. Memos were written about each focused code regarding their definition and relation to other codes. Codes that were related were diagrammed to further assist in the building of the theory.

This process led to the collapsing of focused codes and categories into eleven theoretical categories which represented a basic process of spiritual struggle resolution, including a level of generality to explain the process for all participants versus one participant's process.

In accordance with grounded theory methodology, the theoretical categories were shared with participants of the study to verify that it resonated with them. Eight out of the ten participants responded and consented to participate in this process which is referred to as member validity checking. These validation interviews were conducted through phone interviews in which the theoretical model was shared with the participants and their feedback was solicited. All phone conversations were audio recorded with the participant's verbal consent. Participants were asked "How does this fit with your experience?" along with follow up questions such as "Tell me more about ____," and "Is there anything missing from the theory?" Responses were then integrated into the existing theory. Additionally, since there was no definition of spiritual resolution available prior to the data collection and analysis phases, a definition of spiritual struggle resolution was proposed and shared with participants for accuracy to their experience.

Findings and Results

Overview of Theoretical Categories

There were 686 line by line codes that were combined and refined into 67 focused codes. These focused codes were transformed into eleven theoretical categories through the process of writing theoretical memos, and relating codes to each other through axial coding and diagramming. These theoretical categories are presented as stages of spiritual struggle resolution. As the categories' relationship to one another emerged, a stage model appeared to be the most accurate way to describe their relationship. Many of the theoretical categories, hereafter referred to as theoretical stages began concurrently with the preceding stage and some stages were involved in a reciprocal or cyclical interaction. Many of the theoretical categories feature sub-categories which explain the variation in individual experience. Not all participants reported experiences with every theoretical stage, but most participants did.

As spiritual resolution is a resolution of spiritual struggle, participants shared their experience from onset of struggle to resolution. One of the insights that emerged from the data is that struggle and resolution are interrelated categories and that some stages of resolution involved returning to earlier stages of struggle. In addition, some stages of struggle occurred throughout the resolution process. Therefore, the theoretical categories are presented as a stage model that conceptualizes spiritual resolution and spiritual struggle as somewhat simultaneous and part of the same model.

It is also important to note that within the results, words and phrases will be used which are either consistent with Protestant Christianity or the language of the participants. This includes referring to God with male pronouns. Certain phrases which are common in Protestant Christianity such as "fallen world" and "author of evil" will be explained as they arise.

The theoretical categories are presented in a stage model. A definition of each conceptual category along with sub-categories and connections can be found within Table 1 (Appendix F). The theoretical categories are:

1. Experiencing an Event Discordant with Beliefs

2. Emotional Reaction

3. Questioning

4. Disconnection

5. Seeking Resolution

6. Seeking and Gaining New Understanding

7. Selectively Seeking Support

8. Reconnection with Beliefs

9. Reconnection with God

10. Feeling Resolved

11. Maintaining Resolution

Experiencing an Event Discordant with Beliefs

In this study, the experience of spiritual struggle was reported to have begun following the experience of a traumatic event. Many stated that this traumatic event caused spiritual struggle partially because it was discordant with their previously held religious beliefs. Several of the participants stated they believed that God would protect them from negative events in their lives. For example:

> I don't know if it's common for Christian kids to grow up thinking like, "Well, God's gonna protect us, and nothing really bad is gonna happen." I think I was confused and a little hurt that quote unquote "God didn't protect me." (Participant 5)

Another participant pointed out that she had believed that surrendering one's life to living according to God's will came with the promise of an easy life:

> I don't know if it's the Protestant church, or what I've been taught, [but] somehow, I felt like my life should have gotten better if I had kind of surrendered my life or my will to the Lord. (Participant 1)

This dissonance between prior beliefs and lived experience is the impetus for the entire model, and thus is the catalyst stage rather than a true stage in the process of spiritual resolution. It is important to note this catalyst as a theoretical category, however, because these feelings of dissonance led directly into subsequent stages of struggle and resolution. Furthermore, the event was a background element in many of the concepts and stories detailed by the participants.

Emotional Reaction

Emotional reactions to traumatic events are expected because humans are emotional creatures. Many of the emotions expressed were directed towards God and/or the community of believers. Their emotions were intricately woven into the experiences and understanding of the trauma. Therefore, Emotional Reaction emerged as a key concept early in the process of data analysis. The theoretical category of Emotional Reaction refers to the initial and immediate emotions which emerged for the participant as a result of interpretations about the traumatic event.

All the participants reported having an emotional reaction as a result of the traumatic event and as a part of their spiritual struggle. Participants listed over 20 different emotions that they had felt, which can be condensed under the umbrellas of anger, confusion, abandonment, betrayal, being punished, disconnection, and sadness. Anger was the most commonly reported emotion and was aimed mostly at God Himself, but also at the Church (i.e. the community of fellow Christian believers).

Feeling angry at God. Feeling Angry at God was cited 21 times by participants, and by 9 out of 10 participants, and is well represented in the following quotes:

> I told God that I thought He was an idiot, an asshole, and stupid. You know, what kind of bullshit was this? And I didn't think that He was anything that He made self out to be (Participant 6).

> I think I was angry at God for a while that He would let that happen. (Participant 2)

> I'm angry at God, and thought I could depend on Him, but I can't. (Participant 1)

These quotes demonstrate that blaming God for the traumatic event led to feelings of anger toward God. Many of the other emotions which were cited, such as hurt, confusion, and abandonment, were also present when the participants spoke about anger. God was perceived by the participants as a Being who should have protected them, and when He did not, His ability or desire to protect them was called into question resulting in feelings of anger.

Feeling abandoned/punished. Two other prominent emotions which were often intermingled were Feeling Abandoned and Feeling Punished. Participants who felt these emotions reported that they felt that the traumatic event may have been their fault or that God was unhappy with them, so they felt they were being punished. Similarly, some participants felt that God did not care about them or was ignoring them, leading to feelings of abandonment. Feeling abandoned was reported to be very painful for participants and caused feelings of sadness and depression. Some participants reported having symptoms of major depression and thoughts of suicide due to the event and their feelings of being punished and abandoned by God. Examples of these emotions are exemplified in the following quotes:

> I felt like I was being punished for what I did, and then it seemed like the rest of the world was just conspiring with that thought, and it just got progressively worse, and then I just felt like perhaps God wasn't even there…… I felt like this was God's way of saying, "Well yeah, you really shouldn't have done it. You should have taken heed and you should have considered what that meant." (Participant 9)

> I was feeling like I was also gonna be like abandoned, or judged, or that I was going to experience shame in my relationship with God. 'Cause it's like, you know, if I'm serving God and doing the right thing, why is this happening to me? (Participant 2)

> You look at everything you're doing in your life, what you're doing wrong, what He's doing wrong, and you– I felt like, it was a result of maybe Him [God] being angry, disappointed, that it was something we deserved. (Participant 3)

The perception of being punished was intricately woven with feelings of abandonment. Many participants described that they felt the traumatic event was a punishment, and if they were being punished they must have done something wrong. Also in their perception, if they had done something wrong their punishment may consist of being separated from God's love and reciprocation in their relationship. Many expressed confusion on what they had done wrong, and thus perceived that God had just simply stopped protecting them and was no longer taking an interest in their life or their suffering.

Confusion. Confusion was another prominent emotion and was present for a variety of reasons. The most frequently cited source of confusion was due to the traumatic event not fitting the participant's prior belief system. Examples include the beliefs that one was protected as a Christian, or that surrendering one's life to God's will was done in exchange for protection from such events.

Similarly, confusion stemmed from not understanding how or why God could have allowed the event to happen at all, leading to questions about the place of evil in the world. In this area, confusion grew out of the struggle to reconcile one's previously held beliefs and religious teachings with their lived experience.

Lastly, confusion was also linked to the concepts of identity as many participants primarily identified themselves as a Christian or by their role in the religious community and their personal relationship with God. Difficulty reconciling belief and lived experience,

therefore, left confusion as to who they were if they gave up or altered their beliefs or felt differently toward God. Participants also reported confusion about what the they were actually feeling or thinking, and having trouble sorting through complex emotions and cognitions, especially as they related to their self-concept. Confusion in all these forms are exemplified in the following quotes:

> I think I didn't even know how to feel after the traumatic event…I just felt like I didn't know what to do…[I] didn't really know how to deal with the feelings, nor did I know what the feelings were, so It was um, yeah, kind of just a mess. (Participant 1)

> I don't know, it just sent me into a really dark existential depression, and I didn't know what I believed in anymore because I didn't even believe in myself. (Participant 8)

> I felt very confused…I felt very lost, like I didn't know how to handle it, how to reconcile it with this God who I thought had my back. (Participant 5)

The emotions felt by participants had a profound impact on them, and many had multiple emotions which sometimes affected each other. For example, confusion was often intermingled with anger and feelings of punishment and abandonment. Abandonment was sometimes described as "betrayal" which had undertones of anger and confusion. In this way, the main emotions expressed were often intertwined and effected one another. These emotions were painful for the participants and were intertwined with their feelings about the traumatic event. Many participants reported symptoms of major depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, and anxiety and referred to their symptoms with these labels.

Questioning

Asking questions of their experience and of God also emerged early on as an important part of the participants' experience. Questioning occurred either following or simultaneously with Emotional Reaction. Understandably, as participants felt confusion or perceived that they were being punished or abandoned by God, they asked questions to attempt to understand their

suffering. Therefore, Questioning and Emotional Reaction tended to be reciprocal, and often overlapped and influenced each other. However, both concepts emerged as distinct theoretical categories.

Three main types of questioning were common: questioning of spiritual beliefs, questioning the purpose of the event, and questioning one's own identity during confusion about spiritual beliefs. The stage of Questioning most often happened directly following the onset of the Emotional Reaction stage, but Questioning and Emotional Reaction often happened simultaneously. Some participants stated that they questioned throughout the process of resolution.

Questioning spiritual beliefs. Questioning the validity and current understanding of spiritual beliefs was the most prevalent type of questioning, and was experienced by most of the participants. As mentioned previously, many participants had pre-existing beliefs which no longer made sense to them in the wake of the traumatic experience. This led to feelings of confusion and questioning what to believe, including if God really existed, or how to make sense of their beliefs with this new information. Many participants also felt anger in conjunction with the confusion, and this caused the active rejection of believing in God's existence, questioning the continuation of following the teachings of Christianity, or questioning whether to be in relationship with God, even if He did exist. These concepts are evidenced in the following excerpts:

> I debated on whether or not He had the power that I thought He had and whether or not I was still gonna follow Him. (Participant 6)

> I was questioning my beliefs and struggling with, like, reconciling what happened to me, [struggling] with at that time, my perception of who God was. (Participant 5)

> Although my spiritual walk definitely took a few interesting turns, I think, pretty much it was fine before it all happened, but I think definitely after all of it, I started to call into

question my [spiritual] walk because I started, you know doubting and things like that, or like struggling with reconciling what happened to my life. (Participant 1)

Questioning the purpose of the event. Another prominent type of questioning was Questioning of the Purpose of the Event. This could mean questioning what the participant had done to deserve the trauma, but it could also, and more frequently, mean questioning how God could allow the traumatic event to occur. This questioning was often tied to feelings of anger and abandonment or punishment, rather than feelings of confusion.

Questioning of this nature also tended to persist throughout the resolution process as participants experienced anxiety, depression, suicidality, and self-described "PTSD." For some participants, their circumstances continued to be difficult or new difficulties arose, and this led to continued questioning about the purpose of their suffering. Examples of questioning the purpose of the traumatic event can be seen in the following excerpts:

> I think a part of me blamed a little bit God at the time because why would He, why do I have to have such difficulty in everything I do?….I could get into a depression, little small periods of depression, thinking why couldn't it have been the way it should have been? (Participant 4)

> I was like why, why did this happen to my family? I kinda felt like, kinda thought I surrendered my life to Him, and I thought like after I surrendered my life and my direction to Him that somehow things would get better. (Participant 1)

> It was just a constant asking of why? How could You let this happen? (Participant 3)

> If I'm serving God and doing the right thing, why is this happening to me? (Participant 2)

Questioning identity. Lastly, participants also questioned their identity. This theme was originally seen as minor by the researcher until participants in the validity check emphasized its importance. For some participants, the act of questioning their beliefs brought into question who they were and how they understood their identity. Many stated that they had a secure identity as a Christian prior to the event, so questioning tenants of Christianity was akin to questioning parts

of themselves. Questioning how they would relate to the world without certain beliefs also

questioned how they would relate to the world as a person or without certain parts of themselves.

Some spoke about finding themselves again during later stages of resolution, thus also resolving

their identity confusion. The questioning of one's identity can be seen in the following excerpts:

> When there are challenges to faith—particularly an event that upsets the spirit, that causes us to question—yes, there's a questioning of God, but there's also a questioning of self and self-resilience. In essence, when we question God, we question ourselves because it's easier to externalize. We're in essence questioning ourselves rather than God. (Participant 9)

> My faith was very much naive in some ways, like it hadn't really been through anything super challenging or super traumatic that would rock it or question it or anything, so I felt very secure in who I was as a Christian…. I felt very secure, very confident in who I was as a Christian, and then [the event happened]. (Participant 5)

> Overall, at least one type of questioning was experienced by all participants. Initially the

Questioning stage tended to be directly caused by the traumatic event, and later caused by other

realizations as a part of subsequent stages. One participant described that the questioning lasted

for seven years: I was in the questioning phase a really long time, probably, like seven years, almost longer than my emotional faith. So that was interesting. It was really painful 'cause you had the memories of believing God was good, but also, I didn't want to believe that anymore 'cause I didn't like what happened. (Participant 1)

The experience of Questioning was the long, persistent, and pervasive for the

participants. Therefore, questioning could occur throughout the journey to spiritual resolution.

Disconnection

Amid feeling confused and asking questions about beliefs, including which ones to

discard and which ones to hold on to, many participants began to feel disconnected from both

God and others. This disconnection makes sense if spiritual beliefs are a bridge to the

understanding of who God is and how one can relate with Him. The questioning of God's

existence, character, and attributes, caused a distance between the participants and God which

appeared to be due to changes caused by the questioning. Additionally, these types of questions and emotional changes caused a disconnection with others who shared the very beliefs they were questioning.

The Disconnection category is defined by physical or emotional isolation from God and others experienced either intentionally or through an inability to feel connected. This disconnection involved both feelings of being disconnected and isolated, but also the purposeful action of disconnecting and withdrawing from relationships with God, or from others in the participants' communities of faith.

There were two prongs of disconnection. The first was the avoidance and disconnection from communities of faith or individual relationships. Many participants stated that they stopped attending church services due to fearing or experiencing judgement or misunderstanding when they shared their spiritual struggles with members of the faith community. Similarly, participants also disconnected from friends and family for the same reason.

The second was the emotional disconnection from God. Some felt that they could not connect with God even though they wanted to. Others purposely turned their back to God and stopped engaging in the relationship.

Disconnection, like Questioning and Emotional Reaction, happened in close succession if not simultaneously, with preceding stages and seemed to have a bidirectional relationship as well. Emotional Reaction and Questioning created more disconnection, and the Disconnection stage created more questions about suffering and what one should or wanted to believe, as well as feelings of anger and sadness.

Avoidance and disconnection from others. Most participants who discussed their avoidance of others said they did not actually experience judgement from their faith

communities, but feared that others would not understand if they were to share their questions and feelings about God. In either case, experienced or feared judgement caused them to not share with others, and because it was difficult to maintain the façade of being someone who was not internally struggling with their faith, or because they did not want to explain their actions and thoughts, they avoided people they believed would judge them.

Participants who did share with others (people inside and outside of church communities) reported that, at least initially, they experienced judgement and unhelpful advice. In conjunction with experiences of judgement, many reported feeling that they were misunderstood and inadequately supported. Some reported feeling incredibly hurt by the Church due to being shunned for their trauma and their feelings about it, or that individual relationships were damaged due to the participant's anger about inadequate support. This caused questioning of why these other members of their faith community who had judged or misunderstood the participants were not living out what the participant perceived as tenants of the faith. Seeing a discrepancy between the actions of other Christians and teachings of Christianity caused more feelings of anger and more disconnection. This aspect of the Disconnection category integrates well with both Emotional Reaction and Questioning categories as anger was felt not only at God, but also at others. Examples of this type of disconnection appeared in the following excerpts:

> In the beginning, I think there was a huge, um, huge rejection of both religion and God and a like active, angry, rejection. Not like "God is dead to me, but like, What the F? Like, this is not, you are not being Christian, this is not Christ[like]".... I had a lot of anger. I mean I had some anger at God, but I had more anger at religion and at the perversion of, or what I felt like was a perversion of religion.... I also think that happens for a lot of people. That people's experience with the church does not match up with what they would expect in a crisis event. (Participant 7)

> I think it was for a little while, hard to go to church. I wasn't really going to church. I was feeling pretty isolated from the community of other believers....There was a little bit of tension of like, if I talk about this, people will either think I'm weird and I should be doing something different, or I shouldn't be here; I shouldn't be letting this[abuse]

happen…and when I started going to church, I was hesitant to be open about what was going on….it was hard, I think, to have those perspectives and communicate that to other people….So I think there was a fear of rejection, or that people just wouldn't get it. So, I felt, I felt pretty isolated. (Participant 2)

As far as going to church, I wasn't you know, going, so [that] probably created more distance in my relationship with Him that any closeness. I really fought God quite a bit. (Participant 3)

I didn't want to overwhelm myself with the concerns or opinions of others that would influence me to make my faith about them, rather than making it about me and what I believed…. There were definitely some friends who could tell that I was struggling and they're not necessarily in my life anymore because they couldn't understand why I needed to ask so many questions. 'Cause they felt like I was challenging their beliefs with my questions, when really it wasn't about them at all, it just was about me and my own process. (Participant 5)

So many people you can't sit down with, you know, that made it really hard. A lot of people don't understand, so it's hard to be with people who don't understand…My daughter-in-law and I do not talk. She's one where everything has to be positive. She told me I was the most negative person she's ever met…. that's hard to lose that relationship. (Participant 10)

Disconnection from God. In addition to disconnection from other people, the concept of disconnecting from God was a prominent theme. Several participants stated that they felt they did not want to connect with God and needed to take space in the spiritual relationship. Feelings of anger and questions about His existence appeared to compel an active resistance against God. For example:

It was a transition because I didn't really trust Him anymore, and I debated on whether or not He had the power that I thought He had and whether or not I was still gonna follow Him…. [the] questioning ones [emotions] brought a lot of resistance and defiance. (Participant 6)

In the silence there's a lot of work going on, but I also felt like there was this huge strain on my spirituality, and then identifying as a Christian, like it gave me, I guess ammo temporarily to feel as if I could just kinda turn the other way, you know? Not that I wouldn't believe, but that felt like there was no point in believing in a higher power if that higher power was just gonna sit back and watch me suffer. (Participant 9)

Other participants stated that they attempted to stay connected with God, but had trouble feeling His presence or believing He was listening, and in this way felt disconnected despite their attempts to be connected. This is also reflected in the earlier stages of Emotional Reaction and Questioning because the feelings of abandonment sometimes stemmed from this inability to connect with God. The questioning of God's existence also became more prominent when the participant was unable to feel His presence. Disconnection with God and the questioning of his existence can be seen in the following excerpts:

I think for me when I was going through disconnection, I did disconnect with [sic] God, or I was unable to feel emotionally connected to God and that was really weird. And I had been a Christian at that point for about 5 years, so it was really weird, scary almost that I couldn't feel connected to God, and I think not feeling connected to God made me question God's existence. (Participant 1)

I felt myself wanting to pray and I found myself wanting to connect again, and I would think about everything that I've been through and sometimes that would just stop me, and I felt very disconnected. Like my sense of trust in both God and human beings was broken. (Participant 9)

It was so lonely, and you know, God's not a figure that you can sit down with and look at and touch, and so that's really hard. (Participant 10)

When participants did not choose disconnection, but were unable to connect, they described the experience of feeling disconnected from God as painful and confusing. When participants chose to disconnect, they reported feelings of anger and defiance. When participants chose to disconnect from their faith communities and support networks they reported feelings of fear and sadness. Anger and sadness were reported when their faith community or support system ended the relationship either due to the actual event or the spiritual struggle itself.

Seeking Resolution

The Disconnection, Emotional Reaction, and Questioning stages make up a triad of

spiritual struggle in which all three influenced each other. From this point, participants continued to experience elements of these three stages, but in the participants' perspective, the ratio between spiritual struggle and spiritual resolution began to shift as they entered the Seeking Resolution stage.

The Seeking Resolution stage was comprised of two parts, both involving the decision to actively fix or solve the spiritual struggle. The first part was prioritizing resolution and taking what the participant believed to be the first steps which would aid in this resolution. The second part was a shift in the resistance to resolution (or the relationship with God) which due to anger and confusion some participants had reported. This shift in resistance or priority was followed by taking active steps to resolve the spiritual struggle.

Prioritizing resolution. Participants reported that they came to the realization they were not able to resolve their spiritual struggles in isolation, and that what they had been doing was not working. Many participants reported that they increased their spiritual practices, whether or not the motivation, desire, or enjoyment was present. They described this as just going through the motions, and "living day by day" (Participant 6) as they waited for their emotions to "catch up" (Participant 2) to their actions. Both the moment of making the decision to prioritize resolution and the concept of going through the motions are exemplified in the following excerpts:

> I did become more interested; I think that's when I sought out the counseling at my church to kind of get more in tune with God, you know? I think I even tried to get into the Bible studies, and I think I went to only one of them at that time, but I did try to get a little closer….you know, just have a good relationship with God and be the first—what's first in my life basically. (Participant 4)

> [I was] still staying connected to my women's group, participating in a Bible study. Like it was still kind of going through the motions while having all of this big internal questioning going on. (Participant 5)

[It was] the decision to go back to church, and then, getting involved in the small groups in the church and that kinda took off on its own. (Participant 3)

It doesn't just come from a place of, you know, just time. You have to want to get past it. (Participant 9)

Deciding to resolve. Some of the participants that expressed anger at God reported that they purposely disconnected from Him while they decided whether they wanted to work through their questions or if they wanted to end their relationship with God. For these participants, the decision to resolve came from the realization that the spiritual struggle was causing them suffering and needed to be dealt with. Some participants also decided to resolve as their feelings of anger and confusion began to fade. The reduction of these strong emotions appeared to occur as a natural part of time passing, but also from participants' questioning of their own perspectives, emotions and actions. The following quotes show these shifts in perspective:

I do believe when I give everything to God, it does help me more than when I try to fix it myself. Then, I guess my problem is, I try to—things might not happen so quickly and I start trying to take the steering wheel again, and so, that's probably my downfall. I'm trying to learn to just give it and [not] take it back. (Participant 4)

I kind of went through a rebellious phase of just like, you know what? Screw God, screw this, screw that, and I tried to solve the issues on my own, and I hit a point where I was like, you know, my life's not going in the direction I want it to go in, and I really actually asked God, "I need you to help me because this is not really where I want to be." (Participant 1)

As these excerpts show, participants came to the decision to actively seek resolution because they saw that their efforts were ineffective. They also saw different paths to seeking resolution, including talking to and trusting God, going to church, and seeking answers. All participants touched on this concept of making the decision that working through their spiritual struggles was important. Sometimes the decision happened immediately as an obvious choice, and sometimes it happened after struggling against the need to prioritize resolution or against the idea that resolution could not be done without help.

Seeking and Gaining New Understanding

Questioning was often a major component of the participant's spiritual struggle, so naturally answering their questions became an important aspect of their resolution, and a natural place to start for many participants. Seeking understanding brought more questions leading to a constant cycle of asking and answering questions, and integrating the new information into existing information.

Seeking understanding. Participants sought new understanding in various ways. Some, as they had before, asked their questions to God. However, in this stage there appeared to be more of a willingness to wait and listen for an answer. Some asked for God to help them understand. For example:

> I started asking Him to show Himself to me, 'cause I couldn't see Him anymore. (Participant 6)

> [I was] trying to pursue understanding though prayer. (Participant 5)

Participants also sought understanding through literature and Scriptural writings, including Scripture from other religions. Some searched for inspirational stories on the internet or listened to sermons. For example:

> I do look up inspirational stories. I was always a fan of watching *The 700 Club* and success stories or stories about deliverance. (Participant 4)

> I got really into comparative religion and seeking out other religions, and looking at like how does this fit with Christianity as opposed to other religions. (Participant 7)

Gaining new understanding. Gaining new understanding often came from sermons, inspirational stories, watching the examples of others who were dealing with suffering, or from prayer. Gaining new information mostly consisted of reframing their previous ideas and beliefs, including what it meant to be a Christian. For example, as previously stated, some participants had the belief that being a Christian meant that they were "protected" (Participant 1; Participant

5). Gaining new understanding often involved seeing errors in their previous perception, that being a Christian did not make them exempt from suffering, nor that this was ever a promise that God had made. Instead, participants reported that they realized this message was not explicitly taught to them and was not actually a tenant of their religious denomination.

Similarly, participants described their prior beliefs as black and white, and that as they gained understanding and awareness, they saw that life is much more "gray" (Participant 5). This more abstract way of thinking allowed them to integrate their experiences and their beliefs together because they were no longer rigidly separated.

This also included a new understanding of what, in the participant's perspective, was God's will, or what His involvement in the traumatic event had been. A commonly reported realization by the participants was that God did not want the event to occur and that He was also saddened by its occurrence. Participants reported that they began to shift their perspective to see the traumatic experience as an aberration of God's plan for their lives and not a plan to punish them or cause them suffering. Some stated that they had reconnected to specific theological perspectives in Protestant Christianity, and now believed the traumatic event occurred because the world itself is "fallen" (Participant 5).

This theological principle was perceived by the participants to mean that although God is in control, the world is full of suffering due to the introduction of sin, and that He allows this due to the existence of free will. This shift in perspective appeared to help the participants stop blaming God for the event, and thus feel less angry and abandoned by Him. The concept is shown in the following quotes:

> Growing up we'd always heard, "God's plan for your life, and God's plan, and God's plan," and it made it seem like it was this blueprint for my life, like a building design, you know? So, I had a really hard time reconciling, so like, God planned that this would happen? That just didn't make sense in my head. There was a sermon my pastor did about

God's plan, and how He described it as God's plan is more of a football field. You've got your out of bounds which is kind of like the standardish [sic] rules that we try to uphold as Christians. But then on the field of play, anything can happen. There can be blitzes, you can go out of bounds accidentally, or get pushed out of bounds, you just can't anticipate what's gonna happen on the field of play, and that metaphor was very freeing for me because it helped me understand that for me as a Christian, God didn't necessarily plan for [brother] to die, it was just you know, what happened in the fallen world we live in, and that was an incredibly freeing sermon…. I think the main thing is that I started to see more gray in the world, and that if I followed all the rules, it didn't mean like shit wasn't going to happen. (Participant 5)

I was really trying to not have it be like a black and white thing. (Participant 7)

I did have that as a foundation though, of that God doesn't want this for me. God doesn't want His children to be abused, He doesn't want– So, I knew where to go for the answers. (Participant 4)

Maybe that's not accurate, just because you become a Christian, just because you surrender your life, it doesn't necessarily mean that things are gonna get better for you, or, you know, things are gonna get easier. (Participant 1)

Seeking and Gaining Understanding occurred in several different ways, as demonstrated through the above examples. Shifting perspectives was also involved as new information was added to existing information. Perspective shift seemed to consist of a realization that a belief that was previously held was not as true for the participant as once thought, or shifting the perspective to be less black and white. Participants also reconnected to key pieces of theology which changed their understanding of how God felt about their trauma or what His involvement with it was. These perspective shifts naturally had an impact on the emotions of anger, confusion, and feeling abandoned and/or punished by God.

Selectively Seeking Support

Many participants avoided disclosure with their current support network, as mentioned in the stage of Disconnection, due to either feared or experienced judgement and misunderstanding. In the stage of Selectively Seeking Support, participants sought out support from specific people

and communities they felt were safe and non-judgmental. Sometimes these people were in pre-existing faith communities such as a pastor, or members of a Bible study, and sometimes they were family members or friends who were not associated with the original faith community.

Finding safe people. Among all the participants, effective support came from individuals or groups of people who were understanding and supportive of the participants by providing space and time for them to process and work through their questions, emotions, and the new information they were acquiring. The supportive people also tended to encourage the participants to seek information, re-evaluate their view-points with different perspectives, and talk to God about their feelings. Examples of finding safe people and communities are exemplified in the following excerpts:

> I was very intentional about who I shared my struggles with, and who I sought counsel from because I didn't just want to invite anyone into my internal struggle…. I have a very dear pastor friend who provided space for me to ask really hard questions and to grapple with what I was trying to understand without judgment or shame or [being] overly concerned that I was questioning my religious beliefs. Which was kind of invaluable that he was able to do that for me, and to just validate those questions, and that I was struggling. (Participant 5)

> I've been in counseling with the minister at the church and we see each other a couple times a month, and I see a therapist some. I just tried to find people who are not really pushy about what they think I should do. (Participant 10)

> We were part of a large church and always have been, so I think sometimes you get lost in that, so I think for us it was really getting into those smaller groups and connecting with other individuals that may have gone through similar circumstances – finding people that we can relate to and they can relate to us, and just having that sense of being connected. (Participant 3)

These quotes exemplify that the participants carefully screened others for their safety and only disclosed to people with whom they were comfortable. The criterion for what each participant was looking for in a support network varies slightly. Some participants wanted to find others who had been through similar circumstances and some did not. Some participants looked

only for support from other Christians, and some participants avoided support from other

Christians. Overall, participants looked for people who were generally good listeners, and people

who did not condemn or judge their struggles.

Being in community. Many participants cited specific words or actions stemming from

their support network which were helpful, and some stated that even just being in a new

community, or back in a community of fellow Christians was helpful. For some participants, this

meant seeking out the people they saw as supportive within their old community, and for some

this meant finding a new community of fellow Christians to join. Being in a community and

speaking to others about their struggles allowed for more access to new information as well. For

instance, some participants reported that seeing others cope with their own problems was

inspirational. Some also reported that having experiences in which they saw some meaning or a

parallel to their situation helped them to see their own beliefs in a new way. The following

quotes show how important the support of others was for gaining new understanding and

motivating the participants to take helpful actions.

> I had a Christian friend at the time, and she was like, "Oh my gosh, you haven't prayed in like three days? Go in my room. I'm closing the door. You need to talk to Go about this", and so I think, I did do that, and I recall like feeling that He had kinda spoken to me. (Participant 1)

> Thankfully, I had a really amazing, really amazing support group through my small group and the pastor at my church. He didn't just see things in black and white, good and evil, and he helped me see the gray in the world, where, you know, I was able to find hope again. (Participant 5)

> The pastor at the Church, it's like every Sunday his encouraging words about everything, the way he approaches life have helped me a lot. (Participant 10)

> My Dad saying, "God has already forgiven you. He saw the mistake before you made the mistake. God had already forgiven you, and if you want to be a mom again, be a mom. You take that up with God." (Participant 9)

As new information or the integration of information was gained within the Selectively Seeking Support stage, it often fed back into the stage of Seeking and Gaining New Understanding. These two stages could happen in either order, but some participants did report that only once they had sorted through some of their beliefs internally were they ready to sort through them externally. Regardless of which stage occurred first, they each appeared to influence one another. The experiences and understanding gained in these two stages appeared to have a tempering effect on the participants' feelings (such as anger, confusion, feeling punished/abandoned and sadness) about being in relationship with God, which led directly into the next stage: Reconnection with Beliefs and the Character of God.

Reconnection with Beliefs

In this stage, participants described that after integrating new information they reconnected back to their core beliefs and thus to the core of their faith. This included rediscovering key teachings about God, the various ways the Christian Bible describes His character, and key passages of Scripture. This stage further aided in participants' changes in perspective. However, this stage truly is defined not by the integration of new and old beliefs, but by the reconnection and rediscovery of prior beliefs about who God is and what the Christian Bible states about His character. For example:

> The biggest thing I think for me, was feeling like I was grounded back in the original pieces of love. And then the forgiveness piece that humans screw up. (Participant 7)

> Romans 8:28 talks about how God doesn't promise that everything that we experience will be good, but He will use it for His good and His purpose, and for some reason I never thought of it that way before. Um, I think my naive younger Christian-self thought, "Oh! Well, that means that things will be good," and....And really it's God doesn't promise that things are gonna just be good, but He'll use them for His good. (Participant 5)

> Feeling this, this anger and this fear, and at the same time knowing that I believe in God's truth, and I believe that He is taking care of me and watching over me and He will give

me what I need, and, um, it's a dark time right now, and I know I can trust Him to take care of me, and that it will pass. It's, it's a storm and it's gonna pass. But you know, knowing that took a little bit of time to come back to where my experience and my feelings matched my beliefs, and what I knew was true. (Participant 2)

Connecting back to the belief that God is good also allowed participants to see ways in which they felt God had provided for them during the traumatic event. Perceiving this provision often caused them to reevaluate their initial emotions and assumptions they first felt in the Emotional Reaction and Questioning stages. For example, perceiving that God had provided "a way out" (Participant 2) or had stopped circumstances from becoming worse allowed participants to let go of the feelings of being punished or abandoned as illustrated by the following direct quotes:

> People would say to me, "You just walked through that with such dignity and grace," and I'm like, I put one foot in front of the other and took breaths. That's all I did, and that made me realize looking back, that something got me through that. So that was kind of a resolution I had with my relationship with God, that He actually was there for me. (Participant 6)

> [I was] just feeling that God had been taking care of me through this whole process. [That] definitely was a pretty huge testament to his belief in me and my ability to believe in Him again. (Participant 5)

> For a little while it got confusing, but then really being able separate that and be like, no, that's not where God wants me to be. He's taking care of me, He made a way for me to get out of the situation, giving me a job that was safer somewhere emotionally. Those things are good now. Like, things are going well there now and this person who did these things is not in my life anymore, I have space from them, and it was their dysfunction, and their stuff. Nothing to do with God's heart towards me. (Participant 2)

Some participants reported that prior to this stage they had been able to trust that God would provide for them in the future despite their spiritual struggle. In this stage, that trust turned into a realization that God *had* provided for them already. This motivated some participants to prioritize repairing their relationship with God, similar to the Seeking Resolution stage, as seen in this quote:

There was an experience where I was kinda scared for my life, so I really did feel like He was there with me that night. So, you know, like kind of like, you know, I do have a purpose here. My life does have a purpose and He was watching out for me that night, especially in the—so I did become more interested. I think that's when I sought out the counseling at my church to kind of get more in tune with God. (Participant 4)

The new perspective and understanding the participants seemed to gain in this stage allowed them to be aware of how God might have provided for them. Thus, the feelings of anger, abandonment, and punishment were all reevaluated in light of their new perspective. These emotions were often reported to turn into feelings of gratitude and comfort, which led directly into the next stage of Reconnection with God.

Reconnection with God

This stage primarily consisted an emotional reconnection with God following the new perception that God had provided for them, and the reconnection with their core beliefs. Gaining new understanding and awareness allowed participants to feel more emotionally open to relating to God. As participants changed their interpretations of religious teachings and looked at their beliefs in a way that was less black and white, their feelings of anger, confusion, sadness, abandonment and punishment reduced. Seeing how God had provided for them changed and created new emotions. Participants also reported that they were better able to feel connected with God and began to feel His presence in their lives. For example:

I just found so much unconditional love and empathy and compassion there [with hospice patients], and immediately after one of our [hospice] patients died for the first time, my first experience with that, watching someone take their last breath, I went to my office and prayed for the first time and I just felt, I felt so connected to God physically, so it was really amazing, humbling experience, and that's when I knew that there– death is but a moment and on to the next whatever comes. And just emotionally it was really humbling and now I feel like I have a more holistic relationship with myself and my spirituality. (Participant 8)

I think there was a great deepening of the emotions I had towards God. Um, like it wasn't just a, um, it didn't feel surface level for me anymore. Like the emotions and connections run deep and strong, so I was more easily emotional talking about my faith. Um, more

emotional in being active in my relationship with God, especially worship music impacted me much more strongly than it had before. It was like I had a greater sensitivity to my faith and that relationship. Um, trying to think, and I mean like on the flip side when I was like angry with God, like that anger was even [laughs] stronger, it felt deeper. There was an emotional investment in my relationship. (Participant 5)

I have been impacted by these experiences in my life and I know that God's there for me and that it will get better and I don't, I'm not alone in this. He's not doing this to me, you know, just refocusing on those things that I know were true and that I believe are true. (Participant 2)

Similarly, seeking selective support and reengaging in spiritual practices, even if it was just going through the motions, also allowed participants to feel God's presence again. Feeling God's presence and re-engaging in activities that previously had helped them feel connected to God, such as musical worship or art, appeared to be large catalysts to being able to connect to God again and move onto the next stage of feeling resolved. The following quotes illustrate how reconnection was facilitated through an increase in spiritual practices:

One part that I was noticing was just how important music has been, and being able to connect to God emotionally and cognitively through song, and then also how important it was to spend time in prayer with other people. In the moment, I was just kind of grabbing things and maybe not necessarily knowing how impactful they would be, and how beneficial they would be, and looking back, those were very specific things that were really helpful. Being part of a community in choir, having my prayer group, and being involved in doing Bible study, so three concrete things that were very helpful. (Participant 2)

Once we got back, and got connected into the church and really started working on our relationship with Him, it just felt like there was a fire that started burning again, you know? A happiness, a joy. (Participant 3)

I would definitely say connecting back to my art, 'cause I think through that is how I show my relationship with God. I would say finding meditation has been really profoundly impactful for me in many ways. (Participant 8)

Feeling connected to God was part of feeling resolved for several participants. However, the initial feeling of reconnection was an important step on the road to resolution and appeared to be categorically different than the ongoing feeling of having a connected relationship with God.

After this stage, participants reported improvements in many areas, which are detailed in the next stage, Feeling Resolved.

Feeling Resolved

This stage was defined by the perception that the spiritual struggles in which a participant engaged, were perceived to be completely resolved or more resolved than not. This stage was an initial feeling that the ratio between resolving and struggling had shifted so that resolution was more prominently felt. Many participants felt that they were done with their resolution process at this point, and others felt that they had turned a corner and could slow down in their intensive search for resolution. The participants involved with this research study appeared to understand resolution as a return or partial return to their faith and/or relationship with God. It is important to note that this did not necessarily mean a return to orthodox Protestant Christianity. Participant 7 felt that her faith was not as orthodox as it was before, but during the member validity check she stated that she felt she had reconnected to what she saw as the core of her faith, and continued to identify as a Protestant Christian. All participants who were interviewed continued to identify themselves as Protestant Christian.

Perception of resolution. Participants reported that they knew resolution had occurred when they felt a marked improvement in their lives. This was defined by feeling an improvement in mood, anxiety, or symptoms of psychological distress. Improvement was also described as feeling more connected with God, and sometimes presented as an increase in spiritual activities. Improvement was also reported to be connected to increased feelings of peace and comfort. Even though resolution appeared to be incomplete or ongoing for many of the participants, there did seem to be an initial surge in feelings associated with resolution that tipped the ratio of spiritual struggle to spiritual resolution, leading to the feeling of being mostly or even completely

resolved. This is illustrated in the following excerpts:

> I knew it was getting better when I was able to connect more at church and [was] reading my Bible, and that I was doing those things again more, 'cause I had not been as connected for a while. So being able to be consistent with being in church, being in choir, doing devotions at home, praying at home, doing Bible study, things like that– that those were happening more frequently. More safety was established, and more trust was established. (Participant 2)

> I go to church more now. I pray at night…I feel like I was more at peace with things. I was able to carry on without crying or I just stopped crying, basically, so I kinda knew through that. I became stronger in knowing that I may be struggling right now, but there's a saying, "He'll take our struggles or whatever that's meant for evil to make it for good," so I'm thinking this might be all hard for me, but somewhere, He's going to bring it all around. (Participant 4)

> I feel like I finally started having some days where I could say at the end of the day, "It's been a good day." (Participant 10)

> Well now, I mean I have a really deep, close relationship with God and I know spiritually that I'm on the right path, and I know that all I am is unconditional love [sic]. And I feel it in my daily life. (Participant 8)

> I knew something was different when I just accepted what I wanted to do, and accepted that was where I was at that time. (Participant 9)

Themes from many of the previous stages can be seen in these excerpts such as reconnection with God, an increase in spiritual practices, and the feeling of improvement and initial resolution of spiritual struggles. The process of resolution appeared to occur simultaneously with spiritual struggle. This suggests that as participants questioned and sorted through their disconnection and struggle, they were also resolving at the same time, resulting in a gradual shift in the ratio between struggle and resolution.

Perception of resolution completion. Few participants reported that they felt 100% resolution of their spiritual struggles. Many reported that they still had questions or were still working to rebuild trust. However, they felt that they were mostly resolved. Many participants stated they had felt 100% resolved initially, but soon discovered that there was more work to be

done or that things weren't quite as resolved as they had believed they were. For example:

> Well, I thought they were totally 100% completely resolved, and then all this stuff with the rape stuff came up this week. I don't know if they are [resolved] or not. (Participant 7)

> I actually don't know if they're 100% resolved. I think some days it feels more resolved than others. (Participant 5)

> I think they [spiritual struggles] are more resolved now than when they were before. I don't know that we ever stop struggling. (Participant 9)

Changes in the perception of the struggle. Another shift that appeared to take place within the feeling of being resolved was the ability to see value in the spiritual struggle. Prior to a feeling of resolution, almost all the participants viewed their struggle as negative or partially negative, meaning that they associated it with the difficult feelings and experiences outlined in the previous stages. After shifting into feeling more resolved, all the participants reported they now perceived the value in their struggle and appreciated what they had gained from it. Many felt their relationship with God was deeper and more meaningful or that their beliefs were more secure and rich than they were before the struggle. For example:

> I perceived all of those changes as positive, and freeing, very freeing, in that my faith could grow, and change, and adapt. And become stronger despite hardship, and pain, and suffering, and that you know, God was still gonna be with me throughout all of that. (Participant 5)

> Looking back, positive, right? You don't realize that until you get through the whole thing. During [the struggle], right, it wasn't good, but after [the struggle] you see how He takes care of you. (Participant 3)

> I think I'm seeing it in a more positive light than I have in the past, so thank you for giving me an opportunity to focus on that growth, and that change, and those beneficial things that have happened. (Participant 2)

The discussion of resolution with participants also revealed that not only did the perception of 100% resolution not appear to persist, but that there was an ongoing process of continual resolution. Therefore, the initial Feeling Resolved stage leads directly into the final

stage of the model, Maintaining Resolution.

Maintaining Resolution

Some of the questions asked of participants assumed that resolution was an event. Most notably, "How did you know your spiritual struggles were resolved?" Despite this, participants' answers were quite clear that resolution of spiritual struggle was not an event at all, but an ongoing process, which was often overlapping with the spiritual struggle itself. Participants did have a clear period of their lives in which they recognized that they had made large advances toward resolution or that it had mostly taken place.

Resolution as an ongoing process. In the stage of maintaining resolution, participants reported that they were faced with a new or recurring question or challenge to their faith and/or relationship with God following negative and stressful life events. These challenges included being reminded of the trauma, having new difficulties in life, or even losing connection with God again. Therefore, Feeling Resolved was not the end of the participant's journey of spiritual struggle resolution, merely just another step in a continual process which was also overlapped with spiritual struggle (See Figure 1).
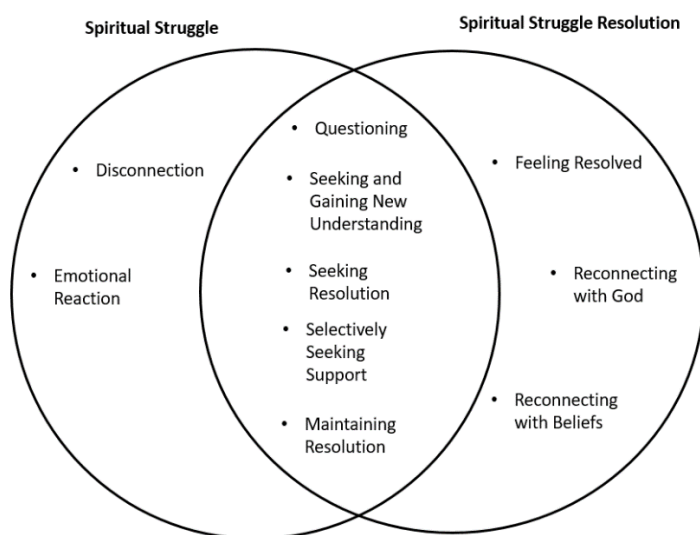
Figure 1. Simultaneous Spiritual Struggle and Resolution

Even though stage repetition did occur in the sample, none of the participants reported what they would consider completely reverting back into spiritual struggle. Many participants asked new questions about the purpose of their suffering or questioned which beliefs they wanted to keep. Participants also had emotional reactions such as anger and confusion to their negative or stressful life events and thoughts. These new questions and emotions led the participants back to both seek and gain understanding, in an effort to once again broaden their view, and to seek support within their already selectively established support system. In this way, any repetition of the stages appeared to be worked through at an accelerated rate as compared to the initial resolution process, likely because the person knew the steps to take which were helpful for them and knew they would be able to work through the struggle because of experience. This is seen in the following excerpt:

> This trusting with God has to grow, because the old God that I had, or my perception of the God that I had, doesn't carry me through the next trauma or crisis or whatever. So, I come to a point where I have to kind of let go of that, and wait in the dark hallway for the next perception of God that will work. But knowing that this has happened so many times, it's like even when this one comes, it's gonna be temporary 'til I need the next one. (Participant 6)

Likewise, spiritual struggle was now seen as something that could be beneficial and should be embraced. This concept is explained well in the following quote:

> I also think that to become 100% resolved almost depicts an air of complacency. Like if I'm only going accept what I believe today, what's going to happen that's going to make me not want to continue to grow? And, yes, these big traumatic things have happened, and, you know they're gonna keep happening. So to say that they're 100% resolved feels complacent to me, because I want to keep growing in my faith and keep asking questions and having to grapple through things. (Participant 5)

This participant's quote illustrates that by time the participants reached Feeling Resolved, they could look back and see gains that they had made or positives in their spiritual struggle. This allowed them to be much more accepting of their feelings and questions when spiritual

struggle arose again, which allowed them to again work through the appropriate stages much quicker. Many participants reported that they now saw spiritual struggle as a part of life, and Maintaining Resolution would be a recurrent stage.

The perceived complexity of resolution. Resolution was often described by the participants as occurring in layers or stages. They reported that this process continued with more layers being revealed after the initial layer was peeled away. One participant described the concept of initial resolution and subsequent maintenance with the following quote:

> You have to constantly redirect yourself back, but once you like open the book… you just keep—there's always more work to be done. (Participant 8)

Another participant described their resolution progress in more detail:

> I would resolve to a certain point, and you're there, and then you resolve to another point and you're there, and then you resolve to another point and you're there. I think that it's been so layered and that each… where you know, intellectually it's resolved, and then it's not. (Participant 7)

Other participants described it in similar fashion:

> I think resolution comes in different forms. Sometimes, the resolution is in the act or it's in the trauma, and maybe we don't recognize it, and we try to make it a lot worse than it needs to be. And sometimes we don't recognize, and it's something that's very external. But no matter what, I think I just come to the conclusion that as long as you're alive and as long as you have the ability to breathe, you have the opportunity to make amends in the relationship with God. (Participant 9)

> It's an ongoing thing, and it will be. (Participant 10)

> All this makes me think about the Scripture to continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling. Constantly integrating what you learn with past beliefs, and that's what working out your salvation means to me right now. I had to really challenge what I previously thought about what being a Christian meant in the light of these new events and how they could co-exist; integrating that into my beliefs. (Participant 1)

These quotes illustrate that spiritual struggle was now interpreted by the participants as a part of having an ongoing spiritual relationship with God. Their belief system was now accepted as fluid and everchanging. In this way, the resolution of spiritual struggle was revealed to not be

a destination, but a path on which one is always either advancing, standing still, or retracing their steps. The participants seemed to accept that they can, and will, always be somewhere on the road of resolution in their spiritual journeys.

These theoretical stages of spiritual struggle resolution were mostly chronological with one stage leading to another, but several stages were involved with each other in circular or partially simultaneous pattern. The pathway of these theoretical stages is illustrated in Figure 2.
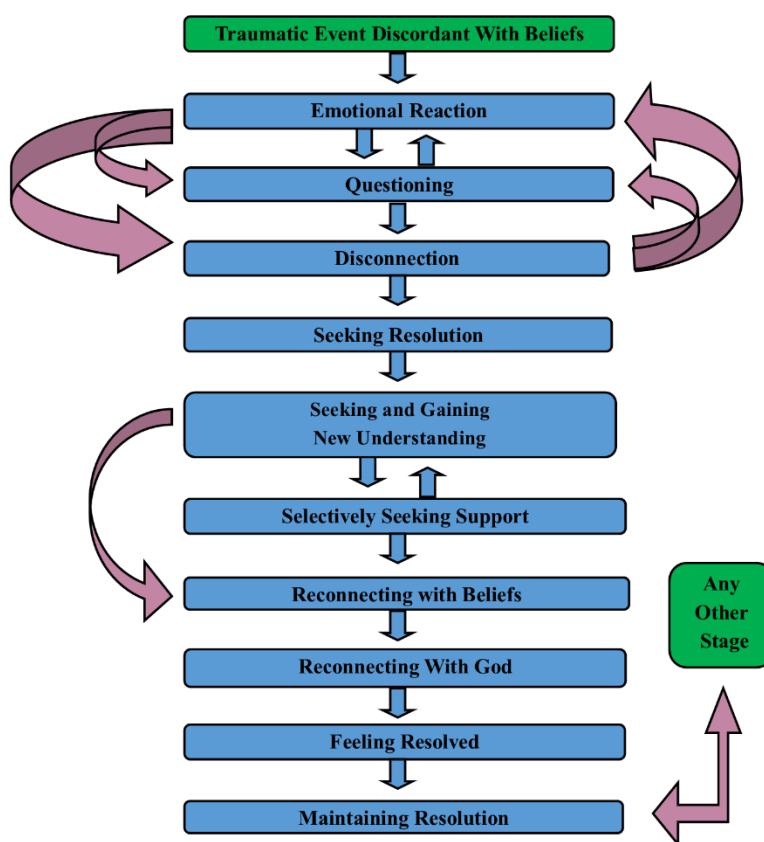

Figure 2. Theoretical Model of Spiritual Struggle Resolution

Defining Resolution of Spiritual Struggle

Although the concept of spiritual struggle has been extensively researched, resolution of that struggle has not. As detailed in the literature review, some studies have looked at addressing

spiritual struggle in the context of posttraumatic growth, but not as its own entity. Desai and Pargament (2015) asked participants to rate their amount of spiritual resolution on a Likert scale, but did not define what resolution of spiritual struggle meant. Therefore, a definition of spiritual struggle resolution was not available, and a secondary goal of this study was to create a workable definition.

In defining "spiritual struggle" this study strived to concisely indicate the core aspects of the theory and to emphasize that spiritual struggle is overlapping with resolution, existing in a shifting ratio of feelings of struggle to feelings of resolution. It was crucial that the definition emphasized that resolution is an ongoing process occurring in layers and often reoccurring in varying degrees.

The definition which is set forth was confirmed by the participants as part of the entire theory's validity check. Eight of the ten original participants were available for validation and all eight concurred with the following definition:

> Resolution of spiritual struggle is the active, continual, and ongoing process of re-evaluating and integrating new understanding into spiritual beliefs and/or the relationship with God in an effort to reconcile the conflict between one's lived experience and one's spiritual beliefs and/or relationship with God. Resolution results in increased feelings of peace, understanding and connection with God/others and spiritual practices.

Discussion

Summary of Findings

The main goal of this research study was to create a model for the process of spiritual struggle resolution following adulthood trauma. Data analysis revealed 11 main theoretical categories which through analysis appeared to be related to each other and best represented through stages. The process of resolving spiritual struggles began with an initial catalyst stage: the traumatic event with did not match the participants' spiritual beliefs of how the world worked. Following the traumatic event, participants entered the Emotional Reaction stage which included feelings of anger towards God and other people, confusion, feelings of abandonment, and the feeling that God was punishing them.

Either concurrently or following this stage, participants entered Questioning stage in which they questioned their religious beliefs, identity, and the purpose of the traumatic event. The Questioning stage and Emotional Reaction stage were often cyclical with one another. The type of questioning involved with this stage appeared to be linked to the specific emotions experienced by the individual in the previous stage. For instance, participants who experienced anger as the most prevalent emotion tended to question the purpose of the traumatic event and the validity of their spiritual beliefs, including whether or not they wanted to keep the beliefs. Participants who experienced feelings of punishment and abandonment tended to ask why the event occurred. Participants who felt confusion tended to have all types of questioning.

The fourth stage was Disconnection. This stage included the act of disconnecting with others due to perceived or experienced judgement and misunderstanding. It also seemed to include disconnection with God either through choice or through an emotional inability to connect with Him. Disconnection also often reverted to Questioning and Emotional Reaction.

Disconnection, Emotional Reaction, and Questioning made up a triad of spiritual struggle experiences. Participants' experience of these stages involved many difficult emotions often cited as being associated with spiritual struggle. These emotions included anxiety, anger and sadness or depression (Harris et al., 2007). These feelings combined with questioning led to the decrease in spiritual practices and questioning of spiritual beliefs, which are also forms of spiritual struggle described in the literature (N. Murray-Swank & A. Murray-Swank, 2012; Pargament et al., 2000).

The fifth stage was Seeking Resolution in which the participants decided to prioritize their problem of spiritual struggle and take action to resolve it. This prioritization arose either from the realization that spiritual struggle was negatively impacting their lives or from the realization that they did want to mend their relationship with God. The actions taken to resolve their struggle led participants to both Seeking and Gaining New Understanding and Selectively Seeking Support stages, which often occurred simultaneously.

The sixth stage, Seeking and Gaining New Understanding involved participants seeking knowledge through readings, talking with God, listening to sermons, or reading their Bible. New understanding tended to be focused on perceiving errors in prior beliefs including the black and white nature of those beliefs, and integrating their new understanding into their current belief system.

The seventh stage, often concurrent with the fifth stage, was Selectively Seeking Support, which occurred through new communities or individuals who were perceived to be non-judgmental and a safe place for the participant to share their feelings and questions. New understanding was often gained through these selective supports.

The eighth stage involved reconnecting to what the participant saw as the core beliefs of

their faith and remembering religious teachings about God's character. This was often intertwined with Seeking and Gaining New Understanding in that participants reported they could separate God from the event and no longer believed that His will for them included the trauma. Participants then reported that they perceived instances in which God had provided for them either during the trauma or in the aftermath.

The ninth stage involved Reconnection with God, and was defined by the emotional reconnection the participants' felt with God. This often involved increasing spiritual practices, especially those that facilitated a personal connection with God. Participants who reported that they previously had difficulty feeling connected to God, reported they could once again feel connected and perceive God's presence. Participants who decided to disengage in their relationship with God reported a willingness to enter back into relationship with Him.

The tenth stage, Feeling Resolved, involved the initial feelings of resolution which were defined by feelings of improvement, and positive emotions such as peace and comfort. Participants also reported that they began to have appreciation for their struggle. Some perceived that their resolution journey had been completed and others felt that they had traveled far enough along to feel more resolved than not resolved.

The final stage is Maintaining Resolution, which sometimes involved a realization that the resolution journey was not completed. For others, it was an awareness that the parts of resolution which were not fully completed were being activated and needed attention. Both experiences involved the continual and ongoing process of asking questions and reorienting the self to a relationship with God while continuing to integrate new information.

These eleven stages began with a reaction to a traumatic event and the subsequent disruption caused in the participant's spiritual lives. Their journeys of spiritual struggle

resolution revealed a winding pathway with some roads which curved back on themselves and some that were straight. Spiritual struggle resolution appears to be a process which involves not only the changing of cognitions, but the reconnection with others, God, and spiritual practices.

Comparison with Current Literature

This study aimed to reveal and understand the process by which spiritual struggle was resolved by Protestant Christians who had experienced a traumatic event as an adult. The criterion of identifying as Protestant Christian was put in place because spiritual struggle has been shown to differ across religions and sects of Christianity (Abu-Raiya, Pargament, and Exline, 2015; Krumrei & Rosmarin, 2012), so it would be logical to assume that processes of resolution may also differ. A secondary objective was to create a definition of resolution of spiritual struggle as none was known to exist at the time of data collection. At the time of data analysis and the writing of this manuscript there was still no published English language definition of resolution from spiritual struggle.

What is indicated in the literature is that spiritual struggle is linked with increased symptoms and worsened prognosis of PTSD, depression, and anxiety (Pargament, Koenig, Tarakeshwar, & Hahn, 2001). Specifically, the beliefs that God is exacting punishment or has abandoned the person have been linked with a worsened prognosis for PTSD in veterans (Harris et al., 2007).

Spiritual Struggle has been defined as "efforts to conserve or transform a spirituality that has been threatened or harmed" (Pargament et al., 2005, p. 247). Various types of spiritual struggle have been proposed, such as trouble in the relationship with God; interpersonal problems with other members of the faith; and cognitive struggles or chronic religious doubting (Pargament et al., 2005).

These themes of spiritual struggle were seen in this study and are shown in the first three stages. In the Emotional Reaction and Questioning stages, cognitive struggles and religious doubting was present, such as religious doubt and confusion, questions about spiritual beliefs and the relationship with God. In the Disconnection stage, questions about relationship with God and interpersonal struggles were present such as disconnecting from the faith community and doubt over whether one wanted to continue in the same spiritual path.

Some studies have looked at spiritual struggle and posttraumatic growth (PTG) or stress related growth ([SRG] Desai & Pargament, 2015; Pargament et al., 2000). Both PTG and SRG have been shown to be negatively correlated with spiritual struggle meaning that the more spiritual struggle a person endorses, the less PTG or STG they are likely to have (Desai & Pargament, 2015; Pargament et al., 2000).

Flowers (2014) focused on PTG and Christian faith. Spiritual struggle resolution appeared to be a part of PTG, but the study did not directly explore spiritual struggle resolution. Nevertheless, many of the patterns found by Flowers were comparable with the present results.

Flowers's first theme, Spirituality Integration, appeared to have elements similar to the stages of Seeking Resolution, Seeking and Gaining New Understanding, Selectively Seeking Support, Reconnecting with God, and Feeling Resolved in this study. Participants in both studies reported working to change their perceptions of God and increasing their spiritual practices. Participants in both studies also went to God for help and felt feelings of peace and comfort as PTG and Spiritual Resolution were perceived to become noticeable.

Flowers' theme, Intrusive Thoughts, were comparable to this study's results in that some of the participants reported feelings of suicidality in the midst of the struggle. There were also parallels to Selectively Seeking Support and the Emotional Disclosure pattern in that participants

in both studies reported being selective and careful in who they shared their struggles with.

Flowers' theme of Cognitive Reframing in PTG was not applicable to the present study as it was more related to trauma related cognitions about the self vs. God or spiritual struggles.

Flowers' theme of Recovery in PTG echoed Seeking Resolution, Seeking and Gaining New Understanding, Reconnecting with God, and Seeking Resolution stages in that participants in these stages purposely increased actions they believed would lead to resolution. Participants in both studies also perceived areas in which God had provided for them in the midst of their trauma, and therefore their perceptions about God changed through new understanding and information.

None of the themes or patterns in Flowers's research appeared to contradict the current model of spiritual struggle resolution. However, the participants in Flowers (2014) did not all identify as Christian, nor did they all have spiritual struggles. Therefore, while some elements are comparable and echo the results of the current study, Flowers' research question and the research question for this study were not the same, and thus the findings did not produce enough of the same information to better be compared.

A study with more similar, but not identical aims to this study was conducted by Durá-Vilá et al. (2013). This ethnographic study looked at the experience of five nuns who had been sexually assaulted by priests. Eight stages comprised the model: Shock and Distress, Self-Doubt in The Reality of the Event, Anger and Mistrust, Withdrawal and Meditation, Secrecy and Disclosure, Community Acceptance, Spiritual Integration, and Posttraumatic Growth.

The first five stages of the Durá-Vilá et al. (2013) study reflect spiritual struggle in that the nuns experienced doubt, disconnection, and secrecy (intrapersonal and divine struggles). It also parallels the first four stages of the present model in that the nuns experienced an event

which was discordant with their spiritual beliefs. The stages of Shock and Distress, Anger and Mistrust shared similarities with this study's Emotional Reaction stage. The stages of Self-Doubt and Shock and Distress also appears similar to the Questioning stage in this model. Likewise, the stages of Withdrawal and Secrecy are similar to the Disconnection stage in this study.

The subsequent stages of Durá-Vilá et al.'s (2013) model also appear to correspond to the results found in this study. The Community Acceptance stage in their model has similarities to Selectively Seeking Support in this study's model, and The Spiritual Integration stage in their model appears to correspond to elements of Seeking and Gaining New Understanding and the Reconnecting with Beliefs Stages in this study's model. In the Community Acceptance stage the nuns reported that they came to understand that Jesus was with them during the abuse and was being abused as well; the abuse was seen as test of strength, and that this test was passed when the nun resisted the abuse by the priests. Durá-Vilá et al.'s final stage was labeled as posttraumatic growth in which the nuns practiced forgiveness and saw the priests as mortal men with human, sexual desires, and as capable as committing sins as secular men. This echoes the shifts in perspective that the participants in this study reported, most notably the perspective that traumatic events happen due to the sinful nature of the world.

Durá-Vilá et al. (2013) were not looking at resolution as a concept, but at how the nuns processed and worked through this specific type of trauma overall. It is unknown therefore, how their process may have fit into the Feeling Resolved or Maintaining Resolution stages, but their journey most certainly echoes many aspects of this model's theory of resolution.

A naturalistic grounded theory study of evangelical women who were survivors of domestic abuse (Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000) found that the women revised their ideas on God, relationship to the Church, meaning of Scripture, and reframed their understanding of God's

perspective on domestic abuse. These findings fit the stages in this model of Questioning, Seeking and Gaining New Understanding (revision of ideas, reframing the meaning of Scripture) and Reconnecting to Beliefs (perceiving God's provision and separating His will from the traumatic event).

Additionally, the women reported steps they took which were helpful in healing from the trauma, including interactions with pastors supportive of their divorce and a transition from relying on others for Scripture interpretation to interpreting Scripture themselves. This fits the Selectively Seeking Support stage in this study's model because the women credited only interactions with supportive pastors as helpful.

Decker (1993) proposed hypothetical stages of spiritual resolution: Separatio (a disruption in beliefs), Sublimate (rising above the trauma), and Calcination (reconnecting). He also proposed a fourth stage which can occur anytime called Mortificatio, which is a stage in which the person's process is stagnant. These stages are sparse in comparison with the present stage model. However, Decker's Separatio stage could encompass three stages of this model: Emotional Reaction, Questioning and Disconnection. Decker's Calcination stage could encompass this model's stages of Reconnecting with Beliefs, and Reconnecting with God. Decker did not propose a bridge between disruption and reconnection. He includes the Sublimate (rising above the trauma) stage, but not how one does this. In the present model, Sublimate would include Seeking Resolution, Seeking and Gaining Understanding, and Selectively Seeking Support. Finally, Decker's Mortificatio stage, in which the person becomes stagnant in their spiritual growth, is exactly what the participants in the present study reported being afraid of. Participants had reported that if they accepted that they were 100% resolved, they feared stagnation in their faith could be a natural consequence. Therefore, they described resolution as

the opposite of stagnation, and as ever flowing and continuous.

Decker's model therefore appears to be too sparse and needs a bridge between disruption and connection. It also appears his final stage is more analogous to a state of unresolved spiritual struggle, perhaps describing the experience that lies between the Disconnection stage and Seeking Resolution stage of the current model.

Lastly, Desai and Pargament (2015) attempted to find predictors of perceived spiritual struggle resolution. Using a Likert style question, they asked participants how resolved they felt in their spiritual struggles. The authors did not define spiritual struggle resolution. They found that 53% of their participants felt partially resolved and only 3% felt completely resolved. This is an interesting finding compared with the results of this study. Participants in this study stated that they felt mostly resolved with only three stating they felt 100% resolved. The participants who said they did feel 100% resolved did not remain this way because they discovered more spiritual struggle when reminded of the trauma or when new stressful and negative life events occurred.

Desai and Parament (2015) also found that social support was a predictor of feeling resolved which fits the Selectively Seeking Support stage outlined in this study. They also found that meaning making was predictive of feeling resolved, which echoes what the participants of this study reported happening when they reframed the traumatic event and their beliefs around it in the Reconnection with God, Reconnection with Beliefs, and the Seeking and Gaining New Understanding stages.

None of these studies perfectly matched the intent of the present study, so it is logical that their results may not perfectly match the results of this study. However, the comparison between the results of these studies and the results of the current study indicate that the current study's proposed model of spiritual resolution fits well into the sparse, but existing literature, while also

enriching our understanding of the path from struggle to resolution.

Comparison with Current Treatment

There have been some authors who have researched treatments for spiritual struggle (Bowland, 2008; Harris et al., 2011; N. Murray-Swank, 2003). *Building Spiritual Strength* (Harris, et al, 2011), detailed in the review of literature, is an eight-week group therapy curriculum consisting of sharing personal histories and goals for the group, prayer and meditation exercises, and discussions about divine response to these prayers, the problem of evil, and forgiveness and conflict resolution with the individual's higher power. The group was found to be effective in significantly reducing symptoms of PTSD as indicated by the PTSD Checklist Military Version (PCL-M).

The *Building Spiritual Strength* protocol (Harris et al. 2011) includes many themes found in the process of spiritual struggle resolution proposed in this study. Discussion about how one is currently relating to God corresponds well with the stages of Questioning and Emotional Reaction in this model. Discussions of the problem of evil, and forgiveness and conflict resolution with a higher power may have helped to facilitate the stages in this model of Seeking and Gaining New Understanding, Reconnection with Beliefs, and Reconnection with God.

Bowland (2008) created an 11-week group therapy curriculum which consisted of focusing on spiritual and trauma histories, spiritual gifts, spiritual coping strategies, anger and its relationship to the women's faith, feelings of fear and powerlessness, shame and guilt, loneliness, despair, and forgiveness and hope. The therapy was found to significantly reduce scores on the Geriatric Depression Scale (GDS), Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms (PSS), Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI), Physical Symptoms (PHQ-15), and the Spiritual Distress Scale (SDS) in female trauma victims over 55. Scores on the Spiritual Well Being Scale (SWS) were also

significantly increased as compared with a wait-list control group.

The discussion on anger towards God and feelings of despair, powerlessness, shame and guilt in Bowland's (2008) treatment protocol corresponds well with the Emotional Reaction and Questioning stages of this model for spiritual struggle resolution. These discussions may have also facilitated the process present in the stage of Seeking and Gaining New Understanding, which would lead into the stages of Reconnection with Beliefs and Reconnection with God. Bowland's discussion on forgiveness and hope may echo some of the process taking place in this model's Reconnection with God stage.

Solace for the Soul: A Journey Toward Wellness developed by N. Murray-Swank (2003) is an eight-session individual treatment for sexual assault survivors that combines mindfulness and spirituality exercises to explore images of God, abandonment/anger with God, spiritual connection with God, shame, body issues, and sexuality. The treatment resulted in significantly decreased scores on the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI) and significantly improved scores on the God Image Scale as compared with a wait-list control group.

The *Solace for the Soul: A Journey Toward Wellness* (N. Murray-Swank, 2003) protocol may have helped facilitate some of the process in the stages proposed in this study. Discussions from Murray-Swank's treatment protocol on abandonment, anger, and shame corresponds well with the Emotional Reaction stage of this model. Processing these feelings may have facilitated the stages of Questioning and Seeking and Gaining New Understanding. Murray-Swank's focus on exploring images of God and spiritual connection would have also helped facilitate the stages of Seeking and Gaining New Understanding, Reconnection with Beliefs, and Reconnection with God from this model.

The Harris et. al (2011), N. Murray-Swank (2003), and Bowland (2008) treatments were

derived from the research on spiritual struggle and not on research of how a person resolves spiritual struggle. Therefore, these treatments risked missing key information which might aid in spiritual struggle resolution.

All of the treatment modalities likely included elements of this model's Selectively Seeking Support stage in that the participants sought support either through a therapist or others in the group treatment who were also experiencing spiritual struggle. All of the researched treatments focused on emotions which fit with the Emotional Reaction stage, and all discussed some type of cognitions which would be present in the Questioning stage (problems of evil, image of God, etc.). Therefore, all of the treatments likely helped to facilitate the processes in the Emotional Reaction, Questioning, and Seeking and Gaining New Understanding stage. All of the treatments also likely facilitated processes similar to the Reconnection with God and Reconnection with Beliefs stages. All three of the treatments were also found to significantly lessen the psychological symptoms of the participants, indicating that the participants may have felt somewhat resolved in their spiritual struggles as the participants in this study stated that feeling less suffering was one of the experiences that indicated they had entered the Feeling Resolved stage. However, the participants' feelings of resolution in the studies by Bowland (2008), Harris et al, (2011), and N. Murray-Swank (2003) can only be speculated about because whether participants perceived they had resolved their spiritual struggle was not included as an outcome measure in any of their treatments.

A comparison of the methods used in these treatment models and the findings of this study indicate that these treatments likely facilitated many parts of the spiritual struggle resolution process, but could potentially have been more effective if they had incorporated more elements from this study's findings. For instance, adding a discussion on the motivation to

resolve (Seeking Resolution) and a discussion on the purpose of the traumatic event and how God might have been present or provided for the participant during that time (Seeking and Gaining New Understanding, Reconnecting with Beliefs) might have enhanced the effectiveness of the treatment. These elements of spiritual struggle resolution did not appear to be already included in these treatment protocols, and as indicated by the findings in this study, are part of the process of resolving spiritual struggle.

Likewise, N. Murray-Swank (2003) and Bowland (2008) encouraged an increase in spiritual practices, but the results of the current study indicate that the participants needed to discover how they personally connected to God (for example, art, worship, etc.), and to increase those practices rather than only prayer and meditation. Finally, the idea of resolution as a continuing process could be included in the termination and future planning sessions of treatment as it not only normalizes ongoing resolution, but also helps to ensure more effective resolution in the future and thus, less suffering.

Validity of the Research Findings

Creswell (2007) established criteria by which any qualitative research can be considered valid. His criteria are that the theory includes some process, action, or interaction, that the model expands to cover more than just the participants in the study, that the findings can be reported in a diagram, the findings can be connected by story line, and that the researcher acknowledges their bias. The findings of this research appear to meet all of these criteria. The model illustrates a process of spiritual struggle resolution which involves process, action, and interaction and can be generalized to Protestant Christian women who have experienced spiritual struggle resolution instead of only covering the women who participated in this study. The theoretical model is also easily diagrammable (see Figure 2) and tells a story of spiritual struggle resolution.

This researcher also acknowledges that as a female Protestant Christian who has experienced spiritual struggle and spiritual resolution, there were some thoughts, based upon personal experience as to how spiritual struggle resolution might occur. An attempt to control for these personal biases included the practice of consistent memoing throughout data analysis, purposeful avoidance of reading on such topics of the theology of suffering and spiritual resolution until data collection and analysis was complete and adhering close to the data and the codes which were being generated from line by line analyses.

The main two ideas this researcher had actually turned out to be either wrong or incomplete. First, that resolution was an event, which in hindsight, is reflected in the research questions (Appendix D), and second that changing perceptions about God would be most important. The results indicated that spiritual struggle resolution was not an event, but a process. Results also indicated that while changing the perception of God was important it was not the most important aspect. Behavioral change, such as continuing spiritual practices by going through the motions and seeking selective support, also emerged as important steps that the participants took. Upon reflection, the theory generated from this research does fit this researcher's experience, but not in ways that were previously conceptualized or thought of. Therefore, this researcher believes that the theory does not simply reflect personal bias, but is grounded in the data.

General principles for validity in grounded theory include workability, modifiability, relevance, and fit (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser, 1978 as cited in Bergkamp, 2010). The results of this study are also believed to fit these criteria is that the theory works to explain how spiritual struggle resolution occurs. Several stages include sub-categories that explain why some people may revert back to earlier stages or complete stages simultaneously, which aids in its ability to

be modified. The theory is also believed to be relevant in that it indicates actionable steps and a predictable path for spiritual struggle resolution. Lastly, the theory was verified to fit well with the participants in the study as evidenced by their feedback during member validity checking (Appendix E).

Charmaz (2014) has set forth her own criteria for validating grounded theory work. Her criteria are that the theory has credibility (others would come to the same conclusion), originality (it fills a gap in the research), resonance (it fits the lived experience), and usefulness. This theory appears to also fit these criteria is that it helps fill the large gap in the research literature on spiritual struggle resolution. It also appears to fit these criteria in that it resonated with the participants of the study (Appendix E). It is also useful is that it indicates actionable steps one could take to help resolve their spiritual struggle.

Recommendations

There are several recommendations that mental health professionals and spiritual leaders could implement based on the findings of this study. These recommendations are truly from the participants themselves as they detailed what was most helpful. However, knowledge of the general sequence of the stages should also be taken into consideration. It is important to note that these recommendations may only be effective or applicable for female trauma survivors who identified as Protestant Christian at the time of the traumatic event. While it may have efficacy for other trauma survivors, there are no published research findings that address this possibility.

Recommendation # 1: Treatments for spiritual struggle should be offered in both individual and group settings. Support from others both adequate and inadequate was a major theme in the participants' process of resolution. Originally, disconnection from others occurred because the participant feared or perceived being judged or misunderstood by their faith

community or their current social support network. Spiritual struggle is not an uncommon phenomenon, especially after traumatic events (A. N. Bryant & Astin, 2008; Falsetti et al, 2003), but in some Christian circles feelings of doubt and/or anger are viewed as sins (Wolff, 1978).

Clients need a safe place to question and express their feelings without fear of judgement and to hear the questions and feelings of others who are grappling with similar feelings and questions. The common experience and open vulnerability of the group may not only help to address any shame that is present, but also allow for the gaining of different perspectives and understandings.

Group therapy should be offered to in addition to individual therapy because while seeking support from others was helpful, clients are likely to have their own feelings and questions that either are not answered by the group, need more intensive processing, or are too shameful for the client to share in a group setting. The participants in this study spoke about their spiritual struggle and its resolution in ways that appeared to be very intertwined with their trauma recovery. Therefore, aspects of spiritual struggle may arise during trauma therapy and should be dealt with in the moment versus waiting for the next group session.

It is unclear if the groups need to be same-faith based. Previous literature has shown that different groups struggle differently (Cohen & Hill, 2007; Krumrei & Rosmarin, 2012; Trakeshwar et al., 2003), so having members of the same faith can contribute to the normalization of spiritual struggle within the same-faith community. Same-faith based groups may also better aid in answering group members' specific questions in a way that fits within their theology. On the other hand, some participants in the current study sought information from other religions, so having different perspectives may also be useful. More research is needed.

Scripture which does encourage open and honest discussion about spiritual struggles

should be addressed. For example, Participant 1 cited Philippians 4:6-7 which encouraged her to work out her salvation with God as evidence that her struggles were normal and accepted by God. Using Scripture in this way may help clients to feel more comfortable talking to God about their struggles, and help them to move through resolution more easily.

Recommendation #2: Motivation for resolution should be addressed. The stage of Seeking Resolution revealed that not everyone who struggles is ready or willing to begin the process of resolution. This stage was partly characterized by a decision to resolve after admitting that spiritual struggle was a problem, and resolution needed to be prioritized. Some clients may not be ready to make resolution a priority, or may be unsure of resolution because they believe it must look a certain way (e.g., a return to orthodox beliefs).

Motivation and goals for resolution should be explored when discussing treatment options and goals in both group and individual therapy so that the client understands what resolution means to them, or at least clarifies what they personally value and want to work towards. Resistance toward resolution should also be explored and worked through if it interferes with their values. If a client is not willing to resolve, these types of discussions could help alleviate their resistance or support them until they are ready to resolve (or decide they don't need to resolve) without creating shame.

Recommendation #3: Discussions surrounding questions and emotions should be emphasized. As mentioned previously, clients will need a safe place to express their questions and emotions without judgement. Some of the most common emotions participants experienced were anger, confusion, feeling punished or abandoned, and sadness. Some clients may not feel that it is acceptable to be angry with God and therefore may feel shame. The feeling of abandonment or punishment from God was deeply hurtful for the participants in this study.

Working through these emotions and questions was the core of several of the stages including

Seeking and Gaining New Understanding, and Reconnection with Beliefs. These stages were

vital for participants to be able to reconnect emotionally with God and move through resolution.

There were several common questions that participants asked such as why the event had

happened, what they had done to deserve it, and why God had allowed the event to happen.

Perspective changes on these topics were reported to be profoundly impactful for the

participants, and so discussion of these themes could help to facilitate resolution. Similarly, the

question of identity and how identity would change if beliefs changed was an important theme

for the participants. Losing a part of one's identity is undoubtedly painful and confusing. Support

around the client and their spiritual identity may also be vastly helpful.

Recommendation #4: Clients should be encouraged to individually seek support and

knowledge. Not all clients will have the same types of questions and emotions and not all will

find answers through simple discussion. Participants in this study gained new understanding

through a variety of sources, and social sources were only one place. Clients should be

encouraged to read writings on the theology of suffering or other applicable topics. They should

also be encouraged to individually speak with God. Many participants reported that they asked

God to aid in their understanding or even to give them answers Himself. Journaling, listening to

sermons, reading philosophy writings, creating artistic expressions, and others forms of

knowledge gathering and information processing could all be helpful.

Recommendation #5: Cognitive flexibility should be addressed. Many participants

reported that they initially engaged in cognitive distortions such as black and white thinking and

other similar errors. They reported that as they gained new understanding they also saw the

errors in their thoughts and in how they had structured their beliefs (such as surrendering to God

equaling an easy life). The ability to be less absolute in their thinking and to be more flexible is important. Some participants reported that even in their Maintaining Resolution stage they had to evaluate their thoughts for errors or negativity. Therefore, learning to be flexible in their thoughts and to recognize and challenge distorted patterns of thinking would be helpful in not only their initial resolution, but in maintaining it as well.

Recommendation #6: Attributes of God should be discussed. Many of the participants questioned the purpose of the traumatic event, which in essence was questioning the character of God and his motives or plan for their lives. Changing the perspective that God planned for the event to happen to a perspective in which He did not plan the traumatic event led them back to a perception of God's character which was more comforting and helpful. This perspective shift allowed them to emotionally connect with Him again because it removed much of the anger and resentment. Therefore, in addition to addressing the cognitions and emotions of the clients in discussion, treatment should also include discussions about who God is and what His attributes might be from various theological perspectives. This would be expected to help clients perceive His provision and presence in their life and to feel more emotionally connected.

Recommendation #7: Connection with God should be individually structured. Several of the treatments reviewed here focused on prayer and meditation practices, but these were not the only ways that participants reconnected with God. Several reported art and music as their main conduits to God, and that increasing these spiritual practices were most helpful. Therefore, reconnection should not entail a one size fits all approach, but should be individually structured to increase the practices that can lead each person closest to God.

Recommendation #8: Reoccurrence of spiritual struggle should be expected and planned for. The last stage in the model was not the Feeling Resolved stage, but the Maintaining

Resolution stage. All participants were clear in their interviews that resolution is not an event, but a process. Upon completion of therapy for spiritual struggle, clients should know that they will probably need to return to some stages of their struggle as new experiences occur. A resolution maintenance plan should be implemented including the steps that were most helpful in their personal journey to resolution. The client should be encouraged to continue the spiritual practices that most connect them to God. This is not to prevent further spiritual struggle, as the participants were clear in their interviews that further struggle is to some degree inevitable. Planning should be to prevent spiritual struggle from significantly impacting the client's lives and their relationship to God, and should be focused on maintaining resolution.

Limitations of the Study

The stage model of spiritual resolution proposed in this study has a few limitations. First, generalization to commonplace spiritual questioning and struggling should only be done with caution and awareness of this sample population in this research. The participants in this study had all experienced a traumatic event. Most, but not all experienced an event which would qualify as a precipitant of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder according to DSM-5 criteria (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Therefore, the specific spiritual struggles and subsequent resolution process may be unique to trauma survivors.

Second, all participants identified as Protestant Christian at the time of the traumatic event. Members of different religious groups have been shown to have different types of spiritual struggles (Krumrei & Rosmarin, 2012), and it would be logical to conclude that they may also have different experiences of spiritual resolution. Therefore, members of other religions, or even of different branches of Christianity (Catholicism, Mormonism, Jehovah Witness, etc.) may not identify with this stage model as closely or at all.

Another factor that limits the generalizability of this study is that all the participants were female. It is possible that men experience spiritual resolution in different ways than women. In the study conducted by Werdel et al. (2014) women in their sample reported significantly more posttraumatic growth than men. This finding could imply that men may be less likely to feel resolved, or if they do, may be less likely to find appreciation for their struggle.

One must also remember that the sample size in this study was small with 10 participants. However, grounded theory does not strive for statistical power and purports that generalizability can occur with small numbers of participants (Bergkamp, 2010; Charmaz, 2014).

Lastly, although all the participants in this study identified with resolution being a return to relationship with God, this may not be the only type of resolution. It is still entirely possible, that there are people who feel resolved through denouncing religion and/or God. Open recruitment on the internet attempted to reach people who may have felt this way. Although no one who may have resolved in this manner reached out for participation, this does not mean they do not exist. Participants were recruited from only small sections of the United States, limiting the pool of potential participants. The return to connection with God by all the participants in this study in no way rules out the existence of other forms of resolution.

Future Directions of the Research

Resolution of how spiritual struggle is resolved has not been well researched despite the plethora of research that has been done on spiritual struggle. The current study discovered eleven new theoretical areas to be expanded and upon which our understanding of spiritual struggle resolution could be further researched.

First, and most importantly, we still do not know how members of faiths other than Protestant Christianity resolve their spiritual struggles following trauma. This research should be

repeated for other faiths including people who do not practice within organized religion. Similarly, it is unknown if there a difference between how men and women resolve their spiritual struggles. It is possible that some or all of the steps taken by women are different than the ones taken by men. It is also unknown how this type of resolution differs from spiritual struggle which is not caused by traumatic events.

In addition, research also needs to be done to find if there are people who truly resolve in a way that does not involve returning to a spiritual faith. This researcher attempted to reach out to such people, and just because they did not respond does not mean they do not exist. It is possible that the language used in the recruitment advertisement caused these people to not respond. Spiritual struggle resolution for these people, if they exist, is equally important. Many of the treatments proposed in the literature for spiritual struggle appear to focus on changing cognitions and emotions in a way that leads one to feel better about their relationship with God. It could be that there is a way to resolve and feel better about *not* having a relationship with God.

Other directions for future research include the integration of these results into existing treatments for spiritual struggle. The current treatment options have been found to be effective and had already implemented many concepts found in this research. Using the additional pieces of information from this grounded theory may help to make these treatments even more effective. This data can be used as the basis for not only treatment guidelines, but also for the further development and refinement of manualized and evidenced based treatments.

There were some aspects of the current theory which did not emerge as major theoretical categories but were present in the data, such as an attitude of humility and maturity of faith. Lack of humility has been linked with higher instances of spiritual struggle (Grubbs & Exline, 2014),

and maturity of faith has been linked with lower instances of spiritual struggle (Werdel et al., 2014). These aspects might also affect the process of resolution, and there may also be other characteristics of a person that affect their ability to resolve. Does the inability to be cognitively flexible or the lack of social support disrupt or even change the course of resolution? Are there personal factors that encourage or aid in resolution that the participants were unaware of? For example, temperament, resilience factors, or personality traits may either aid or interfere with resolution.

Lastly, there are several scales for measuring spiritual struggles already in use. Prior to the current study, it was difficult to conceptualize a scale to measure resolution of the struggle, as there was not even a definition of resolution. High scores on such a scale may not simply be the inverse of lower scores on the spiritual struggle scale as resolution does not seem to simply be the inverse of spiritual struggle. It may be that spiritual struggle and resolution are two different processes which intersect in various ways. Thus, the findings of this study could aid the development of a measure that could assess where a person is in the resolution process.

Conclusion

The information shared by this study's participants highlighted that spiritual struggle is suffering often experienced in secret. Many participants did not feel they could share their struggles with others, and this appeared to lead to prolonged suffering. Normalization of spiritual struggle is present in the literature, but it needs to become normalized within the therapy room as well as the religious leader's office. Having a safe place with no judgment and with validation of feelings and questions appears vital in the healing process.

The importance of engaging in spiritual practices, even if a person does not feel compelled to (going through the motions), emerged as an important piece to resolution, a piece

that does not seem to be as prevalent in spiritual struggle literature. Much of the prior research has focused on the different cognitions of spiritual struggle and the treatment of changing those cognitions. Taking action allowed the participants to gain new information, be in contact with supportive people, and reconnect to God.

Lastly, the concept of resolution as a never-ending process was a surprise to this researcher, and appears to be one of the biggest enhancements to the current literature, as much of the literature seems to assume that reversing spiritual struggle would be an event. In this way, the resolution of spiritual struggle was revealed to not be a destination, but a direction, likened to the concept of values in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Hayes, 2005). Resolution, like values, is similar to traveling East. One can arrive in any city in the geographical East, but one can never stop moving East, because the direction always exists relative to where you are. The understanding from the results of this study of spiritual struggle and its resolution indicate that resolution can be described in much the same way. Therapists and religious leaders must point people experiencing struggle to continue east as resolution is not any destination, but a direction always relative to where one stands.

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Appendix A

Participant Recruitment Flyer

Seeking Research Participants

Exploring the experience of resolving spiritual/religious struggle and questioning following traumatic events

Have you experienced any of the following types of events, and *at the time of the event*, identified as Protestant Christian?

- Car or other transportation accident
- Military Combat
- Domestic Violence
- Sexual Assault/Rape
- Physical Assault With/Without Weapon
- Natural Disaster
- Other Traumatic Experiences

And after the traumatic event, you experienced any of the following?

- Questioning of Spiritual and/or Religious Beliefs
- Anger with God
- Feelings of Being Punished by God
- Other forms of Spiritual and/or Religious Struggle/questioning

And you feel that your spiritual or religious struggles and questions have been resolved as you understand resolution?

For more information, or to participate in the study, contact Aimee Keith at akresearchinfo@gmail.com with your name, phone number, and availability for a short telephone pre-screening interview.

This Study is being conducted as part of the student dissertation requirement of the Psy.D. program at Antioch University Seattle

ANTIOCH UNIVERSITY SEATTLE

Appendix B

Telephone Pre-Screening Script

Hello, is this (Participant Name)?

Hello (Participant), this is Aimee Keith. You sent me an e-mail that you were interested in being a part of my study on the resolution of spiritual struggle. Are you still interested in doing that?

(If no) I appreciate your time. Thank you, and have a great day.

(If yes) Great! Do you have a few minutes for me to tell you a little more about the study and to ask you a few screening questions?

(If no) I understand. When would be a good time to ask call you back for this?

(If yes) Great! Okay, First, a few pieces of information about the study. This study is part of my dissertation at Antioch University Seattle. If you and I agree that you are a good fit for this study, we'll make an appointment to meet for an hour to an hour and a half. During that time, I'll ask you questions about how you resolved your spiritual struggles, but I won't ask you specific or detailed questions about your trauma, other than to ask what type of trauma it was. Do you have any questions so far?

Pre-Screening Questions:

1. Are you eighteen years or older?
(Exclusion Criteria: under 18 years old)

If yes: Continue to Question 2
If no: Thank you for your time, but I need everyone in the study to be 18 or older.

2. Could you tell me in just a few words what type of trauma it was that you experienced? For example, car accident, assault, etc.

(Exclusion Criteria: Trauma does not fit Criteria A for PTSD in the DSM-5)

No Exclusion: Continue to Question 3

Exclusion criteria: Thank you for your time. Your experience sounds like it was an awful experience, and I am sorry that you had to experience that. However, for this study, I need participants who have experienced specific types of trauma. Unfortunately, that means I can't invite you to be a part of the study now. I hope that is not too upsetting for you. (If the person reports or demonstrates distress by this conversation, I will offer to provide you with the names and numbers of three therapists who provide spiritually integrated services in the area.) Thank you for your time.

3. Did you consider yourself to be a Protestant Christian when (participant's trauma) occurred?
(Exclusion Criteria: Traumatic event occurred previous to identification with protestant Christianity).

If yes: Continue to Question 4
If no: Thank you for your time, but for this study, I need everyone to have been Protestant Christian before the trauma happened.

4. After the (insert traumatic event) did you have spiritual struggles? Examples include questioning of your spiritual beliefs, anger at God, feeling that you were being punished by God, etc? (Exclusion Criteria: Did not experience spiritual struggle)

If yes: Continue to Question 5
If no: Thank you for your time, but for this study I need participants who have experienced some type of spiritual struggle.

6. Do you feel that you have resolved these spiritual struggles? (Exclusion Criteria: Does not feel they resolved their spiritual Struggle)

If yes: Thank you for your time. I would like to schedule a time for an interview with you. The interview will take between 60 and 90 minutes and will be held at (TBD). Would you be available on any of the following dates and times (list current availability)?

If potential participant seems distressed: Thank you for your time, and for answering my questions, even though they may have been uncomfortable for you. Unfortunately, this study doesn't quite fit you at this time. You sound like this conversation has brought up some feelings for you. Are you okay? (Wait for response)

(If no) Do you have someone you can call and talk about this with or something that you can do to help you feel better? (If participant appears highly anxious, I will lead them through some deep breathing).

(if no) I can provide you with the names and numbers of some therapists who are familiar with spiritual issues. Would you like this information? (if yes, give information for three therapists and help participant find an activity to help regulate their emotions). Thank you for your time, and I'm sorry that the study doesn't fit you right now. Would you like information about the outcome when I finish the study? (if yes: Confirm e-mail address).

For those who will be invited to participate: Thank you for your interest in this study. I will send you a confirmation e-mail with the date, time and location of the interview. (Confirm e-mail address)

Appendix C

Demographic Information

Age: _____

Sex: _____

Ethnicity: _____

Specific denomination of Christianity (if any): _____

In a few words, please name the type of trauma(s) you experienced: _____

Appendix D

Interview Questions

- How would you describe your relationship with God before the (type the trauma)?
- How did your feelings and/or relationship towards God change after the event?
    - Follow up: How did your spiritual beliefs change after the event?
- What was your perception of these changes at the time? Were they positive, negative?
    - Follow up: How were you emotionally affected by changes in your spiritual beliefs or feelings toward God?
- What steps, if any, did you take to resolve the struggle?
    - Follow up: What were the most helpful words, actions, or steps in the resolving your spiritual struggles?
    - How did you know when your spiritual struggles were resolved?
- Is there anything that has occurred to you during this interview about your experience of resolution that had not occurred to you before?
- Is there anything else you would like me to know about your experience of resolution?

Appendix E

Member Validity Checking

A grounded theory is shown to be viable and valid if it conforms to the four hallmarks; workability, modifiability, relevance, and fit (Glaser, 1978 as cited in Bergkamp, 2010). In other words, this means that the theory needed to be workable in that it can generalize beyond the experience of the participants in the study and account for general experience. The theory also needed to be easily modifiable through integration with new data. It needed to be relevant and to fit the variations in experience of people who have experienced spiritual struggle resolution. Many grounded theorists, including Kathy Charmaz, recommend checking the validity of the theory with the participants themselves (Charmaz, 2014).

Participants were presented with both the theory and a definition of resolution, since at the time of data collection and analysis there was no know definition for resolution of spiritual struggle. The participants who were reached, gave favorable feedback to the theory. For example:

> Everything was spot on, especially I like the last part of how it is continually transformative. (Participant 6)

> I think it definitely fits, specifically the part that stuck out to me was that part about seeking specific support. (Participant 9)

> I feel like that makes a lot of sense hearing it broken down that way. Yeah, I can resonate with it…There were enough steps that it felt like it progressed really naturally, and I really liked what you said about the resolution occurring in layers 'cause I think that could change over time. I liked it. It's great. (Participant 5)

> It sounds like it fits with my experience well. Definitely, I was waiting to see if you would address the part about God not being the author of evil because that is so important, and I think, at least for me, I came out of it with a theology of suffering. (Participant 2)

> It feels like that kinda hits all of the different parts. It seems like that hits pretty much everything. I would feel comfortable with that. (Participant 7)

Participants did give some feedback which was incorporated into the theory. One participant early on stated that she felt questioning of her identity was present in the questioning stage. This

concept had emerged in the participant interviews, but had not appeared to be a major category.

The data was revisited and the concept of questioning identity was added and checked with

subsequent participants. A sampling of the feedback in this area was as follows:

> I think it [identity] kinda can be enmeshed in that first part of questioning. (Participant 9)

> It's kinda like a new normal, and who am I in this new world with these changes and how does this impact me and who am I now. Like a self-discovery component. (Participant 5)

> Two participants stated they did not experience the disconnection from others, but did not

deny that the other part of the disconnection stage, disconnection from God, occurred for them.

One participant reported she experiences the positioning of the Disconnection stage differently:

> I think for me the disconnection might have happened before the questioning. I think for me, I– it was like I wanted to avoid and disconnect from others and from God 'cause I didn't understand what had happened, and I didn't have the capacity to question yet. I just needed to space to disconnect. (Participant 5)

> Regarding the presented definition of resolution, participants gave no negative feedback

and all stated that the definition fit their own definition of resolution. This included the

participants who did not return to orthodox Protestant Christianity. For example:

> I think it sounds really good and I think it fits. And the people that I tend to talk to who have had trauma, and have returned, I feel like have returned to faith in a little more than a traditional way that I have. And I still feel like yours fits for me, so I would consider myself to be a little bit more of an outlier., So if it includes me, I feel like it's a pretty good theory. I don't have any negative feedback. (Participant 7)

> The feedback from the participants indicated that the proposed theory of how resolution

of spiritual struggle occurs passes the validity checks and has workability, modifiability,

relevance, and fit. Comments made by the participants were integrated and several were used as

example quotes to further define the theoretical categories.

Appendix F

Table 1

Table 1

Theoretical Categories, Sub-Categories, and Definitions

Theoretical Stages	Definition	Sub-Categories	Relation to Other Stages
Experiencing the Event	The lived experience of a traumatic event often experienced as discordant with prior religious beliefs.		• Leads to all other stages
Emotional Reaction	The initial and immediate emotions which emerged as a result of interpretations about the traumatic event which occurred either just prior to or in conjunction with/as a result of the stage of Questioning.	• Feeling Angry • Feeling Punished • Feeling Abandoned • Feeling Confused	• Typically occurs following: The traumatic event and also after or simultaneous to the Questioning stage • Typically Leads to: The Questioning stage (if not concurrent) and the Disconnection stage.
Questioning	The conscious act of asking why the event happened, how to make sense of spiritual beliefs, including which ones to keep and which to discard, and how to understand identity following the traumatic event.	• Questioning Spiritual Beliefs • Questioning Purpose of the Event • Questioning Identity	• Typically occurs directly following or concurrent to: Emotional Reaction stage and during the Seeking and Gaining new Understanding Stage, but can occur throughout resolution. • Typically leads back to or concurrently with the Emotional Reaction Stage, or to the Disconnection, and Seeking and Gaining New Understanding Stages.
Disconnection	The Physical or emotional isolation from God and others experienced either through the purposeful action of disconnection or through an inability to feel connected.	• Feeling Disconnected from God (Voluntary or involuntary) • Feeling Disconnected from Others	• Typically occurs after the Questioning Stage • Often in a cyclical relationship with Emotional Reaction and Questioning
Seeking Resolution	The acknowledgment that spiritual struggles are interfering in one's life and the conscious and deliberate decision to prioritize resolution.		• Typically occurs after the first three stages • Leads to all Seeking and Gaining New Understanding and Selectively Seeking Support stages
Seeking and Gaining Understanding	The deliberate effort to seek new understanding through various means and the attainment of new understanding and perspectives which is	• Seeking understanding • Gaining understanding	• Occurs partially during the Questioning stage • Primarily occurs after the seeking resolution stage and either before or simultaneous

	integrated into prior understanding.		• with the Selectively Seeking Support stage • Leads to all subsequent stages.
Selectively Seeking Support	The search for either a community or individuals who are believed to be a non-judgmental source of support and place to share spiritual struggles and emotions towards God.		• Typically occurs after Seeking and Gaining New Understanding stage begins • Can occur simultaneously with Seeking and Gaining New Understanding • Leads to all subsequent stages and sometimes back to Questioning stage
Reconnecting with Beliefs	The reconnection with the core of one's faith, including the true meaning of spiritual teachings and the true character of God.	• Reconnection with the Character of God	• Typically occurs after the onset of the Seeking and Gaining Understanding and the Selectively Seeking Support stages, but often partially overlaps. • Leads to Reconnecting with God
Reconnecting with God	The emotional reconnection with God including the ability to connect with God again and is often associated with the increase in spiritual practices.		• Typically occurs after a reconnection of beliefs • Leads to Feeling Resolved
Feeling Resolved	An initial feeling of improvement and that the relationship with God has been mostly or completely repaired and is often associated with increased feelings of peace and comfort.		• Typically occurs directly after Feeling Connected with God stage. • Leads to Maintaining Resolution
Maintaining Resolution	The ongoing, continual process of questioning beliefs, integrating new information and actively working on one's personal relationship with God.		• Occurs after Feeling Resolved Stage • Can Lead back into any other stage