



Technical Assistance Guidance

# Spiritual Health Matters: Strategies for Supporting the Spiritual Wellbeing of Survivors of IPV

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“ Survivors need advocates who care about them holistically- mind, body, and spirit. When the spirit is wounded, it affects the deepest part of who we are. Focusing on spiritual health in addition to other needs, helps survivors to heal from the inside out. ”

– Ghia Kelly

## Introduction

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is a pervasive form of trauma that can have a multiplicity of effects on the health and well-being of survivors. Advances in research related to trauma and resilience have helped those in the anti-violence field better understand the physical, mental, and emotional effects of trauma and best practices for responding to these effects, but very little of the research focuses on the *spiritual health* of survivors. Spirituality is important to the holistic health of survivors and can be a critical component of a survivor’s healing journey. In a study on the importance of spirituality in the lives of IPV survivors, 97% of the women interviewed acknowledged their spirituality and/or faith as a source of strength and comfort (Gillum, Sullivan & Bybee, 2006).

**This resource has been developed to help advocates:**

- 1** gain a deeper understanding of spiritual health and its connection to one’s overall health,
- 2** have conversations with survivors about their spiritual health,
- 3** promote spiritual self-care, and
- 4** partner with spiritual allies.



## What is Spiritual Health?

Spiritual health is one of the eight dimensions of human wellness (Figure 1) that “creates meaning in life, cultivates altruism and ethics, and is based on individual perceptions convincing us of our ability to survive” (Heyn, 2018). Westernized approaches to trauma recovery and healing have historically focused on the cognitive and emotional elements of wellness, but practitioners and researchers are starting to understand the importance of focusing on the whole person – body, mind, environment, and spirit (Warshaw, Sullivan & Rivera, 2013). Some people, including advocates, experience discomfort with the concept of spiritual health because they equate spirituality with religion. While religion and the belief in a higher power (i.e., God) can be important aspects of spiritual health for some, spirituality is highly individualized and expressed differently based on a person’s culture, beliefs, and worldview. Some survivors may attend a church, mosque, or temple as a spiritual practice while others may practice yoga, meditate, or connect with nature. Religion is communal and structured, while spirituality is much more personal and fluid. Advocates must understand and acknowledge the diversity that exists in spiritual practices to help foster a sense of inclusion when talking to survivors about their spiritual health.

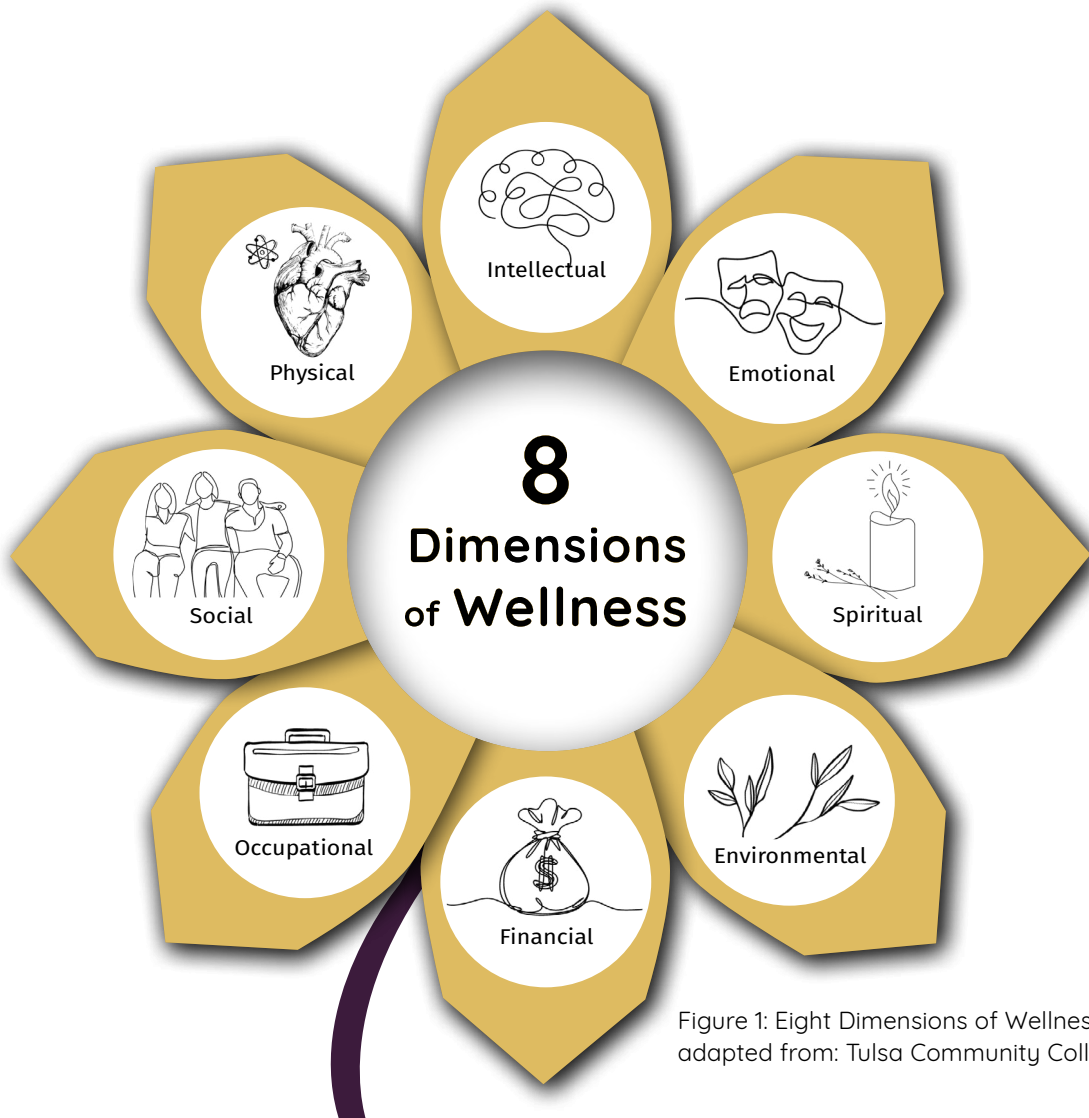


Figure 1: Eight Dimensions of Wellness, adapted from: Tulsa Community College

Ghaderi et al. (2018) identified four dimensions of spiritual health:

1. **Personal** dimension or the connection with self;
2. **Social** dimension or connection with others;
3. The **Environment** or connection with nature; and
4. **Transcendent** dimension or connection with a higher power.



Figure 2: Four dimensions of spiritual health

When someone is spiritually healthy, they know who they are, they feel connected to others and the world around them, they have a sense of purpose, and they feel connected to something greater than themselves. Experiencing IPV can erode a person’s spiritual health, as perpetrators will often isolate victims from their faith communities or deny them access to their spiritual practices to maintain power and control. Sacred texts and religious doctrine may also be used to blame the survivor, to justify or minimize the violence, or to perpetuate silence and shame (FaithTrust Institute & FCADV, 2015). Helping survivors reconnect with their spirituality and promoting spiritual health can restore their connection with themselves, strengthen their social support system, and give them a sense of hope.

### Spiritual Health as a Protective Factor

Many researchers have found that religion and spirituality generally lead to improved mental health, a higher quality of life, and better physical health (Ghaderi et al., 2018; Weber & Pargament, 2014; Gillum et al., 2006). Some religious communities have harmed survivors because of patriarchal, homophobic, and transphobic practices, whereas others have provided much-needed support, financial assistance, and safety (Crowley, 2023; Gillum



et al., 2006). For African Americans, the Black Church has been at the center of Black communities as the greatest source of religious enrichment and secular development and a leading voice in the fight against injustice and oppression (Kelly, 2022). Researchers have been able to document the links between spiritual practices and coping and psychological well-being among African-American survivors (Gillum, 2009).

Advocates must be aware of the risk and protective factors that exist for IPV survivors. Protective factors are the characteristics, conditions, or behaviors that help reduce the risk of negative outcomes and enhance an individual's ability to cope with stressors and challenges (CDC, 2020). For many survivors, spirituality and religion are positive coping strategies for dealing with intimate partner violence and healing from its effects (Gillum et al., 2006). In addition to helping survivors cope, religion and spirituality can also provide community, support, and positive beliefs which all can increase survivor safety, mental health, and personal agency (Weber & Pargament, 2014).



## Ways to Promote Spiritual Self-Care

Because of the trust that is built between advocates and survivors, advocates can play a key role in promoting healthy coping and self-care strategies. Self-care is important in the life of everyone, but especially survivors of trauma, because it allows them space to nurture themselves and practice self-compassion (RAINN, n.d.). The physical and emotional elements of self-care are typically prioritized but advocates are encouraged to broaden their view of self-care to also include spiritual self-care. Survivors may not know what spiritual self-care is or how to put it into practice, so advocates must increase their knowledge and comfort with the concept.

**Here are some questions advocates can ask survivors to assess their spiritual health and promote spiritual self-care:**

1. How important is spirituality and/or religion to you?
2. How has your spirituality and/or religion been shaped by the violence you've experienced?
3. What or who is the source of your sense of hope? How can your sense of hope be strengthened?
4. Has your spirituality and/or religion helped you? Has your spirituality and/or religion harmed you? How?
5. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your spiritual health? Why?
6. What activities help you to connect with your spirituality and/or religion? When was the last time you practiced one of these activities?
7. Do you believe your life serves a greater purpose? What do you feel it is?
8. What is a scripture, song, mantra, or quote that encourages you when you're feeling down?
9. If you would like to improve your spiritual health, what is a daily practice you can commit to?
10. How can I support your spiritual health and well-being?

Keep in mind that while advocates are encouraged to discuss spiritual health with survivors, survivors should never be forced to discuss anything they don't want to. If a survivor expresses a lack of interest or discomfort in the conversation, the advocate should acknowledge their feelings and change or end the conversation. Survivors should be encouraged to reach out to the advocate if they want to discuss their spiritual health at a later time. Conversations about spirituality and spiritual health should never be used to debate religious doctrine or to promote or discourage a particular spiritual practice but to center the spiritual health and well-being of the survivor. Survivors should also be assured that engaging in conversations about spirituality is not a mandatory practice or a pre-requisite for receiving services.

### Ways Advocates Can Support Their Own Spiritual Health

As anti-violence advocates regularly encounter trauma and violence in their work, their own spiritual well-being and self-care are crucial. Over half of them experience severe traumatic stress symptoms and compassion fatigue, and approximately 16% meet the PTSD diagnostic criteria due to vicarious trauma exposure (Michigan Victim Advocacy Network, n.d.). Many advocates are also survivors themselves, further highlighting the importance of their self-care (The Soar Collective, n.d.).



Figure 3: Supporting Advocates also Supports Survivors, Source: The SOAR Collective (May 2023)

### Here are some spiritual self-care strategies for advocates:

- Try and spend 30 minutes each day doing something that makes you feel more in tune with yourself spiritually (meditation, prayer, deep breathing, nature walk, etc.).
- Keep a journal of your thoughts, hopes, joys, and fears.
- Connect with a community of people that share your spiritual or religious practices.
- Practice gratitude daily.
- Develop a purpose statement and refer to it when you feel lost or hopeless.
- Create a wellness vision board using the eight dimensions of wellness. (See Figure 1 on Page 2.)
- Recite personal affirmations regarding your value, purpose, and worthiness.
- Consider volunteering for a cause that you feel deeply connected to.
- Attend a spiritual or religious retreat.



## Spiritual Allyship

Another way that advocates can promote and support the spiritual health of survivors is to partner with local spiritual and faith-based organizations who are committed to ending violence in their community. These spiritual allies can provide spiritual care and safety for survivors, create brave spaces for congregations to challenge harmful spiritual and religious practices, and facilitate community dialogues on IPV and violence prevention (Crowley, 2023). Because of the intersection of spirituality, religion, and intimate partner violence, partnerships between anti-violence advocates and spiritual and religious leaders not only strengthens the support system for survivors but brings greater visibility to the issue of intimate partner violence (Crowley, 2023; Gillum, 2009).



## Conclusion

Intimate partner violence is a widespread issue that can have lasting effects on a survivor's health and wellbeing. As advocates support the physical and emotional needs of survivors, it is important that they also support their spiritual needs since they are critical to the survivor's holistic health. Research has proven that spirituality and religion can improve a person's physical and mental health, coping, and resilience; many survivors identify their spirituality or religion as a source of strength and hope. While spiritual health can include religion or a belief in a higher power, it is not limited to these things. Spirituality is diverse, fluid, and self-defined and should be promoted as such. Advocates must build their capacity to have conversations about spiritual health with survivors that are unbiased, non-threatening, and inclusive, and should partner with local spiritual allies. It is also important that advocates prioritize their own spiritual health and self-care to lessen their risk for burnout and vicarious trauma. To invest in the spiritual health of a survivor is to honor and deepen their purpose, values, optimism, and continued survival.



## About the Author

Dr. Ghia Kelly is a transformational leader, facilitator, trainer, and subject matter expert with broad-based experience in systems building, maternal and child health, domestic and sexual violence, mental health, and racial justice & equity. Dr. Kelly is also a faith leader and certified mental health and life coach who focuses on the intersection of faith, emotional health, and spiritual development. She is the founder of The Gift of Truth, Inc., a faith-based organization that seeks to create safe spaces where individuals and faith communities can learn, heal, and grow. She has dedicated her life to empowering individuals, advocating against injustice, and ministering to the whole person- body, soul, and spirit. Dr. Kelly currently resides in North Florida with her husband and three children.



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