Counselling Disaffiliated Evangelicals

by

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Abstract

At the heart of this capstone project are individuals who have exited conservative evangelicalism and are reclaiming and rebuilding their lives after having adverse religious experiences and experiencing religious trauma from fundamental evangelical settings. The paper provides a snapshot of the identity and beliefs of fundamental evangelicals and a review of the literature on the diverse mental health issues disaffiliated evangelicals may seek support with. Considerations and cautions for clinical counsellors in working with disaffiliated evangelicals are included. This exploration is done with the hope that it will be informative and helpful for mental health professionals when members of this demographic seek support and intervention.

Keywords: Adverse religious experiences, evangelical, disaffiliation, conservative evangelical, fundamental, religious trauma

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Chapter 1: Introduction

There is a noticeable cultural shift in North America away from religious affiliation. The Pew Research Center reports a significant increase in Canadians without religious affiliation. In 1971, only 4% of Canadians were religiously unaffiliated, but by 2011, this number had risen to 29%. In British Columbia, 44% of residents identified as religiously unaffiliated in 2013 (Pew Research Center, 2013). Protestant denominations in Canada are experiencing higher rates of decline than other faiths. For example, from 1971 to 2011, Protestant affiliation dropped from 41% to 27% (Pew Research Center, 2013). Within the Protestant realm, evangelical Christians make up around 10% of the Canadian population, whereas in the United States, evangelicals account for over a quarter of the population (Coren, 2017). Various denominations within evangelicalism, such as Pentecostals, Southern Baptists, Wesleyans, Mennonites, Church of the Nazarene, Free Methodists, and Church of God, adhere to fundamentalist and conservative Christian teachings. A study by the Public Religion Research Institute reveals a 37% decline in white evangelical Protestants in the United States since 2006 (Blake, 2020). While there is an overall disaffiliation trend in Christian denominations, the exodus of evangelicals from their churches is particularly notable.

Some individuals who identify as ex-evangelical have reacted to their experiences within evangelicalism by embarking on a journey of questioning, ultimately leading to the deconstruction and rejection of their beliefs. While some individuals in this group may transition to alternative religions or denominations (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016), others engage in deconstruction and reconstruction while remaining part of their congregations, seeking to bring about change from within. On the other hand, some choose to disaffiliate completely, meaning

they renounce their faith and no longer participate in church activities. This inquiry focuses specifically on these disaffiliated individuals.

Why Focus on Evangelicals?

While it is true that individuals from various religious affiliations question and leave their faith traditions, this project concentrates explicitly on evangelicals for several compelling reasons. Ex-evangelicals have attracted significant media coverage. Evangelicals have historically embraced mass media technology as a means of communication to evangelize, proselytize, and foster a vibrant community (Fekete & Knippel, 2020). Intriguingly, ex-evangelicals use the same methods and tools once used to stay engaged with their faith to oppose their former beliefs openly.

Evangelicals are receiving significant media attention these days. According to Galtung and Holmboe, adverse events involving influential figures or large numbers of people, particularly those portrayed as conflicts between individuals, are more likely to be covered by the media (as cited in Haskell, 2009). Given this, a narrative emphasizing tension and conflict between fundamental evangelicals and ex-evangelicals would naturally capture media interest. Recent revelations of scandals involving prominent evangelical leaders have contributed to this attention. Carol Penner, a professor at Conrad Grebel University College, has noted that sexual abuse scandals have shaken many evangelical churches in the past five years (Mann, 2022). The media actively reporting on these cases brings further attention to evangelicalism. The departure of pastors, authors, and artists from evangelical denominations, such as Joshua Harris (Pastor), Kevin Max (Music Artist-DC Talk), and Paul Maxwell (Author/Pastor), has also generated media coverage. The focus on evangelicalism has been heightened since Donald Trump's presidency in the United States, as many white evangelicals left their churches due to concerns

about faith leaders aligning with Trumpism and holding hard-right political views (Engler, 2022). Canadian society currently exhibits less tolerance for exclusionary right-wing groups (Reimer, 2021), making stories of Christians breaking away from such groups, especially fundamental evangelicals, of public interest. Finally, given that journalists often lean liberal on social and religious issues (Haskell, 2009), there is a greater motivation to cover stories involving the defection of fundamentalist evangelicals.

In addition to coverage in mainstream media, ex-evangelicals are taking to social media to communicate their issues with evangelical beliefs and the harms correlated with them. While it is challenging to find statistics, data, or academic literature specifically on evangelicals who are disaffiliating, their stories can increasingly be found in popular literature and on social media (Fekete & Knippel, 2020). A few searches on Google will result in a plethora of content castigating this group's experiences, from best-selling books (e.g., Pure by Linda Kay Klein) to popular podcasts (e.g., "Exvangelical"), documentaries (e.g., CBS "Deconstructing my Religion"), blogs (e.g., rachelheldevans.com), and Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok posts and stories from prominent progressive evangelical and ex-evangelical members (e.g., Joshua Harris, Chrissy Stroop, Abraham Piper). Access to social media has provided the space for those who previously felt isolated in their decision to disaffiliate to find support and connection (Fekete & Knippel, 2020). These social media spaces, podcasts, and other popular forms of public communication have resulted in the issues of the disaffiliating evangelical coming to light.

Listening to disaffiliating conservative evangelicals sharing their experiences is crucial. Ex-evangelicals recount stories of suffering, loss, abuse, trauma, guilt, and shame. Due to their intensely personal connection with God, strong community ties, and adherence to strict values, beliefs, and behaviours, ex-evangelicals may experience profound loss and grief that may differ

from other Christian denominations (Nica, 2019). Some ex-evangelicals have described their experiences as traumatic within patriarchal, heteronormative, and racist norms (Onishi, 2019). Exiting their religion can adversely affect their beliefs, morality, emotions, intellect, inner world, and sense of belonging. Fenelon & Danielsen (2016) concluded that evangelical Protestants and those from high-cost religious groups may experience more significant well-being challenges than other religious groups. This emerging social sub-group can significantly benefit from healing, support, and care.

Significance to the Field of Counselling

Due to the recent emergence of religious disaffiliation in society, limited research has been conducted on the issues and treatments specific to this group (Björkmark et al., 2021). The scarcity of peer-reviewed academic studies on ex-evangelicals is a shared finding among researchers exploring the impact of disaffiliation (Cameron, 2008; Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016; Nica, 2019; Sloan, 2021). This lack of resources poses two significant issues. Firstly, religious and non-religious clinical counsellors may be unaware of this phenomenon despite its increasing prevalence in North American society (Cameron, 2008). The lack of research means mental health workers have fewer opportunities to learn about and support this demographic. Secondly, clinical counsellors may encounter clients dealing with the aftermath of leaving their religion. However, without sufficient studies on ex-evangelicals' struggles, therapists may lack the resources to support this population effectively. Significant life disturbances such as leaving religion can negatively impact well-being and mental health (May, 2018). To effectively assist these individuals, therapists must understand the complex variables associated with being raised in authoritative, prescriptive, and exclusionary evangelical settings. There is a dearth of information on the specific concerns that ex-evangelicals may seek treatment for, and an even

more significant gap in the literature regarding effective treatments for these issues. This paper aims to provide insights for mental health professionals on the challenges this demographic faces and how to support them best.

Research Questions

The questions prompting the research regarding ex-evangelicals originated from personal encounters with evangelicalism and my own disaffiliation experience. In witnessing other ex-evangelicals' testimonies and experiences on social media, in documentaries, books, and in articles in various magazines and newspapers, I became even more curious. Three key questions prompted this inquiry: 1) What prompts conservative evangelicals to disaffiliate? 2) What are the issues ex-evangelicals might struggle with? 3) How can clinical counsellors best support disaffiliating Christians?

Purpose Statement

This capstone project explores the mental health-related issues that conservative evangelicals may present when questioning their faith, especially when it leads to no longer existing within the community and beliefs of their faith system. At the heart of this capstone project are the people who have exited conservative evangelicalism and are reclaiming and rebuilding their lives after participating in beliefs, practices, and communities of evangelicalism. This exploration is done with the hope that it will be informative and helpful for mental health professionals when members of this demographic seek support and intervention.

Personal Positioning

While a long autobiographical account of my own experiences as a woman born and raised in a conservative evangelical denomination does not serve the purpose of this particular

paper, it is significant to acknowledge how my experiences and intersectionality have impacted the research.

I was raised in a conservative evangelical family, with my parents serving as clergy members. My father held various roles within the United Pentecostal Church International, including pastor, missionary, district leader, and teacher. From the time I was born until my late twenties, I made sincere efforts to adhere to the fundamentalist doctrines, beliefs, and attitudes that are still followed by some evangelicals today. My upbringing in the evangelical setting resulted in: a pervasive pressure to attain perfection, the internalization of shame and a profound impact on my self-worth, and the presence of strict rules and control, especially for women, which impacted my self-esteem and sense of authenticity.

During my time in the evangelical community, I sincerely believed that without God and a transformative experience through the Holy Spirit, I was destined to be a sinful person bound for hell. I believed that if I were a good Christian, I would not commit sins, and my inability to meet this expectation led me to internalize the feeling of not being enough. Striving to emulate Christ's perfection, I repeatedly fell short of these ideals. Particularly during my teenage years, I struggled with the strict rules and norms imposed by the evangelical framework, including abstaining from sex, alcohol, smoking, and refraining from activities like dancing and attending parties. I especially struggled with and hated the prescribed dress code of wearing dresses and skirts, which was expected within my denomination as modest womanly attire. Consequently, I constantly felt like I was messing up. There were instances when my “sins” were publicly exposed, leading to shame and embarrassment. I vividly remember an occasion when a teacher from our church contacted my father, the pastor, after witnessing me smoking a cigarette with friends at school. Although this must have been difficult for my father, he called me into his

office for a conversation. I remember him empathizing and normalizing with the fact that as a teenager, I might be curious about smoking; however, as the pastor there were guidelines to follow when those involved in ministry were participating in activities considered below the standards of a Christian leader. Consequently, I was prohibited from playing the drums on the worship team for three months. I felt a mixture of embarrassment and anger, knowing the entire congregation would become aware that I was no longer part of the worship team due to not meeting the leadership expectations. Growing up in an environment that I perceived as demanding perfection caused me to internalize immense shame, resulting in long-term damage to my self-worth.

The evangelical environment imposed strict rules and control over behaviours, particularly for women. For instance, women were expected to cover their bodies and demonstrate modesty by wearing dresses or skirts and refraining from wearing excessive makeup or jewelry. I internalized the belief that women were responsible for preventing men from succumbing to their sexual desires. Another factor that negatively impacted my self-esteem was the distinctness of my appearance in society. As a "tomboy" and a young woman with athletic inclinations, wearing long skirts and dresses felt incredibly uncomfortable, and I never felt truly myself in this attire. I experienced ridicule for my appearance in school. Being a teenager already presented difficulties in fitting in, but the rules around appearance further compounded my internal struggles and affected my self-esteem.

Navigating the secular world outside the Christian bubble proved a significant challenge for me. Feeling adrift in the university environment, I decided to leave after my first year and pursue training in ministry. I obtained my initial degree from a Wesleyan bible school focusing on cross-cultural ministry. While I actively engaged in evangelical denominations and had

undergone leadership training, belonging and adhering to the established norms was a struggle. I felt like I did not fit in within the evangelical community and struggled to feel at ease in the world beyond the confines of the evangelical bubble.

In 2006, based on a culmination of negative experiences and finding myself in a same-sex relationship, I made a heartfelt and ethical choice to leave the church. It became clear that living authentically meant distancing myself from beliefs and attitudes that contradicted my authentic identity and aspirations. This departure disrupted an entire belief system and sense of self. In the aftermath, I experienced losses that required a grieving process. Only in the past four years have I begun to comprehend the extent of the harm and trauma resulting from my time in conservative evangelicalism.

I have provided a glimpse into my experiences as a woman raised in a conservative evangelical denomination. While my own experiences may not fully encompass the wide range of experiences within evangelicalism, they serve as a lens through which we can examine the adverse effects and traumatic impact that some individuals may face when leaving their faith. The pressure to attain perfection, the internalization of shame, the strict rules and control, particularly for women, and the challenges of navigating the secular world have significantly shaped my understanding of myself and the world. By sharing the experiences of ex-evangelicals, it is hoped that empathy, compassion, and respect for those who have suffered within the evangelical framework may be found. Through increased awareness and understanding, mental health professionals can better support individuals affected by their experiences within evangelicalism, helping them navigate the path toward healing and personal growth.

The purpose of this paper is not to blame, condemn, or pass judgment on conservative evangelicalism. Faith and spirituality have their place and can be beneficial, even contributing to the healing process for many individuals. However, it is essential to clarify that this paper focuses on the adverse effects and traumatic impact that evangelicalism can have on some individuals who are leaving or have left the faith. This perspective alone may be offensive and deter some readers from engaging with the content. Nevertheless, this project aims to approach the topic with empathy, compassion, and respect for diverse viewpoints to foster a positive reception. Only through counselling have I been able to confront the losses, shame, and diminished sense of self-worth resulting from my experiences in evangelicalism. Therefore, I plan to educate myself and others in the counselling field about this demographic and how the beliefs and experiences within the evangelical faith have influenced those involved. I sincerely hope that individuals like me who have endured suffering find solace and relief through this work.

Reflexivity

In qualitative research, researchers need to acknowledge how their subjectivity can influence data collection and analysis to enhance the integrity and trustworthiness of the study (Finlay, 2002). Reflexivity is a method used to address subjectivity, where researchers can attempt to neutralize its influence, acknowledge it, explain it, or even capitalize on it (Gentles et al., 2014). While different perspectives exist on the function and purpose of reflexivity in research (Francisco et al., 2022), this paper aims to recognize, embrace, and value the researcher's subjectivity, including personal experiences integral to this capstone project. Acknowledging that achieving true objectivity or complete neutrality in this endeavour is unrealistic is essential. Given the purpose of this paper, which is to shed light on the issues faced

by ex-evangelicals seeking counselling, it is inevitable to include qualitative research that reports on the experiences of this population. Furthermore, as the researcher has personal experience within the evangelical world, it is only natural that this background has influenced the choices in writing and in selecting which research to include or exclude.

When writing a capstone on a deeply personal topic, it is essential to acknowledge the potential for bias and subjectivity. Despite experiencing personal hurt and harm within evangelicalism, maintaining a neutral tone in this paper is paramount. The aim is to foster understanding and empathy among religious and non-religious mental health professionals toward the challenges faced by ex-evangelicals. The choice of tone and language plays a significant role in ensuring effective communication. To ensure neutrality in tone and content, the paper undergoes readings by at least two highly experienced and qualified academic readers. The researcher has also conducted a thorough review of the paper, actively checking for any biases or subjectivity that could compromise the integrity of the content. Hopefully, this paper will be well-received and provide valuable insights for those encountering ex-evangelicals in their practice.

Theoretical Framework

Constructivist, social constructionist, and relational engagement theoretical frameworks guide the research for this paper. Furthermore, systems theory informs my understanding of how disaffiliated evangelicals have developed and shaped their experiences.

Firstly, a constructivist framework is essential in this project as it allows for including the subjective experiences of the disaffiliated evangelicals under investigation. Constructivism acknowledges that individuals understand their world through experiences and interpret their meaning subjectively. Therefore, the research must embrace subjectivity to comprehend my

experiences and those of other disaffiliated evangelicals. As Boyland (2019, p. 30) eloquently states, "Constructivism offers a paradigm of investigative thinking whereby the researcher journeys with participants into a space of interpreted reality that is as personal and individual as each person in the collective sampling and as diverse as the collective of lived experiences that are profiled." This paper aims to uphold this sentiment.

In academia, rationality, objectivity, and scientific methodologies are typically valued as the gold standard in research, while relational, personal, and subjective approaches are less prevalent. However, Harlene Anderson, a pioneer in collaborative and post-modern therapeutic methods, presents an alternative perspective on the research process. She challenges the notion that research must adhere to a single set of authoritative conventions, including the requirement for objectivity and neutrality (Anderson, 2014). Anderson views research as a process of learning and knowing that actively incorporates the voices of the people involved (2014). Research is seen as a social inquiry rather than a strictly scientific one. Anderson beautifully suggests that this shift allows us to transition from learning "about" to learning "with" (2014). While this paper does not entirely abandon conventional social science research parameters, a deliberate decision was made to value subjective approaches alongside objective ones and engage in learning "with" evangelicals regarding their experiences.

A pioneer in social constructionism, Gergen posits that our realities depend on what groups we have conversed with and are derived from participation in our relationships within groups. Essentially, we become who we are in acts of communion (Dole, 2021; Dole, 2017). This framework is considered significant in the disaffiliated evangelical’s self-development because they are community members who engage in frequent communion and interactions with one another. Sheila McNamee, known for her work in relational engagement, posits that who we

are emerges in our relations with others (ThinkPlayPartners, 2019). However, it is essential to note that this relational engagement approach to meaning making is less concerned with the individual concerning their context but with the relational configurations that give rise to any sense of individuality (McNamee, 2004). Therefore, exploring and examining the relationships evangelicals form in community with one another and how those interactions impact the sense of self is viewed as notable and included in this paper.

In addition to individuals' influence upon one another, it is significant to reflect on how the overarching system in which an individual participates affects their experience of self. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory impacted the research and creation of this paper. As Bronfenbrenner posited, human development cannot be witnessed in isolation but must be viewed within the context of a person's relationship with their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1978; Friedman, 2014). Identifying how the evangelical environment impacted the disaffiliated evangelical person's development of self was significant to consider.

Research Methods

In conducting research for this paper, peer-reviewed academic resources have been prioritized. Due to a lack of quantitative studies on this group, much of the research utilized in this paper comes from a limited selection of qualitative studies and thesis papers from other masters and Ph.D. level students researching this topic. In addition, due to the lack of empirical research, resources from organizations focusing on research and care around religious trauma, such as the Religious Trauma Institute and Global Center for Religious Research are included. Finally, experts were cited from podcasts, videos, and other media sources.

Key Terms

Adverse Religious Experiences (ARES): “Any experience of a religious belief, practice, or structure that undermines an individual’s sense of safety or autonomy and negatively impacts their physical, social, emotional, relational, or psychological well-being” (Anderson & Peck, 2019; Slade, 2022). The experience of AREs may correlate to religious trauma.

Disaffiliation: In this paper, the term refers specifically to the act of a person leaving the religious denomination in which they were raised. The disaffiliate opts for no religious association in adulthood, resulting in the person no longer identifying as part of that faith (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016). This results, for example, in the person no longer attending services or being engaged in the faith community.

Evangelicalism: Evangelicalism is a broad movement within Protestant Christianity that highlights the significance of individual conversion, strong belief in Jesus Christ, and the authority of the Bible. Evangelicals often prioritize spreading the Christian message (evangelizing) and actively seek personal and societal transformation based on their religious convictions (Pew Research Center, 2011).

Fundamental evangelical: In this paper, "fundamentalists" refers to evangelicals who adhere more strictly to certain beliefs. For instance, fundamental evangelicals believe in the literal interpretation of Scripture, while not all evangelicals share this view. Additionally, fundamentalists tend to have conservative political, theological, and social viewpoints and may exhibit intolerance towards those who hold different beliefs. Separatism is also emphasized among fundamental or conservative evangelicals (Green, 2004)

Religious Trauma (RT): Dr. Marlene Winell is a licensed psychologist, educator, and writer who, in 2011, coined the term Religious Trauma Syndrome (Journey Free, n.d.). In steering away from pathologizing language, the outdated phrase “syndrome” is intentionally omitted

throughout this paper. However, due to Winell's expertise in religious trauma, her explanation is followed in this paper. Religious trauma is encountered by individuals who face challenges while leaving a rigid and authoritarian religion and dealing with the repercussions of indoctrination. This includes the turmoil of losing a deeply significant faith and disentangling from a controlling community and way of life. RT arises from the ongoing mistreatment within the religion and the consequences of disconnecting from one's faith. It can be analogized as a blend of PTSD and Complex PTSD (C-PTSD) (Journey Free, n.d.).

Outline of Next Chapters

The following chapter will delve into the latest and most relevant resources regarding disaffiliated evangelicals and their relationship with evangelicalism. The chapter will begin with an introduction to evangelicalism to provide context. Next, an overview of the literature will be presented, highlighting ex-evangelicals' mental-health-related challenges. Finally, the chapter will examine significant themes from the literature review: impacts on women and LGBTQIA2S+ individuals, grief and loss, and adverse religious experiences and religious trauma.

The final chapter will provide considerations and cautions for mental health professionals working with individuals who are disaffiliated from fundamental evangelicalism.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

> "The world is full to overflowing with pain. It is a relentless source of dismay for a person of faith to struggle with the omnipresence of radical, destructive suffering. But for the source of suffering to come from the church and be justified by its scripture and traditions is a kind of toxic, crushing pain that is hard to endure." (Farley, 2011, p. 5)

Understanding the Fundamental Evangelical

Evangelicalism emerged in the mid-20th century in response to a rift amongst Protestants concerning how the church should respond to the moral issues of the day (Melton, 2016). The modernists believed that acclimating meant opening to new ideas and interpretations of biblical verses (Sparkle, 2020). However, groups rose in response, eschewing any belief or idea that would dilute the messages deemed biblically infallible (Melton, 2016). Responding to this threat to moral superiority and absolute doctrines, fundamental members under the evangelical umbrella became known for what they disputed instead of what they supported (Sparkle, 2020). These fundamentalist evangelicals took rigid opposition to the challenging of modern views on evolution, sex before marriage, abortion, a woman's role in leadership both in the home and in the church, the death penalty, and climate change (Bishop, 2019; Lipka, 2015; Rosentiel, 2009). At the heart of this paper is a subset of religious disaffiliates raised in strict fundamentalist Christian churches such as Pentecostals, conservative evangelicals, and Southern Baptists. This group's beliefs in God and the Bible, strict adherence to prescribed norms, and stance on social issues are intended to create a clear distinction between themselves and the world.

First, biblicism informs the fundamental evangelical's experience of the world and self (Simpson, 2013). Authority from God is revealed through the Bible, which serves as the ultimate spiritual and moral guide. While all decisions, actions, beliefs, and values are justified if aligned

with these God-inspired scriptures (Kreil, 2022), it is essential to note that they are subject to interpretation. Critics take issue with evangelicals' selective Biblical literalism, in which verses or passages in the Bible are selected, emphasized, and interpreted literally. In contrast, other passages or verses are deemphasized or encouraged to be read within cultural contexts (Balmer, 2006). For example, in some fundamental evangelical denominations, women are prohibited from wearing pants. One Bible verse supporting this belief is Deuteronomy 22:5: "A woman must not wear men's clothing, nor a man wear women's clothing, for the LORD your God detests anyone who does this." Nevertheless, in 1 Corinthians 14:4-6 Paul admonishes women in the Church to cover their hair while praying; however, this is not practiced in most evangelical settings, even in some of the more fundamentalist congregations.

Nevertheless, congregants are expected to follow these prescribed interpretations, disregarding outside perspectives, even other denominational translations. Congregants who challenge these prescribed interpretations of the Bible are viewed as destabilizing the group's social order and devaluing scriptural authority (Kreil, 2022); thus, members tend to follow the beliefs without much resistance. Conservative evangelicals firmly believe in the Bible as an infallible and flawless source of moral guidance. They strictly adhere to the fundamentalist interpretation of the scriptures, which defines their evangelical identity.

Cultivating a relationship with a god who is active, intimate, and personally present is also characteristic of evangelicals and is crucial to understanding the impact disaffiliation might have on them. To understand how this relationship develops, one must understand crucicentrism and conversionism, two significant beliefs of evangelicalism.

Crucicentrism, the idea that people are saved from sin through Christ's atoning death on the cross, is central to the evangelical faith (EFC, 2023). Conversionism is the belief that

individuals must repent from their sins, have faith in the redemptive actions of Christ, and dedicate themselves to a life of following the teachings in the Bible and serving others (2023). According to the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, "the salvation of lost and sinful humanity is possible only through the merits of the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, received by faith apart from works, and is characterized by regeneration by the Holy Spirit" (2023). If a person embraces this, then they are considered "born again" because they metaphorically die to their old sinful selves and begin a new identity as a child of God (Thurston, 2000). This conversion experience is significant, historic, and expected for those raised in evangelicalism especially those coming in from the outside. A pastor who has served decades in Pentecostal denominations and was my pastor for most of my life explains a personal relationship with God.

> When God created man and woman in His image and placed them in the Garden of Eden, we read in the Bible that He walked and talked with them in the garden. This is evidence that with God, it has always been about a personal relationship with humankind. God wants us to have a personal relationship with Him rather than simply being religiously devoted to a set of beliefs or faithfully adhering to some religion. At the heart of the Christian faith is a person: Jesus Christ. A personal relationship with God is made possible through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. To have that relationship, we must believe God exists and rewards those seeking a personal relationship with Him. This leads us to repentance and uniting ourselves with Jesus in water baptism. The Holy Spirit bears witness that we have become a child of God by indwelling us. There is no more personal relationship than that. We build our relationship with Jesus like we do our earthly friends by communicating with and having fellowship with Him. We do this by studying the life of Jesus, reading what Jesus taught, talking to Him in prayer and

> listening for God to speak to us through the Word of God. We can talk to Him about anything, anytime, and anywhere and know He is a friend who will respond in love and with deep compassion for us. Jesus came so that we might have a meaningful life and enter eternal life with Him in heaven, where one day, God will walk and talk with us again. (D. L. Curtis, personal communication, July 29, 2023)

Recognizing the significance of individuals forming a personal connection with God is essential. When evangelicals disaffiliate, they may not realize the depth of their attachments and the resulting feelings of loss and grief that may arise when this connection is severed.

Additionally, conservative evangelicals are expected to live out and prove their faith by maintaining strict norms of conduct prescribed by the church (Nica, 2018). The evangelical belief regarding salvation relies on faith rather than good deeds (EFC, 2023). This means a person does not have to perform specific actions to earn salvation. However, evangelicals also consider it essential to see evidence of salvation in the believer's life. In a global survey of evangelical leaders, virtually all shared that following the teachings of Christ was essential to being a "good evangelical" (Pew Research Center, 2011). They believe that a person's actions reflect their relationship with Christ. As a result, guidelines and norms are established by denominations to help believers stay in a close relationship with God and emulate Christ-like behaviour. These rules are based on scriptures as interpreted through the conservative evangelical lens.

Evangelicals can maintain their relationship with Christ by avoiding sin and a sinful world. Significant restrictions on activities and exposure to the outside world are characteristic of conservative evangelical denominations (Nica, 2018). This can entail abstaining from dancing, drinking, smoking, and gambling (Thurston, 2000). The restrictions are exceptionally prominent

for women with strict dress codes for modesty, such as being forbidden to wear pants, make-up, shorts, and bikinis (2000). This separation from the world is characteristic of fundamental evangelicals and even extends to not associating with unbelievers, even other non-fundamentalist Christians (2000).

Another expected norm for the fundamental evangelical is immersing oneself in the church through consistent and frequent church attendance (sometimes 3-5 times a week), and participation in all activities put on by the church is characteristic of conservative evangelical denominations (2000) and evidence of one's faith and commitment to God. It is important to note that imposing restrictions and incubating its members from sinful influences of the outside world is intended to foster a secure and supportive community where congregants can grow in their faith and relationships. However, according to Bishop (2019), isolating people from an outside world deemed a threat can foster "tribal thinking," which can induce a fear of opinions and thoughts different from what has been prescribed. It creates an us versus them mentality, placing fundamental evangelicals in defensive conflict with all who do not believe the same (2019). Such set patterns of living within a close community become problematic for individuals who eventually exit that community and attempt to adapt to the unfamiliar outside world.

Fundamentalist evangelicals react strongly when they perceive threats to their faith and beliefs regarding morality. As a result, they often take an aggressive stance on social issues. Many members of this group are opposed to and do not accept the LGBTQIA+ community, gay marriage, abortion, premarital sex, and other related issues. (Haskell, 2006). Jerry Falwell Sr. joked that fundamentalists were "evangelicals who were mad about something" (Sutton, 2013, p. 5). To illustrate, it is common to witness fundamental evangelicals protesting loudly and angrily outside drag queen story hours at public libraries and for popular evangelical leaders, such as

Franklin Graham, to commend the protesting (Barnhart, 2018). One author attributes the intensity of evangelicals to fight liberal stances to "the felt need for absolute certainty" (Francis, 2020, p. 165). Individuals in evangelical communities develop a strong need for absolute certainty and non-doubt (2020). A sense of certainty can provide a comforting and straightforward approach to navigating moral dilemmas. However, when faced with uncertainty and challenges to their beliefs, values, and norms, evangelicals respond defensively.

Reactance theory helps us understand that people experience an adverse emotional reaction when they perceive their ability to engage in specific actions freely is limited or contested (Steindl et al., 2015). Specifically, this can lead to anger when confronted with a threat, which drives individuals and groups to take action to eliminate the perceived threat (2015). For fundamentalist evangelicals, who hold on to absolute convictions, beliefs, and values, any external ideas contradicting their certainty can trigger a combative mindset.

Pro-choice, acceptance of LGBTQIA+ people, and gay marriage, for example, threaten fundamental evangelicals' beliefs regarding living morally; therefore, we see them attending protests and radically opposing the acceptance of these "sinful" practices. When individuals adopt beliefs and practices that oppose the values and customs of their community, it can be a challenging experience. Those who have left evangelical communities may seek counselling to address feelings of guilt related to beliefs they now see as oppressive. They may also struggle with shame over past protests against individuals who are now their friends. Evangelicals have strong opinions on social issues and defend their faith against what they see as sinful practices. This affects disaffiliated evangelicals as they navigate a new world outside their communities.

Evangelicals have a close personal bond with God and a strong attachment to their community. All community members adhere to the same values, beliefs, and behaviours centered

on a prescribed literal translation of the Bible. Furthermore, evangelicals tend to incubate themselves from the world and immerse themselves in their church communities. This group goes on the offensive when they perceive that specific social issues threaten their ability to practice their faith. Due to these factors, these disaffiliated evangelicals may be more vulnerable to experiencing feelings of loss, pain, and confusion than those in less high-control denominations.

Why Evangelicals Leave

The reasons evangelicals disaffiliate from their faith are complex, varied, and individual. Covering this in depth would require a separate research project; however, since this inquiry hopes to provide clinical counsellors with a better understanding of the disaffiliated evangelical, a brief discussion of the factors emerging from the literature is provided. Research on religious disaffiliation, deconversion, and studies that specifically explore the evangelical experience have been included to address the lack of literature on the evangelical community.

Though not explicitly focused on evangelicals, Björkmark et al. (2021) cited intellectual disagreements, lifestyle restrictions, and generational differences as reasons religious persons disaffiliated. Thiessen and Wilkens (2017) inquired into the variables associated with religious disaffiliation. Though the participants were not explicitly identified as evangelical, four central reasons accounted for their disaffiliation: parents provided children with religious choices, intellectual disagreements, social influences, and life transitions. Reyes et al. (2021) identified two critical factors of deconversion from Christianity among 18-48-year-old American adults: the church being out of touch with their lives and doubt concerning the immorality of same-sex marriage. Common themes revealed through open-ended questions were judgmentalism, unrelatability, close-mindedness, and non-inclusivity.

Interviews with evangelical participants who left their faith pointed to intellectual discrepancies, increased education, and the struggle to meet community social norms as reasons for a shift to reject theism (Fazzino, 2014). Fenelon and Danielsen (2016) cited politics, theological dissatisfaction, and dissatisfaction with social aspects of the religion as reasons for disaffiliation. Vargas (2012) found that political factors (e.g., supporting LGBTQ+ rights), skepticism (e.g., questioning doctrines), and life stressors (e.g., financial crisis) correlated with a higher rate of disaffiliation.

Interestingly, generational division has been reported in the research on this subject. Younger generations are more likely to seek counselling (King, 2016); thus, it is especially significant to understand these younger disaffiliates and why they choose to leave. A study by Farrell (2011) implies that a division on issues between a younger, more liberal generation of evangelicals and the older, more conservative generations may factor into disaffiliation. Older evangelicals tend to believe God is the ultimate source of moral authority, while the younger members believe the judge of right or wrong is their conscience (Farrell, 2011). This disagreement leads to division on what is morally right or wrong. For example, younger generations have more open views on pornography, cohabitation, premarital sex, and same-sex marriage (Farrell, 2011). Batchelder (2020) focuses on why Millennials and Generation Z leave evangelicalism. One conclusion Batchelder (2020) makes is that Millennials leave due to negative experiences within an insulated environment, including witnessing scandals and sexual and spiritual abuses from leaders. Gen Z is most likely to leave because they have a more globalized perspective and a sense of individuality; they value skepticism, inclusivity and diversity, and conservative evangelicalism does not typically embrace those values (Batchelder, 2020).

A study of Gen Y who left the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Finland revealed they left because they did not find the institution to align with their own beliefs and life view and because they lacked faith (Niemelä, 2015). For Gen Y, authenticity is valued, and they are willing to construct a life in various ways, figuring out which beliefs and values make sense for themselves (Bhor & Hughs, 2021). In an Australian study exploring why Gen Y is leaving Hillsong and other Pentecostal churches, Bhor and Hughs (2021) identified five primary reasons for their exits: the rejection of exclusive and judgmental beliefs and values, bad experiences within the church, the narrowness and disingenuousness of religious community, feeling judged by the community, and the lack of openness to critical inquiry. Younger generations are leaving fundamental evangelicalism, and the research reveals they are unwilling to sacrifice their authenticity for an exclusivist, collectivist mindset.

While an in-depth study of why evangelicals disaffiliate is not provided, it is hoped that an overview of the literature reviewed here is informative and helpful in garnering some insight into this group's motivations for leaving and questioning their faith.

The Issues: An Overview of the Literature

This section provides a general overview of the diverse and broad range of issues a disaffiliated evangelical might present when entering counselling. Since there are few studies on the experiences of fundamental evangelicals who have disaffiliated, insights from resources on religious disaffiliation, in general, are included. This overview will be followed by a more in-depth exploration of themes in the academic literature related to this project.

This inquiry serves to help clinical counsellors understand the mental health-related issues disaffiliated evangelicals may experience. As fundamental evangelicals exit their religion,

everything from "beliefs to morality, emotions to intellect, inner world changes to shifts in communal belonging" can be affected (Strieb, 2012, as cited in Wagstaff, 2015, p. 5).

Violations of Human Dignity

In their qualitative study of 18 disaffiliated participants who left various religious communities in Finland, Björkmark et al. (2021) concluded that life after disaffiliation for the participants entailed different forms of suffering of life. These “violations of human dignity” (p. 3) included pain and sorrow over rejection, guilt and shame, fear of life and death, and feelings of humiliation (2021). This study suggests that leaving one's religion can harm mental health. While it does not mention fundamental evangelicals, they may experience similar suffering when leaving their fundamental denominations.

Depression and Suicidality

In their study on the role of religious strain on depression and suicidality in college students in the United States, Exline et al. (2000) found that feelings of alienation from God were strongly associated with depression. They also found that religious rifts, disagreements with religious institutions or conflicts with family or friends on religious issues were associated with depression (2000). In addition, suicidality was closely related to religious fear and guilt, specifically regarding a sin too big to be forgiven (2000). When evangelicals disaffiliate, some struggle with the loss of a relationship with God, some experience conflict with members of their families and congregations, and some live with fear and guilt. As a result, if evangelicals disaffiliate, there is a chance that they may undergo depression and even suicidal thoughts from the strain, ultimately ending up in counselling spaces to receive support.

Health and Well-being

While Fenelon and Danielson (2016) studied the impact of religious disaffiliation on American participants' health and well-being, they found that religious disaffiliates experienced poorer health and lower well-being than those who were consistently affiliated and those who were consistently unaffiliated. Interestingly, the health disadvantages for those who disaffiliated from evangelical congregations were higher, and evangelical disaffiliates reported lower subjective well-being than those who remained evangelical. Fenelon and Danielson included research in their study, which noted that evangelical disaffiliation seemed to reduce resources for emotional coping and raised issues related to a preoccupation with human sin, divine retribution, or guilt (Exline, 2002). It is essential to understand that ex-evangelicals may struggle with a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment after leaving their faith and may be carrying burdens they may not be able to cope with well due to the loss of their emotional support system.

Psychopathology

Ellison et al. (2013) conducted a study to explore the correlation between spiritual struggles and mental health. They examined the connection between spiritual struggle and four types of psychopathologies: anxiety, phobic anxiety, somatization, and depressed affect. They hypothesized that those participants who identified themselves as highly religious and most invested in their roles as religious persons would experience the most substantial negative impacts on their mental health when facing spiritual struggles. The study resulted in the validity of the hypothesis. Since fundamental evangelicals are known for their high commitment, investment, and participation within their religion, this places them in a highly religious category. Consequently, this study's results are poignant and indicate that evangelicals may suffer from anxiety, phobia, depression, or somatization when grappling with spiritually related matters associated with disaffiliating from their faith. Therefore, counsellors should not be

surprised that an ex-evangelical client's symptomology is connected to their past religious experiences.

Family-Related Distress

Knight et al. (2019) examined religious disaffiliation through a family systems lens and reported that participants experienced some level of relational distress within their families. Major themes emerged, including a lack of communication, feeling unknown, a lack of participation in family events, awkward interactions, and painful emotional responses. Other studies on individuals exiting high-control religious groups have also reported participants having issues maintaining familial connections (Berger, 2015) and dealing with unresolved pain due to familial abandonment (Cameron, 2008). Disaffiliating from the evangelical community impacts a person on individual and societal levels. The rejection and pain within one's family unit can also negatively impact a person's mental health and well-being.

In their study examining the deconversion experience of six participants from evangelical Christian faith to Atheism in the UK, Lee & Gubi (2019) reported several post-deconversion issues. Because this study specifically focused on evangelicals' experiences and one aim of this capstone project is to value and include subjective experiences, more details are provided than with other studies. Themes of suffering related to damaging doctrines, difficult emotions, feeling like a fraud, losing a worldview and identity, and experiencing discomfort around Christians (2019).

Damaging Doctrines

First, doctrines were cited by the participants as being damaging. A few participants talked about anxiety and fear due to an emphasis on spiritual warfare, evil spirits, demons, and hell. Some individuals in the study expressed feelings of inadequacy, overwhelming guilt, and

shame for being unable to control their sinful thoughts and actions. To illustrate, one participant spoke of the battle with sexual desires and his hate towards himself because he could not prevent them as a Christian should. Additional research validates these participants' experiences. For example, Martínez de Pisón (2022) discussed how traditional Christian preaching, when not addressed cautiously and overly preoccupied with sin, eternal punishment, and hell, could cause unhealthy feelings of shame and guilt. To further illustrate the potentiality of fundamental teachings as harmful, Boshen (2010) asserted that sermons focusing on the sinful nature of humans and unworthiness of God's love lead to feelings of shame and guilt. This can cause individuals to develop an inner critic and be more prone to feeling ashamed of themselves (2010). Thurston (2000) also explained that fundamental evangelicals emphasize sin and punishment and believe that unbelievers will be separated and sent to hell, while faithful followers will live forever with God in heaven (2000). Martínez de Pisón (2022) asserts that this emphasis on sin and hell could contribute to the development of shame and guilt, resulting in self-alienation and deterioration in a person's mental health. It may be worthwhile to examine the messages disaffiliated evangelicals received while they were part of the evangelical community. This examination can help determine if shame and guilt have been internalized and affect self-perception and behaviour. A closer look at damaging doctrines and the harm and trauma they cause will be explored later in this chapter.

Difficult Emotions

Secondly, Lee & Gubi's (2019) study identified a theme of difficult emotions, including regret, shame and embarrassment, anger, and guilt. Participants experienced regret. One participant struggled with "wasting so many years believing something that was not true," while another wished he could go back and "deprogram" himself (p. 176). Regret was also expressed

in how they treated people while attempting to live according to Christian teachings. In addition, shame and embarrassment arose for those involved in the study. While Martínez de Pisón's (2020) work focused on the shame and guilt derived from harmful messaging, the ex-evangelical participants in Lee & Gubi's (2019) exploration described shame and embarrassment related to a lack of intelligence and a lack of critical assessment of what they believed. In McSkimming (2017), a disaffiliated fundamental Christian also expressed feeling "stupid" and "ashamed," sharing that she felt like she was "manipulated and dumb" (p. 177). Shame and embarrassment over having been a part of evangelicalism are evident in those who have left. The participants in Lee & Gubi's study also expressed anger about how religion impacted their development and behaviours. Finally, two participants shared experiences of guilt related to not living authentically. To illustrate, one participant had been concealing her bisexuality, while another felt guilty because they were not open about their disbelief to family and friends. When assisting ex-evangelicals, it is helpful to understand that they may experience challenging emotions such as shame, regret, anger, and guilt. These emotions can hinder their ability to lead a fulfilling life. Therefore, counsellors should be mindful of this and help clients recognize and explore these difficult emotions in a safe and supportive environment. By doing so, clients can process their experiences with self-compassion and move towards a more positive future.

Feeling Lost

Thirdly, losing worldview and identity was a research theme. In Lee & Gubi's (2019) research, one participant described how it felt during her deconversion process:

> …it's how you understand your place in the world, how you understand the things that happen to you, how you understand what you are supposed to do with your life. And then

> that all falls apart and you have got to try to and find a way of making sense of everything again from a completely different place. (p. 178)

Another participant expressed feeling lost and had difficulty thinking for herself. Nevertheless, another shared that she experienced "existential angst" and feelings of being "small and disconnected" (p. 178). Other studies have also identified this theme of loss of identity and worldview. For example, a participant in Fazzino's (2014) examination of evangelical exit narratives one of the participants also shared about the emotional challenges and uncertain beliefs connected to their process of leaving evangelicalism, admitting that "in that moment, I had no idea what that meant for my life" (p. 258). A disaffiliated fundamental Christian in McSkimming (2017) shared how life outside of religion was a "great unknown" and that it was "an enormous change in your frame of reference." (p. 177). He spoke of how it felt he was joining the "evil side" in some way (p. 177). Fazzino (2014) reported that within days, weeks, and months after deconversion, participants encountered new existential and social challenges, and it was crucial for them to reconcile these issues as part of their self-identity transformation. Religious socialization can have a strong hold on individuals, so significant distress can occur when they begin exploring who they are without this identity. Counsellors should be aware that evangelical disaffiliates may come to them feeling lost and confused about who they are, separate from evangelicalism.

Discomfort around other Christians

Finally, all the participants in Lee and Gubi's (2019) exploration reported experiencing discomfort around Christians. They felt they could not speak to Christians about their doubts for fear of judgment or the risk of being proselytized. One participant said, "They think that you are lost, and they pity you, or they feel you can't be content as they are, or you were never a

Christian in the first place…" (p. 179). Two participants expressed doubts about a Christian counsellor's ability to remain impartial while working with individuals going through deconversion. All participants in this study believed that without personal experience, counsellors would likely be unable to fully grasp their process (2019). It is significant to note that disaffiliating evangelicals entering counselling may be skeptical of the counsellor's ability to empathize and understand. Trust and rapport building may be more significant when working with these clients.

Redefining Oneself

In further review, Cameron's (2008) inquiry explored the experiences of fundamental evangelicals who had grown up in and later left evangelicalism. This descriptive phenomenological study revealed significant challenges in participants locating or re-defining themselves psychologically, emotionally, interpersonally, and spiritually. During discussions, participants expressed difficulties regarding self-doubt, unfulfilled desires, lack of validation and affirmation, intense fear, uncertainty, reduced confidence, problems with identity, significance, meaning and purpose, and inner conflicts about what was acceptable (2008). This research, based on the experiences of fundamental evangelical disaffiliates, shines a light on the diverse issues this population may experience.

Social Rejection

When individuals depart from these high-control religious groups known for their strong community dynamics and where the group dominates members so strongly, they face both perceived and real repercussions related to social support, and there are challenges linked to the act of leaving (Berger, 2015; Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016; Björkmark et al., 2022). The similarities between Jehovah's Witnesses (JWs) and fundamental evangelicals are worth noting

when examining the social impacts of disaffiliation. Both groups are examples of high-control, fundamentalist, strict religious groups (Nica, 2019). Studies have shown that those who leave Jehovah's Witnesses often experience ostracism and social shunning (Ransom et al., 2022), whether they choose to leave or are pushed out. When this occurs for JWs, a loss of social identity results, along with the loss of significant bonds (Testoni et al., 2019). Participants from high-cost religions, including those from evangelical memberships, described a sense of ceasing to exist" from members of their congregations, and they spoke of feelings of being an outcast (Björkmark et al., 2022). This research indicates that when evangelicals disaffiliate, they, like JWs, may lose their support system and social identity and experience isolation and loneliness for some time.

An overview of the literature highlights the mental health-related challenges that disaffiliated evangelicals may encounter. While not all-encompassing, the issues found in the literature reflect violations of human dignity, depression and suicidality, health and well-being, psychopathology, family-related distress, damaging doctrines, difficult emotions, feeling lost, discomfort around other Christians, redefining oneself, and social rejection. These issues collectively shed light on the complex emotional and psychological terrain that disaffiliated fundamental evangelicals navigate, underscoring the importance of providing appropriate support and counselling services tailored to their unique experiences. Counsellors may witness disaffiliated evangelicals grappling with a range of psychological and emotional challenges, including feelings of guilt, shame, and regret stemming from doctrines and experiences. They may experience a loss of identity and worldview and struggle with being around Christianity post-disaffiliation. They may experience skepticism of the counselling field and the ability of counsellors to understand their experiences. This portion of the review emphasizes the

significance of recognizing and addressing these issues in counselling sessions to promote the mental well-being and recovery of disaffiliated evangelicals.

A Deeper Dive into the Issues

The following section provides a deeper dive into the effects on mental health experienced by ex-evangelicals. The examination will focus on the impacts on women and LGBTQIA2s+ individuals, then explore the grief and loss often felt by those who have left the evangelical community. This section will conclude with a closer examination of the potential harms, abuses, and trauma that disaffiliated evangelicals may experience.

Impacts on Women

In surveying the research on evangelical disaffiliation, several studies and books revealed that evangelical teachings were especially damaging to women. The evangelical community has been impacted by the influence of conservative messaging and teachings called the purity movement, which has particularly affected women's lives (Ingersoll, 2019; Ortiz, 2019). This movement strongly emphasized women preserving their virginity and conforming to traditional ideals of femininity (Pikel, 2018). Young women who were part of the conservative evangelical subculture, especially during the 1990s to the early 2000s, were exposed to these messages concerning sex and sexuality. As a result, numerous millennial women raised in this subculture have come forward to express experiencing enduring feelings of shame and trauma (Ingersoll, 2019). Notably, individuals such as Linda Kay Klein, Jamie Lee Finch, and Nadia Bolz-Weber have used their books to shed light on their personal experiences and those of others, highlighting the issue of sexual shame within the evangelical culture.

Estrada (2022) discusses the Evangelical Purity Movement’s (EPM) impact on female sexuality. Estrada asserted that the sexual messaging received from the EPM left women feeling

"insecure about their sexuality, responsible for others' behaviours, disconnected from their bodies, illiterate about sex, and ashamed for not measuring up to unrealistic standards they had been told were ordained by God." (p. 122). The combination of guarding against male advances, not trusting one's body, and excessive objectification and sexualization of women led to feelings of sexual shame, unhappiness, and dysfunction, and it reinforced the idea that survivors were responsible for assault and rape (Gregoire et al., 2021). Given how evangelical messaging has uniquely impacted and could still impact women, more attention to the research is warranted, especially from a social justice standpoint.

An overarching belief of conservative evangelicalism in the literature is that women are a problem and a danger (Sparkle, 2020); therefore, strict rules must be applied to them as they enter womanhood. In addition, as the core beliefs of conservative evangelicalism concerning purity culture were explored, the ones that stood out amongst the sources reviewed were that men are highly sexual while women are not (Claney, 2020), men are to prize virginity (Gish, 2018; Klement & Sagarin, 2017) and are to be protected from sexual temptation; thus, women must guard against tempting men by covering their bodies and being modest (Klement & Sagarin, 2017; Pikel, 2018,)**.**

The literature consistently highlights two prevalent themes: shame and guilt. Ortiz (2019) delves into how modesty contributes to feelings of shame. Imposing limitations on a woman's body can make women feel self-conscious and overly attentive to it, fostering a perception of inherent negativity within the body (2019). Consequently, sexuality and the broader sense of identity become disconnected. This division can lead to reduced self-awareness (Claney, 2020). When rigid messages surrounding sexuality are emphasized, women might

struggle to perceive themselves as sexual beings, potentially leading to diminished self-esteem (Abbot et al., 2016).

Not only is there potential for fundamentally religious women to have lowered self-esteem, but they may also experience less sexual activity within a relationship, poor sexual satisfaction, and guilt because of it (Abbot et al., 2016). Sparkle (2020) reflects upon how if one's entire existence is intended for another, it causes a lack of self-understanding. When one lacks the tools to understand and manage their sexuality, they may spin into a shame spiral when experiencing the feel-good expressions of sexuality (2020). Stanley (2020) adds to the discussion around shame and discusses the demonization of sex for women. Understandably, these women may have difficulty turning that shame and sin into joy and pleasure. The belief that a person's worth is diminished by being sexually active has consequences beyond impacting one's self-esteem The female sexual experience is dehumanized. Abstinence education had lasting effects on those who sat under its teachers. In Stanley (2020), ex-evangelical Jamie Lee Finch even related her experiences with purity culture to a form of PTSD called Religious Trauma Syndrome, which will be explored in more detail later in this chapter.

Messaging from purity culture, at its worst, can perpetuate sexual violence (Fahs, 2010). One of the harms done to women who read certain Christian dating books is that they internalize the message that men should control women's bodies (Klement & Sagarin, 2017). This could inevitably lead to an acceptance of harassment or abuse. If men cannot control their lust, and a woman is supposed to act in ways to protect him, when he does advance for sexual gratification, the woman might assume it is her fault. Some literature claims that purity culture messaging supports rape culture (Fahs, 2010; Gish, 2018; Klement & Sagarin, 2017; Stanley, 2020). Boys do not rape but lose control of themselves (Fahs, 2010). This conclusion may inadvertently lead

to excusing young evangelical men of sexual violence. The silencing of women when bringing up sexual abuse and violence becomes more likely. Women are essentially shamed and blamed for the abuse. It is somehow their fault.

Evangelical women, whether disaffiliated or still practicing, have much to grieve and heal from. The patriarchal, hegemonic, sexist messaging preached to these young women during their formative years can be likened to abuse. When a woman's sexuality is restricted by these conservative beliefs, especially without room to explore compromise, it creates a hole in the wholeness a woman deserves to experience. When spiritual narratives do not support integrated sexuality, women may feel stuck, resulting in a poor self-concept, limited sexual satisfaction and disintegrated lives (Sykes, 2020). Disaffiliated evangelical women may enter counselling feeling ashamed and filled with grief over the ways they were taught to think and feel about themselves, especially concerning sex and sexuality. Consequently, counsellors must be aware and prepared to discuss these issues with compassion and empathy.

Impacts on LGBTQIA2S+ Individuals

In reviewing the literature on disaffiliated evangelicals, the harm to individuals who are LGBTQIA2S+ was too significant to ignore. To honour their experiences and to continue with a social justice approach, a section is dedicated to the impacts of fundamental evangelical beliefs on members of the LGBTQIA2S+ community.

Before understanding the harm that occurs for LGBTQIA2S+ persons in conservative evangelicalism, a basic overview of what evangelicals believe about gender and sexuality is helpful. In their 2014 U.S. religious landscape study, the Pew Research Center found that 55% of evangelical protestants believed homosexuality should be discouraged, and 92 % vehemently opposed same-sex marriage. This is not surprising considering conservative Christian beliefs

about gender and sexuality are often structured around the idea that God's plan for creation includes two opposite and complementary sexes, male and female, which are meant to come together in marriage (Tobin & Moon, 2019). The concept of the binary gender in the book of Genesis is an implied commandment for fundamental Christians (2019). Therefore, same-sex attraction and diverse gender experiences are sinful transgressions, creating a divide between a person, God, and the community (2019).

Despite its current limitations, an expanding body of research emphasizes that LGBTQIA2S+ individuals who participate in evangelical Christian communities are prone to experiencing spiritual abuse, leading to trauma (Barnes & Myer, 2012; Cole & Harris, 2017; Gibbs & Goldbach, 2020; Hollier et al., 2022). Spiritual abuse is "pervasive psychological damage resulting from religious messages, beliefs and experiences" (Stone, 2013, p. 324). Whether the detrimental effects on this group stem from messages, beliefs, or experiences, or a combination of each, LGBTQIA2S+ individuals suffer a high rate of religious trauma (Stone, 2013), and they tend to voice their negative religious experiences at a high rate (Goodwin, 2022).

In Goodwin's (2022) systematic review of the impact of religious trauma on the LGBTQIA2S+ community, most individuals faced adverse religious experiences exhibited through microaggressions and abuse within the religious setting, rejection based on sexual orientation, and conflict between religious and sexual identity. Consequently, increased rates of depression, anxiety, internalized sexual stigma, suicidality, substance abuse, and high-risk sexual activity were reported by participants in the studies (2022). Clinical counsellors would benefit from understanding that trauma and other harms are especially prominent for ex-evangelical LGBTQIA2S+ individuals. Exploring and processing how these members were treated in their community and the lasting impact on their mental health is significant in their healing process.

Stone (2013) explored the ways religion and spirituality can be a source of harm. While LGBTQIA2S+ individuals have similar experiences as their hetero counterparts regarding sinful behaviours, their experiences are intensified because they are condemned for being a sinful self; for being who they are (2013). Heterosexual members of fundamental Christian communities have also been taught that they are inherently sinful. However, LGBTQIA2S+ members are more likely to be shunned for their sinfulness, especially when their "sin" becomes visible through the coming out process (2013). After all, non-hetero evangelicals are taught that being who they are is an "abomination of God's plan." Consequently, they are faced with choosing between embracing their authentic selves, their non-heterosexuality, and being accepted by the only God, family, and community they have known. Whether abandoned by the community or whether they choose to disaffiliate, significant grief and losses are experienced. Understanding the rejection that ex-evangelical LGBTQIA2S+ individuals can experience, especially regarding such an innate aspect of self, clinical counsellors may want to explore internalized homophobia, grief and loss, and other wounds suffered from their experiences.

Tobin and Moon (2019) examined the experiences of shame for LGBTQIA2S+ conservative Christians. Shame was defined as an emotion involving three key elements: pain in being exposed and viewed by others as defective, fear of losing significant social connections because of the exposure, and sensing a loss of control over one's identity (2019). This shame adversely impacted relationships, mental health, and physical well-being. Some participants shared that they had experienced depression, attempted suicide, suffered from asthma attacks, and required hospitalization due to increased heart rate (2019). In listening to the stories of LGBTQIA2S+ ex-evangelicals, it becomes evident how this shame develops and can become a chronic disposition in their lives. Many respondents were told they were unfit for ministry, even

church membership. They felt pressure to fix themselves before being able to love and know God and even themselves (2019). For LGBTQIA2S+ members of conservative Christian communities, "the whole self is chronically experienced as defective" (2019, p. 114). They internalize their churches' teachings, spending years trying to suppress and get rid of their "sinful" nature, and when this does not work, the shame is so great that they can only resort to believing they are so unworthy that even God has rejected them. Tobin and Moon include an excerpt from Kevin Garcia (Spiritual Recovery Coach) in their work to illustrate the shame and pain of the LGBTQIA2S+ experience:

> These unwanted homosexual attractions were something I viewed as separate from me. They were a cancer to be cured, a tumour on my heart to be cut out. I was terrified to share my torment with many people because I was ashamed. I was told that if I just prayed the right prayers, if I fasted, if I did the "heart work," that maybe, hopefully, God would grant me the grace to overcome these temptations.
>
> But nothing ever worked.
>
> Not therapy, not prayer, not getting "demons" cast out of me, not fasting, not group confessions, not holy oil, nothing. For ten years I was convinced there was something wrong with me. It had to be me. I wasn't ever going to be good enough for God because I wasn't strong enough to overcome this trial. (Garcia, 2016)

Clinical counsellors benefit from understanding that LGBTQIA2S+ individuals who have departed from evangelical backgrounds might suffer from chronic shame. Acknowledging and addressing this shame during sessions can be crucial for helping clients heal.

Grief and Loss

A more extensive section is devoted to exploring the grief and the losses associated with leaving one's faith, as this theme emerged frequently in the literature.

When an individual leaves their faith system, it is a complex process and losses in various domains of life result in distress (Nica, 2018). There are several losses related to losing faith, as discussed in the literature: loss of relationship with God (Simpson, 2013), loss of family, friends, and the Christian community (Marriott, 2015; Nica, 2018; Knight et al., 2019), loss of sense of self and identity (Fazzino, 2014; Wagstaff, 2015; Nica, 2018; Knight et al., 2019; Lee & Gubi, 2019), loss of social scripts (Nica, 2018), loss of ultimate meaning (Moscati & Mezuk, 2014, as cited in Fisher, 2017; Marriott, 2015), loss of world view (Lee & Gubi, 2019) and even loss of jobs (Marriott, 2015). Three impactful losses are emphasized here: loss of God, community, and sense of self.

Losing God. Terminating a relationship with God can be analogous to grieving the death of a loved one. Evangelical Christians emphasize a personal relationship with God, who is talked to via prayers and who is unseen but felt and present (Simpson, 2013). God is a friend to talk to when needing help and a father to go to when needing wisdom, direction, and love. To evangelicals, God is an active, living, and present personality. It is not that evangelical Christians believe God *is* a person, but they do experience him in some ways, *like* a person (Simpson, 2013). This relationship with God also resembles a human connection in that God comforts believers during distress. Relationship with God has been shown to follow attachment model explanations (i.e., to function similarly to other genuine human relationships), and when other people are not present or cannot provide support, God can serve as a replacement attachment figure (Simpson, 2013). It is, therefore, not difficult to fathom that when evangelicals leave the fold, they suffer the same loss as anyone might with a living, breathing loved one who dies. In a

sense, God dies, and the disaffiliate must process this grief. This non-finite, living loss and disenfranchised grief must be addressed. Outsiders without a personal relationship with God may not understand this loss as valid and impactful. God is not physically present, so it is challenging for those who do not have a personal relationship with God to validate this loss. This leaves the disaffiliating evangelical dealing with this grief alone.

Additionally, some may not understand that this loss has the potential to be carried and felt for years, even indefinitely. After all, God continues to exist for many in society; therefore, even after one disaffiliates and leaves theism behind, family members, friends, co-workers, and even the media continue to perpetuate God's existence. In essence, the exiting member is constantly reminded of the relationship they once had with God, just as a person might continually be reminded of their grief and loss when dealing with a family member with Alzheimer's. Disaffiliation and death are similar in that they have the potential to engender grief (Simpson, 2013). Unfortunately, the exiting evangelical may not receive the support they need in the grieving process due to their grief being disenfranchised. Thus, counsellors should be informed of this grief and prepare to support the client through it. Counsellors may look into attachment theory as, in some cases, people's connection to God may be likened to an attachment relationship, categorized as secure, anxious, dismissive-avoidant, or fearful-avoidant (Stone, 2013).

Losing Community. No version of Christianity is non-communal. In a study by Sloan (2021), deconstructing evangelical participants expressed that they experienced extreme social losses, including loss of friendships, family, and social support. Fundamentalist groups, especially, encourage strong participation and promote close social ties within the community (Nica, 2019); thus, broken relations can result in pain and sorrow, whether by choice or force.

Specifically, it can be unbearable when a member is rejected by force due to their questioning beliefs. Feeling forsaken and abandoned by significant people who used to be close and then feeling unwelcomed is hurtful (Björkmark et al., 2021). Living in a strange situation where one cannot stay in touch with people, even though they are alive, is lonely. Not only do these members feel a sense of ostracization from their community, but they also feel like outsiders concerning the new world they have chosen to join (Björkmark et al., 2021). The grief associated with this loss cannot be ignored. If the community is a fundamental aspect of evangelical life, then the loss of it is devastating. Perhaps this is why exiting evangelicals are flocking to podcasts and the social media pages of their peers. Fekete and Knippel (2020) explored virtual religious deconstruction communities and found that those deconstructing and disaffiliating from evangelicalism are forming new and dynamic online communities where support can be found. Disaffiliated evangelicals may want to replicate the community and belonging they had before the loss. Therefore, it is vital for counsellors to be familiar with grief work and to support these evangelicals by exploring ways they can form new connections and communities.

Losing Sense of Self. For many people raised in legalistic faith communities, God and the system of religion are viewed as the same. A tough choice arises, leave the system and God or stay in it and lose a part of themselves. Paradoxically, in exiting one's faith community, disaffiliates experience a shedding of identity so tightly embedded in the religious community (Nica, 2019). Many exiters must confront questions about reconstructing new identities and identity narratives outside their former religious communities (Nica, 2018). According to Eriksson (2006), a person who has experienced themselves as a whole before religious disaffiliation may suddenly feel that their "identity has dissolved and their inner core has crumbled into many small parts" (as cited in Björkmark et al., 2021, p. 6). They feel lost, even

ingenuine, because their entire history, self-understanding, and being become seemingly void (Björkmark et al., 2021). One's identity has long been immersed in the religious community, following its prescribed norms for behaviour and way of being, that when shed, it is a significant loss, and grieving is required. Exiters of evangelicalism release themselves from the rules and the tenets of their past faith system and begin the challenging process of identity reconstruction. However, in this circumstance, the object of grief is not dead; therefore, the loss is defined as a living loss. There is an inherently evolutionary characteristic to identity and sense of self. Identity does not simply die and renew. A person who goes through deconstruction goes through a process of demolition while simultaneously rebuilding, and because of this, the loss of the old self may be mourned for lengths of time. Many in society may not acknowledge the suffering and turmoil the loss of a sense of self can have on those exiting a religion. Therefore, counsellors might consider exploring modalities that would be efficacious in working with identity loss issues and increasing self-acceptance.

The literature on grief and loss related to religious disaffiliation reflects the multifaceted nature. Individuals experiencing these losses may encounter challenges in finding understanding and support as their grief is often disenfranchised and unique to their religious context. Counsellors can play a crucial role in helping clients navigate these losses, providing a safe space for processing grief and assisting in reconstructing their sense of self and social connections.

Adverse Religious Experiences and Religious Trauma

After examining the research, it became clear that researchers are beginning to explore the impact of harm within religious settings and are addressing the abuse and trauma individuals are experiencing. A challenge for counsellors who want to research this phenomenon is the lack of a consistent term. In reviewing the literature, various terms were used: religious/spiritual

harm, religious/spiritual abuse, religious trauma syndrome (RTS), religious trauma (RT), and Adverse Religious Experiences (AREs). (Anderson & Peck, 2019; Cameron, 2008; Cashwell & Swindle, 2018; Downie, 2022; Ellis et al., 2022; Finch, 2019; Goodwin, 2022; Kreil, 2022; Oakley et al., 2018; Pasquel, 2015; Stone, 2013; Swindle & Caswell, 2023; Swindle, 2017; Thomas, 2023; Winell, 2011). Swindle and Cashwell recognized the challenge of developing a common language for discussing religious harm and described it as a work in progress (2023).

Defining AREs. After reviewing the literature, the term "Adverse Religious Experiences" seems the most fitting phrase to describe the range of harmful and abusive experiences an individual may encounter within a religious environment. Cashwell and Swindle (2017) utilized the term "religious abuse" to describe the harm within Christian systems. In a webinar Q&A session, the concept of "Adverse Religious Experiences" was presented to Swindell and Cashwell, both of whom expressed appreciation for the term. Swindle noted that it accurately encompasses the idea of religious harm existing along a spectrum (Swindle & Cashwell, 2023). The idea that harmful events and the level of resulting trauma can be on a continuum is repeated in the literature (Anderson & Peck, 2019; Slade, 2022; Swindle & Cashwell, 2023). Adverse Religious Experiences can be defined as:

> Any experience of a religious belief, practice, or structure that undermines an individual's sense of safety or autonomy and/or negatively impacts their physical, social, emotional, relational, sexual, or psychological well-being. (Anderson & Peck, 2019, 13:26; Slade, 2022)

According to Slade (2022), not all negative religious experiences cause religious trauma, which is also acknowledged by Anderson & Peck (2019) and Swindle & Cashwell (2023). While AREs can potentially escalate to the level of trauma, it is significant to note that this is not always the

case. As Cashwell highlights, describing the event as abuse is accurate, but whether it leads to trauma varies greatly depending on the individual's physiological response (Swindle & Cashwell, 2023). The term “Adverse Religious Experiences” is preferred in this paper when discussing any acts or events of harm or abuse experienced in a religious context that have impacted individuals negatively, whether physically, emotionally, cognitively, socially, or psychologically. The emphasis here is that AREs cover a broad spectrum of experiences and various levels of negative impact.

Defining Religious Trauma. Slade (2022) defines religious trauma as the “lasting adverse effects on a person’s physical, mental, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being after an Adverse Religious Experience has occurred.” In discussions surrounding the adverse events, acts, and abuses within the realm of religion, and when emphasizing the broad spectrum of resulting harm, utilizing the term "Adverse Religious Experiences" may be helpful. When such experiences result in actual trauma, "religious trauma" may be a more fitting descriptor.

Winell (2011) offers valuable insights into the potentially detrimental mental health consequences of leaving an authoritarian and dogmatic religious community. She coined the term "Religious Trauma Syndrome" (RTS) to describe the condition experienced by those grappling with the effects of fundamentalist indoctrination (Winell, 2011). Winell asserts that symptoms of RTS can be similar to those of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), resulting in intrusive thoughts, negative emotions, and impaired social functioning (2011).

It is important to note that how a person views trauma impacts a definition of religious trauma. According to trauma expert Bessel van der Kolk, author of *The Body Keeps the Score,* understanding how trauma affects the body helps discern between actual trauma and events that, while distressing, are not traumatic (Psychotherapy Networker, 2014). In other words, not all

adverse experiences result in trauma or trauma responses. Van der Kolk defined trauma as an event that overwhelms the central nervous system, changing how a person processes and recalls trauma memories (2014). However, trauma is not the past event or experience, but the enduring imprint of the fears, pain, and horror associated with it (2014).

Anderson and Peck (2019) defined religious trauma as a "physical, emotional, or psychological response to religious beliefs, practices, or structures that overwhelm an individual's ability to cope and feel safe." In line with Van der Kolk's description of trauma, Anderson and Peck (2019) assert that religious trauma is distinct in that the suffering is long-lasting and stored within the body and nervous system. Religious trauma has a lasting impact on the nervous system, resulting in trauma that can trigger a flight, freeze, or fawn response (2019). The implication is that the harm does not constitute trauma unless the nervous system is impacted. Anderson shared an example. A physiological response can occur when a small child gets indoctrinated about hell and experiences a deep fear of being sent there. This can persist in the body so that even after leaving religion, they still have a visceral response when hearing about hell (2019).

A Distinction. In summary, it seems there is merit in distinguishing between Adverse Religious Experiences and religious trauma. Adverse Religious Experiences encompass a range of harmful encounters within a religious context that can cause pain and distress but do not necessarily result in long-term physiological responses or PTSD symptoms. Alternatively, religious trauma involves a physiological impact on the nervous system, which may include PTSD-related symptoms and induce a sense of being unable to cope or feel safe when triggered.

A Problem with Criterion-Based Definitions. While it can be helpful for clinical counsellors to assess for and differentiate between Adverse Religious Experiences and religious

trauma when working with disaffiliated evangelicals, it is helpful to acknowledge the problem with limiting the criteria for any clinical term. The mental health profession has dichotomized diagnosis/designations as either meeting or not meeting criteria (Swindle & Cashwell, 2023). In situations where clients do not meet the diagnostic criteria, such as for PTSD, they may not be eligible for financial assistance to access counselling services, potentially depriving them of the care they require. Even if individuals can access and afford counselling, their experiences could be minimized if not they do not meet specific criteria for trauma (Swindle & Cashwell, 2023). While striving to abide by the definition of religious trauma as outlined, mental health professionals may risk becoming too rigid in their adherence to the criteria and potentially losing sight of the ultimate goal: gaining a deeper understanding of the client to provide the most effective care. It is hoped that the distinction between Adverse Religious Experiences and religious trauma is helpful when working with disaffiliated evangelicals and other individuals harmed within religious settings.

AREs/RT: The Issues

In exploring the experiences of disaffiliated evangelicals, examining the literature that explicitly discusses the abuse and trauma experienced by Christians, especially those in more fundamental settings, is beneficial. Winell (2011) pointed out that those at the highest risk of religious trauma were raised in a religion, sheltered in it, deeply and personally connected with it, or involved in a very controlling form of it. Individuals who disaffiliate from conservative evangelicalism may fit one or more of these criteria; therefore, counsellors may find disaffiliated evangelicals coming to them for support to process the harm they experienced, and this may include abuse.

Harm by Religious Leaders. One of the themes in the literature is the harm perpetrated by leaders in churches. After interviewing the participants in her study, Swindle categorized religious abuse into three broad categories: abuse from religious leaders, abuse from the group, and abuse due to a religious component (2017). Harm perpetuated by leaders within the church also came up in Anderson & Peck (2019) and Winell (2011). Anderson and Peck (2019) discussed the dynamic of power and control as being foundational to a fundamentalist, legalistic, patriarchal, abusive system. One of the issues within restrictive religious systems is that the leaders claim to speak on behalf of God (2019). The congregant might even conflate the perpetrator with God (Swindle, 2017). Because of this, the leader may be viewed as infallible; thus, followed and obeyed without doubt or questioning. This type of authoritarian leadership has the potential for harm. Winell claimed that individuals within fundamental religious settings experience physical, sexual, and emotional harm because authoritarianism goes unchecked (2011). This abuse from leadership may include:

> manipulation and exploitation, enforced accountability, censorship of decision-making, requirements for secrecy and silence, coercion to conform, control through the use of sacred texts or teaching, requirement of obedience to the abuser, the suggestion that the abuser has a "divine" position, isolation as a means of punishment, and superiority and elitism. (Oakley, 2018, p.146)

When individuals are abused by their spiritual leaders, they may experience feelings of betrayal, stigmatization, powerlessness, and trauma (Swindle, 2017). A study by Martin et al. (2013) discovered that trauma involving a level of betrayal was strongly linked to an increased likelihood of psychological symptoms such as depression, dissociation, and PTSD. The close, often familial relationship those in fundamental religious settings have with their leaders can

intensify these symptoms because of the deep betrayal and shattered trust (Pasquale, 2015; Stone, 2013). This breach in trust from spiritual figures could extend to other persons of authority in the victim's life, even impacting the counselling process in future if they were to pursue it. In the case of sexual abuse by clergy, McGraw et al. (2019) found that the victims suffer from a negative self-image, social isolation, self-sabotage, and an inability to connect with others. These challenges can endure for years following the abuse. Survivors might also struggle with shame, perceiving themselves as wounded or unworthy of love (2019).

Harm from Community. While the tight-knit fundamental evangelical community supports and cares for its members, some disaffiliated evangelicals recounted stories of harm from community members when they deviated from expectations and experienced corrective measures. In his 2008 study, Cameron explored the experiences of disaffiliated fundamental evangelicals, and some participants highlighted their encounters with correction within the community. While the church was a haven for many, participants in Cameron's research also felt its authority and punishment when a congregant "fell from grace" (2008). These individuals required "restorative" intervention. The interventions included punishment and alienation before they could return to the fold (2008).

Participants in Fazzino's (2014) study on deconversion from evangelical Christianity evidenced this well. "When people continued to live in sin, we had to exclude them. It was our responsibility to protect the community from Satan" (p. 257). Another participant shared, "If you didn't dress the right way, you weren't part of the team. People just looked down on you" (p. 257). Another participant shared, "We used prayer as a way to justify gossiping about somebody's problems. Pretty soon, the whole church knew what that person was going through" (p. 257). Another individual voiced, "You don't expect to be judged by people in church, and

letting your guard down because you think you are safe intensifies the pain of betrayal" (p. 257). Failing to meet the expectations of the community and leadership resulted in judgment, stigmatization, and rejection. These experiences can result in feelings of guilt, rejection, depression, and self-abasement, which can be long-lasting in the individual's life (Fazzino, 2014).

In addition, ex-evangelical members may experience deep-rooted suffering stemming from pressures from the community to conform and adhere to impossible requirements (Winell, 2011). Fundamental religious communities can exhibit tribalistic thinking, with an us versus them mentality that sees outsiders as dangerous and those within who deviate from established beliefs as problematic (Anderson & Peck, 2019). For example, expressions of support for LGBTQIA2S+ rights or association with gay friends may be viewed as oppositional to the community's values and beliefs, leading to social isolation, stigma, shame, and rejection (Swindle, 2017). Such individuals may face pressure to cut ties with those outside the community and increase their commitment to the church (Anderson & Peck, 2019). Those who choose to keep their opposing ideals while remaining in the evangelical community may be subject to threats, accusations, and intimidation (Anderson & Peck, 2019) from members who view such beliefs as sinful. The threats may entail losing relationships, accusations of sin, and intimidation using biblical verses. These experiences of abandonment, manipulation, rules with severe consequences, and constant fear of rejection from people thought to be safe and trustworthy can result in a long-term inability to trust others or feel safe with them (Anderson, 2023). To illustrate, a disaffiliate of fundamental Christianity shared, "Even now, I still lack the ability to trust very easily and becoming very close to people is something I still find very alien and hard to achieve" (Winell, 2011, p.17).

People who belong to fundamental Christian communities may experience harm from their community in cases where they are victims of abuse by a church member or leader. Krueger (2018) found that church congregations can exacerbate the abuse by blaming the victim or remaining loyal to the perpetrator despite the abuse, which can be very damaging for the victim. According to McGraw et al. (2019), when families and the community dismiss and conceal abuse, it leads to prolonged abuse and delayed exposure. While the fear of rejection by God is a powerful motivator in keeping victims silent, this fear may crossover to the family if the family is strongly dedicated to their faith and the church (Thomas, 2023). Due to their status as representatives of God, victims' families may place full trust in the church and its leaders. As a result, victims may wait years before disclosing the traumatic experiences to their families, fearing a severing of ties with the church. If the perpetrator or the community suggest that the victim had a part to play in the abuse, victim-blaming occurs (McGraw et al., 2019).

To add to the trauma, following disclosure, exceptionally dedicated family members may encourage the victim to forgive the perpetrator. These instances of victim blaming, isolating the victim, and siding with the primary abuser over the victim can cause secondary abuse and trauma (Ellis et al., 2022). Winell (2011) recounts the experience of a disaffiliated fundamental Christian who had suffered abuse, "I had so many pent-up emotions and thoughts that were never acknowledged..instead of protecting me from a horrible man, they forced me to deny my feelings and obey him, no matter what" (p. 25). Experiencing abuse in a setting expected to provide protection and uphold moral values can lead to a sense of powerlessness (Swindle, 2017). The survivor might experience feelings of helplessness in seeking solace anywhere else, believing there is no place to be safe since even their church community was not safe (2017).

Harm related to Teachings. In addition to harm and abuse coming from leaders and the group, disaffiliated evangelicals can undergo trauma due to the teachings and practices of their former religious setting (Anderson, 2023; Anderson & Peck, 2019; Swindle, 2017; Winell, 2011). Specifically, counsellors should be aware that many ex-evangelicals were steeped in fear-based doctrines, which could result in trauma and PTSD symptoms.

Fear-Based Doctrines. The teachings within fundamental evangelicalism can have psychologically damaging effects, especially regarding eternal punishment, the rapture, and demons.

First, individuals raised in fundamental evangelicalism are taught about a literal place of eternal torture. In Lee & Gubi's (2019) study, a disaffiliated evangelical shared, "I was brought up to be in an almost constant state of fear." Christian churches have often used the fear of hell to bring people to conversion and to enforce conformity to the rules of the faith (Leboucher, 1989, as cited in Martínez de Pisón, 2022). In Björkmark et al. (2021), participants feared going to hell and ending up there for eternity. Individuals who suffer from fear of hell have usually spent years or a lifetime being indoctrinated by their religious community. In fundamental evangelical settings, children and teenagers may be exposed to the concept of a never-ending inferno, either through vivid sermons or graphic depictions in media (Winell, 2011). The message is communicated that if a person stops believing the prescribed doctrines, leaves the religious community, or lives a lifestyle contrary to the teachings of the faith, they will go to hell (Jasko, 2020). The idea of being condemned to such a fiery fate can have a profound and traumatic effect on young persons and adults.

Another distressing doctrine that disaffiliated fundamental evangelicals might have encountered is the concept of the rapture. This belief conveys that sinners will be condemned to

hell. At the same time, those who adhere to the church's doctrines will find themselves in heaven. According to this teaching, at an unspecified time, Jesus will return to Earth to gather the faithful and transport them to heaven for eternal life. While this notion may offer reassurance to some, it also has the potential to instill fear. If a person is not a believer, has committed sins, or is not spiritually ready, they will not be included in this event and will be left behind to suffer. Consequently, there are accounts of children who experienced panic attacks as they frantically searched for caregivers, believing the rapture had already occurred and they had been left behind to suffer in hell (Winell, 2011). Some reported that this trauma became a recurring issue (2011).

Another teaching that can be harmful and traumatic for evangelicals is emphasizing evil spirits or demons. In the fundamentalist evangelical worldview, the world is a place to be feared and to stay separate from. Teachings that communicate the world as an evil place ruled by Satan and demons are common in fundamental evangelical settings. One ex-fundamental Christian shared, "I was raised on fire and brimstone, speaking in tongues, believing the world was a dangerous and evil place full of temptation and sinners seeking to destroy me and drag me down" (Winell, 2011, p. 24). Based on personal experience, in some settings, young evangelicals witness the casting out of "demons" during prayer services, leaving them with nightmares and fears of demons coming into their rooms, especially if they had misbehaved. Over time, these terrifying thoughts and experiences growing up in fundamental evangelicalism can be at the root of C-PTSD and PTSD symptoms (Jasko, 2020; Winell, 2011).

A psychologically unsafe environment can cause mental health issues such as anxiety, PTSD, and OCD. These issues are coping mechanisms in response to a constant perceived threat (Jasko, 2020). Belief in concepts like eternal torture (hell), abandonment (rapture), and evil spirits (demons) do not promote a safe psychological environment. Therefore, counsellors should

be aware that disaffiliated evangelicals may exhibit PTSD symptoms related to the doctrines they were raised with.

This section highlighted the profound harm, even trauma, which can be experienced by disaffiliated evangelicals in religious contexts, explicitly stemming from religious leaders, the community, and teachings. Abuse by religious leaders, hidden behind their divine authority, can cause trauma and lasting psychological distress. Community judgment and rejection can lead to shame, guilt, and depression. Fear-based doctrines can create distress and physiological symptoms similar to PTSD. Recognizing these sources of harm is crucial for counsellors working with disaffiliated evangelicals, as it can inform their approach to addressing trauma and facilitating healing in this population.

Chapter Summary

This chapter aims to offer clinical counsellors an overview of disaffiliated evangelicals and the mental health challenges they may encounter during counselling. Disaffiliated evangelicals can experience various spiritual, physical, mental, emotional, and social effects. These effects may include struggles with depression, suicidal thoughts, grief, loss, shame, and trauma stemming from their previous religious community, leaders, and beliefs. It is essential for counsellors to grasp the broad scope of issues that ex-evangelicals may bring into counselling, mainly because it may be unfamiliar territory for some counsellors. It is hoped this chapter bridged any knowledge gap in counsellor education and provided insights into this distinctive client population, enabling them to receive more appropriate and adequate support in future.

Chapter 3: Considerations and Cautions

Research affirms that religion can offer a powerful sense of social identity and a cohesive framework for interpreting the world (Ellis et al., 2022). Generally, studies have suggested that spirituality and religion are connected to enhanced well-being, better stress management, and improved mental health (Koenig, 2012). Despite this, in researching for this project, the literature revealed a demographic reporting long-lasting injurious effects of religion in various areas of people's lives, including emotional, intellectual, physical, social, and spiritual domains (Winell, 2011). Specifically, individuals who have disaffiliated from fundamental Christian settings have offered insights into the adverse experiences and trauma they suffered. Although spirituality and religion can hold great significance for many individuals, the literature in this project points out that specific individuals may need to relinquish their religious beliefs to achieve personal healing and experience greater happiness and functionality (Lee & Gubi, 2019). While disaffiliation can bring about a sense of liberation, leading to feelings of freedom, relief, and happiness (Fazzino, 2014; Lee & Gubi, 2019), lingering issues from adverse religious experiences may prevent individuals from living as authentically and freely as they would prefer. These disaffiliated evangelicals may turn to counselling to understand themselves better.

The literature review in Chapter Two provided counsellors with an understanding of who disaffiliated evangelicals are and the potential issues they might present with. There is a scarcity of scholarly guidance on addressing negative religious experiences within a counselling setting, especially regarding religious harm (Swindle, 2017; Ward, 2011; Wood & Conley, 2014). Therefore, recommendations for specific interventions when working with ex-evangelicals have been left for future research. This chapter focuses on the significant considerations and cautions counsellors may benefit from contemplating when working with disaffiliated evangelicals.

Acknowledging the Apprehension

Before delving into the considerations, it is important to acknowledge and communicate an understanding of the anxiety and uncertainty that may arise for counselling professionals when considering working with issues related to religious experiences. It is significant to promote empathy and understanding among colleagues in the counselling field and avoid judging one another's choices about which populations each chooses to serve. For example, some clinical counsellors choose not to work with clients struggling with pedophilia, others do not work with personality disorders, others choose not to work with children, and others choose not to work with male clients. It is essential to respect and validate the choices made by fellow professionals and trust that they are acting in the best interest of both themselves and their clients.

Some counselling professionals may feel anxious when working with individuals disaffiliated from fundamental evangelical Christianity. First, counsellors may have anxiety about religious-related conversations (Rhodes, 2022) due to a lack of personal experience with or knowledge of the subject matter. Understandably, counsellors may feel they should have expertise or experience in the client's religious or spiritual beliefs to be competent in their work (2022). Additionally, a fear of engaging in unethical practices due to a lack of education and competency in assessing and dealing with religious issues could arise (2022). This fear is understandable. In a study of 341 British Columbia Association of Clinical Counsellors members, only one-third of the participants expressed satisfaction regarding integrating spirituality and religion into their graduate programs (Plumb, 2011). Counsellors may feel ill-equipped and, therefore, cautious about crossing into unethical territory.

Moreover, a counsellor's or the client's beliefs, whether supportive of or opposing religion, can evoke strong emotions and passion (Swindle, 2017). Counsellors have been trained

to understand the possibility of inadvertently influencing a client toward the counsellor's worldview (Cashwell & Young, 2011). This power, a potential force in the client's life, should be seriously considered (2011); therefore, it makes sense that professionals in the counselling field may be averse to bringing up topics with the potential to ignite personal passionate responses and attitudes.

Recognizing Limits

There are many other reasons why working with disaffiliated evangelicals could evoke apprehension. Counsellors must understand that they may only feel called to counsel some people (Cashwell & Young, 2011). Validating and acknowledging this is significant before providing recommendations and cautions, as we should extend our colleagues the same level of empathy and support that we offer our clients. Counsellors need to be equipped with evidence-based practices to concretely help people experiencing harm in their spiritual and religious communities or practices (Kreil, 2022). Counsellors may struggle to work with disaffiliated evangelicals for various reasons, and if this is the case, the most ethical course of action would be to refer the client to someone who can support them. There is no shame in acknowledging when there are certain issues that are a struggle to align with. Ultimately, the well-being and best interests of the client are considered paramount.

Considerations

Know Yourself

Regardless of a counsellor's religious views, it is ethically significant to make an effort to comprehend and provide support aligned with our client's cultural and philosophical perspectives. More importantly, if a counsellor is considering working with clients regarding

religious harm, assessing personal beliefs, attitudes, and biases about religion and spirituality before practicing in this area is highly recommended.

The first recommendation for mental health professionals working with disaffiliated evangelicals is to engage in self-reflection. It is crucial to ethical practice that mental health professionals be aware of potential personal biases regarding religion and spirituality to minimize any negative impact their bias may have in causing harm to their clients (Bartoli, 2007; Vieten et al., 2016). To further emphasize this importance, in British Columbia, where I practice, members of the British Columbia Association of Clinical Counsellors (BCACC) adhere to an ethical code of conduct. The code of ethical conduct states that registered clinical counsellors (RCCs),

> ...practice awareness of their own social, cultural, emotional, spiritual, physical, and financial condition or status, recognizing where these characteristics are empowering and/or divergent from those of a client, and protect against the potential for harm that may arise from these differences. (BCACC, 2023, p. 9).

Counsellors should practice awareness of their views on religion and spirituality to reduce bias when working with disaffiliated evangelicals. For example, when working with a disaffiliated evangelical, an anti-religious counsellor must evaluate whether they can avoid imposing their personal views. If an ex-evangelical expresses anger towards the manipulation and control they faced from a pastor, can the counsellor empathize and keep the focus on the client's experience without getting caught up in the client's criticism of the system? Can the counsellor validate feelings of disappointment, anger, and disillusionment rather than focus on the rightness or wrongness of the church leaders or their beliefs? Similarly, a highly religious counsellor would

benefit from assessing their ability to refrain from defending the church and its beliefs when a disaffiliated evangelical shares negative experiences.

While counsellors are expected to assess and self-reflect on personal beliefs regarding religion and spirituality, guidance on how to do this is not always readily available; thus, a helpful tool for reflecting on integrating religion and spirituality into practice is provided in Appendix A. The Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC), a division of the American Counseling Association, developed the "Competencies for Addressing Spiritual and Religious Issues in Counseling"(ASERVIC, 2009). These guidelines cover six general areas and 14 more specific competencies standards. For example, one of the general areas covering counsellor self-awareness provides three competencies for professional counsellors to consider:

> 3. The professional counselor actively explores his or her own attitudes, beliefs, and values about spirituality and/or religion.
>
> 4. The professional counselor continuously evaluates the influence of his or her own spiritual and/or religious beliefs and values on the client and the counseling process.
>
> 5. The professional counselor can identify the limits of his or her understanding of the client's spiritual and/or religious perspective and is acquainted with religious and spiritual resources, including leaders, who can be avenues for consultation and to whom the counselor can refer. (ASERVIC, 2009)

Counsellors considering working with disaffiliated evangelicals may benefit from using this resource to determine how to engage in psychotherapy respectfully and effectively while being sensitive to viewpoints and preferences related to religion and spirituality. Ultimately, it is help

for counsellors who decide to work with disaffiliated evangelicals to engage in self-reflection. They should consider whether working with this specific demographic, including the potential challenges they may bring, is not only in the client's best interest but also aligns with the counsellor's own well-being and interests.

Know your Client

A second recommendation for mental health professionals working with disaffiliated evangelicals is to know and understand the client as fully as possible. In understanding the disaffiliated evangelical better, three suggestions are provided: assessment of the client's needs, education on the part of the counsellor regarding fundamental evangelicalism, and access to related resources for the counsellor and client.

Assessing Religiosity/Spirituality. The first step toward knowing any client deeply is to broach significant topics in an initial session. Counsellors commonly explore a client's physical, emotional, spiritual, and environmental factors in an initial session. These explorations can be facilitated through discussion and qualitative and quantitative assessments (Cashwell & Young, 2011). The counsellor may not initially know that their client is a disaffiliated evangelical, and the client may not seek counselling specifically for issues related to their negative experiences within evangelicalism. However, if the topic of religion and spirituality is broached, this may come to light and significantly impact the direction the counselling takes. Thus, it is highly recommended that clinical counsellors include questions in initial sessions with clients related to their thoughts, feelings, and experiences with religion and spirituality (Cashwell & Young, 2011; Plumb, 2011; Rhodes, 2022; Stone, 2013).

There are a myriad of ways to broach a client's relationship to religion and spirituality. It can be as simple as asking the client open-ended questions in a conversational style, such as:

1. What role does religion/spirituality play in your life presently?
2. Has religion/spirituality played a role in your life in the past?
3. How likely is it that religion/spirituality will come up in our sessions?

More formalized questionnaires could be utilized, as exemplified in Appendix B. In addition, using genograms, eco-maps, sandtray therapy, music techniques, or sentence completion exercises can open up dialogue around religious beliefs and practices (see more about using these in Cashwell & Young, 2011, pp. 148-151). If the counsellor prefers, they may adopt quantitative assessments for spirituality, such as the Spiritual Assessment Scale (SAS) (Howden, 1991), the Spiritual Health Inventory (SHI) (Veach & Chappel, 1992, as cited in Cashwell & Young, 2011), or the Spiritual Well-Being Scale (SWBS) (Ellison, 1983).

A counsellor's approaches or assessments are not necessarily significant when addressing a client's religiosity and spirituality. What matters is that the subject is broached with sensitivity and warmth during initial counselling sessions. Failure on the part of counsellors to engage in discussions related to religion may instill hesitation in clients regarding the permissibility of bridging up such discussion (Rhodes, 2022). By fostering an environment of openness concerning religion, both the client and the counsellor can determine the significance of religion in the client’s life, its relevance to the counselling process, and the necessity of its integration into the therapeutic journey (Rhodes, 2022).

Counsellors must consider that some disaffiliated evangelicals may prefer a counsellor with similar religious and spiritual views and experiences. The client might be concerned about whether a counsellor with no religious background or experience with disaffiliation could truly empathize and understand their concerns (Park et al., 2017). Therefore, it may be helpful for a client dealing with disaffiliation to know the counsellor’s stance on spiritual matters early on.

Alternatively, asking the client whether the lack of similar experience is significant to them might be good practice. This way, clients can make an informed decision as to whether or not they want to work with that counsellor. If the client decides to work with a counsellor who does not have a similar background or experience with religion, issues around their different perspectives can be dealt with with openness, sensitivity, and acceptance (Lee & Gubi, 2019). For individuals disaffiliated from fundamental evangelicalism, who may grapple with anxiety, sensitivity, and shame around their religious past, the counsellor's display of cultural humility and sensitivity can serve as a catalyst for establishing safety, building rapport, and nurturing unconditional positive regard integral to effective counselling practice.

Educating Yourself. In addition to being open to broaching religion and spirituality with clients, it is recommended that counsellors take the initiative in educating themselves about spirituality and religion. The literature cites a need for comprehensive training and education on integrating religion and spirituality in counselling (Cashwell & Young, 2011; Kreil, 2022; Paloutzian & Park, 2013). Consequently, proficiency in the intersection of religion/spirituality and mental health relies on specific training rather than a comprehensive education in graduate and clinical programs (Paloutzian & Park, 2013).

Certainly, counsellors are not expected to be experts on a client's religious or spiritual beliefs (Rhodes 2022), nor are counsellors required to have all the answers to client's questions related to their religious beliefs (Rhodes, 2022). Nevertheless, if counsellors choose to work with clients on religious and spiritual issues, it will benefit their practice and relationship with their clients if they familiarize themselves with their religion and the associated issues. In the case of ex-evangelicals, there is a need for sensitive and informed practitioners who are educated in issues related to evangelical fundamentalism, foundational principles that connect psychology

and religion, as well as the harmful and hidden nature of spiritual and religious abuse caused by caregivers and individuals in positions of spiritual authority and influence (Cameron, 2008). A local Registered Clinical Counsellor who specializes in working with individuals who have experienced trauma due to religion shared that clients will be more adequately served if mental health professionals take the initiative to engage with new research and literature that supports the work (M. Jespersen, personal communication, September 18, 2023). Workshops, conferences, and seminars are other sources for counsellors who want to work with individuals from fundamentalist Christian denominations. For example, the Religious Trauma Institute offers a recorded course for mental health professionals entitled Foundations for Treating Religious Trauma (Keller & Clark-Miller, n.d.). In addition, The Global Center for Religious Research (GCRR) offers a certification program in religious trauma studies for mental health specialists (GCRR, 2023). Although researching and finding education about adverse religious experiences and spiritual harm may demand more effort compared to other counselling topics like eating disorders, addictions, or trauma, it remains crucial for counsellors to be proactive in learning what they can about disaffiliated evangelicals and their issues. This knowledge will enable counsellors to provide the best support for their clients.

Consulting Others. ASERVIC's spiritual and religious competencies include the guideline that counsellors be "..acquainted with religious and spiritual resources and leaders who can be avenues for consultation and to whom the counsellor can refer" (ASERVIC, 2009, p. 1). For clinical counsellors who wish to work with disaffiliated evangelicals or disaffiliated Christians of any denomination, it is suggested to network with other counsellors who have either experienced religious disaffiliation themselves or who have studied and specialized in working with trauma specific to fundamentalist religions (Cameron, 2008). This consultation can

aid the counsellor in becoming more acquainted with the issues ex-evangelical clients may present with and help counsellors identify the most appropriate approaches to counselling this demographic. In Dille's (2023) study of counsellors' experiences working with religious trauma survivors, counsellors agreed that having a professional community around them was essential when working with religious trauma. One of the most helpful supports reported by a participant in the study was that of a supervisor to "bounce ideas off of" (2023, p. 36). It is, thus, suggested that counsellors working with those disaffiliated from evangelicalism find a supervisor experienced in religious disaffiliation, religious trauma, and Adverse Religious Experiences.

Cautions

When counselling disaffiliated fundamental evangelicals, there are some significant cautions to address related to countertransference and diversity. By addressing these concerns, the counsellor is better equipped to hold a safe, accepting space where clients feel free to open up and share their struggles.

Countertransference

For this paper, countertransference is understood as a shared phenomenon between the counsellor and the client, from which valuable insights about the client and the counsellor can emerge (Gabbard, 2020). The counsellor's responses to the client, the client's transference, and the counsellor's own intense emotions may arise while working with clients (Cavanagh, 2015). Paying attention to countertransference is significant as counsellors who cannot recognize their own reactions to defenses can lose their effectiveness in therapy (Gubi & Jacobs, 2009). When counsellors cannot manage their feelings well, the therapeutic relationship can become judgmental, critical, unaccepting, and debate-filled (2009). Counsellors may experience a range

of feelings in response to their work with disaffiliated evangelicals, and this can inform the therapeutic work and even interfere with the balance of the counsellor's life.

In Dille's (2023) study, counsellors working with religious trauma survivors reported emotional, psychological, and physical responses. Since a review of the literature has revealed that disaffiliated evangelicals suffer due to Adverse Religious Experiences and religious trauma, there is potential for counsellors to experience feelings such as anger, sadness, frustration, grief, overwhelm, and uncertainty in response to hearing their client's stories (Dille, 2023; Gubi and Jacobs, 2009;). Counsellors may find it emotionally challenging to empathize with stories of religious harm. Consequently, they might unconsciously respond to the client by managing this empathic pain by avoiding the topic or over-identification (Gubi & Jacobs, 2009). Especially in cases where the counsellor and the client have a shared experience of religious harm, diversion, avoidance, or reactivity can potentially enter the space (Kreil, 2022), and the counsellor may become less engaged and fail to ask questions that would advance the client's exploration (Stone, 2013).

Notably, counsellors should be cautioned that working with disaffiliated evangelicals may precipitate a shift in their beliefs and assumptions about spirituality and religion. Interestingly, in Dille's (2023) study, counsellors were impacted similarly to their clients in that they experienced a shift in their perspectives and beliefs about religion, religious communities, and religious leaders. One Christian counsellor expressed that the more she listened to her client's struggles, the more challenging it was for her to feel safe in her own church, and she eventually left (2023). There is also potential for non-religious counsellors to experience a greater openness to the experiences of those coming out of religious settings. One counsellor shared,

> I separate out the idea of the structure of power and control that comes with religion from the followers of religion. So, I have found myself gaining a lot of perspective and compassion for the people who are in religious communities, not because I think every religion is like super toxic and harmful, but just in the sense of seeing the good intentions and the harmful impacts. (Dille, 2023)

It would be beneficial for counsellors working with disaffiliated evangelicals to receive their own counselling and be vigilant for signs of countertransference in their work with disaffiliated evangelicals. These countertransference reactions can make it challenging for the therapist to remain reflective. They can increase the risk of the therapist's attitude toward religion and spirituality unconsciously impacting the client. These complex countertransference responses and dynamics require ongoing support and consultation for the therapist working with disaffiliated evangelicals. (Stone 2013)

Cultural Sensitivity

Another critical factor when working with disaffiliated evangelicals is how their fundamentalist upbringing influences the counselling relationship and process.

Clinical counsellors need to understand that individuals from fundamentalist evangelicalism are generally more suspicious of the mental health field (Thurston, 2000). Disaffiliated evangelicals may have been admonished by their community and leaders to avoid counselling (2000). Lloyd (2023) coined "spiritual reductionism" to describe a phenomenon common in Christian communities adhering to biblical literalism. In such settings, individuals with mental illness often have their suffering exclusively attributed to spiritual factors like demonic influence, sin, and divine punishment, neglecting the relational, psychological, and physical aspects (2023). Thus, even when disaffiliated evangelicals get the courage to engage in

counselling, they may unconsciously dismiss alternative secular interventions and want to fall back on spiritual solutions (2023). Counsellors may need to educate clients on a holistic understanding of mental health where the spiritual and secular can co-exist, and both contribute to healing.

Clinical counsellors working with ex-evangelicals must approach their clients with increased sensitivity and a firm commitment to being non-judgmental. More than any other group, ex-evangelical clients may interpret their problems as punishment for some perceived sin and experience varying degrees of guilt for their perceived wrongdoings. The counsellor should avoid downplaying or rationalizing these feelings and instead validate them. Also, ex-evangelicals may have concerns that the therapist will misunderstand them and criticize their remaining religious beliefs (Thurston, 2000). Consequently, clinical counsellors should be exceptionally attentive in establishing trust and credibility with these clients, particularly those who have experienced harm and trauma.

Diversity

When dealing with diversity issues related to ex-evangelicals, it is essential to consider the potential intersection of gender and religious beliefs. For example, if a male therapist works with a female fundamentalist client, there is potential for significant transference related to authority issues. This can manifest as the client displaying a continuum of behaviours from unquestioning obedience to passive-aggressive behaviours to open rebellion or sabotage of the relationship (Thurston, 2000). Despite a male therapist's best attempts at reducing an authoritarian stance, the female client may perceive him in that role due to her fundamentalist experiences. Therefore, addressing these authority dynamics and clarifying roles during therapy early on is essential.

Recognizing the diversity of beliefs and practices within conservative evangelicalism is significant, as some counsellors may mistakenly assume that all fundamentalist denominations hold the same beliefs and priorities. The emphasis on particular teachings can vary significantly depending on the denomination and even the individual pastor within that denomination. For example, speaking in tongues may be emphasized in one fundamentalist denomination as evidence of the Holy Spirit, leading to weekly altar calls for individuals to receive this "gift." In another fundamentalist evangelical denomination, the focus may shift towards prosperity theology, where faith, positivity, and generous donations to the church are believed to lead to improved health and wealth. To provide adequate counselling, counsellors should avoid assuming that all disaffiliated evangelicals adhere to identical belief systems. Instead, they should approach their clients curiously and directly inquire about their beliefs and experiences.

Conclusion

Considerable research has been conducted on the advantages of religious affiliation, and it is widely acknowledged that religion offers benefits and can positively impact well-being (Koenig, 2012). However, this research project has uncovered the potential harms of fundamental evangelical settings. The adverse effects of fundamental evangelicalism can be far-reaching, affecting an individual's emotional, intellectual, developmental, and interpersonal aspects of life (Anderson, 2023; Stone, 2013; Winell, 2011). This project involved a comprehensive literature review focused on disaffiliated evangelicals, shedding light on the mental health challenges unique to this population that may arise during counselling sessions.

Evidently, this demographic of clients may present a wide range of mental health issues. As demonstrated in this paper, former evangelicals may need to address grief, loss, and deep-seated feelings of shame and low self-esteem. Disaffiliated evangelicals, especially, women and members of the LGBTQIA2S+, may have experienced harm and abuse within their religious

community, at the hands of their leaders, and through doctrinal beliefs, which can manifest as trauma and result in symptoms resembling Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Significantly, this paper offers considerations and precautions for counsellors who may find themselves working with individuals dealing with issues related to their evangelical pasts. Before counsellors embark on assisting individuals who have disaffiliated from evangelical environments, it is crucial that they engage in introspection to ensure they possess the willingness and capacity to empathize with clients without judgment. Counsellors should dedicate time to educating themselves about religious trauma and adverse religious experiences, just as they would when learning about adults with adverse childhood experiences before offering support. This paper has fulfilled its purpose by addressing the gap in the literature for counsellors concerning disaffiliated evangelicals and providing a valuable resource for counsellors considering working with ex-evangelicals.

Future Research

There is not much academic research examining how religious disaffiliation affects fundamental evangelicals. This paper represents a small contribution to this growing area of study. During the research, a few areas that warrant further investigation were noticed.

Firstly, there is a notable underrepresentation of women's experiences in the existing literature. More research is needed to understand how women navigate their faith after leaving a fundamentalist evangelical setting, where they often encounter patriarchal and misogynistic attitudes and teachings. Exploring this area can help counsellors better grasp the mental health impacts and provide appropriate support for ex-evangelical women.

Additionally, there is a lack of research on how fundamental evangelical teachings impact men. For instance, in Kriel's (2022) study, all participants identified as female. There is a

genuine curiosity about how conservative evangelicalism affects men, particularly regarding messaging related to gender, sexuality, and purity. What harmful messages might they have internalized and need to deconstruct? Further research in this area could shed light on these important questions.

Furthermore, it would be valuable to have more research on the experiences of clergy and leaders who have disaffiliated from evangelical settings. These individuals might grapple with unique challenges, such as the burden of guilt and shame for their role in causing harm to other disaffiliates. It would be beneficial to understand their experiences and how counsellors can effectively care for and support them.

Importantly, there is a strong recommendation for conducting further studies to investigate how fundamentalist evangelical teachings affect children and contribute to adverse childhood experiences and trauma. For instance, it would be worthwhile to explore whether experiences related to fundamentalist religious beliefs should be included in the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) assessment. Such studies could shed light on the impact of fear-inducing doctrines on children. They might also increase awareness among clergy and other evangelical leaders regarding the potential harm and guide them in introducing these doctrines at developmentally appropriate stages in the lives of younger evangelicals. For example, if churches find it necessary to include teachings about concepts like hell, they could consider refraining from presenting or discussing them in front of young children and reserving these messages for adult settings. Safeguarding children from potential trauma and harm stemming from frightening doctrines is paramount. However, without existing research on the harm caused and access to such research to share with church leaders, fear-inducing doctrines may continue to be preached without thoughtful consideration.

Furthermore, the study conducted by Knight et al. (2019), which examined disaffiliation through the lens of family systems, held significant relevance and struck a deep chord. It emphasizes the importance of future research into how families can navigate when a member of a fundamental evangelical family decides to leave the church. Such studies would be of great value because disaffiliated and affiliated family members often face relational challenges that can strain their bonds and potentially lead to severed relationships. There is a pressing need for a systemic understanding of religious disaffiliation and the development of clinical recommendations for supporting such cases. In other words, how can counsellors create a space for family counselling that promotes the continued functioning of the family dynamic? It's essential for disaffiliated individuals and their families to have opportunities to comprehend each other's perspectives and adapt their family dynamics to thrive despite their differences. However, there is currently a gap in the literature regarding this aspect.

Another area of study recommended is to begin work on examining and testing which therapeutic theories and models are most efficacious for working with disaffiliated evangelicals. Little literature on modalities or theories specific to working with disaffiliated evangelicals exists. It would be helpful if specific modalities were to investigate how their approaches might be integrated into work with religious disaffiliation.

For instance, narrative therapy could be valuable when working with disaffiliated evangelicals. In this therapy, as the client recounts their religious journey, the therapist pays attention to what remains unspoken, hidden, or implied in the narrative (Sandage et al., 2020). These gaps in the story serve as windows for exploring emotions, feelings, unmet needs, or painful experiences (Kreil, 2022). Addressing these omissions helps clients integrate their experiences and develop a more coherent sense of self. After delving into the emotions and

sentiments associated with what's missing in the narrative, clients can start reshaping their preferred story and envisioning their desires for the future (Sandage et al., 2020). Because disaffiliated evangelicals are shifting from one journey (the religion-based one) to another (one without religion), restructuring one's story could be very healing. Additionally, as Kreil (2022) noted, other therapeutic approaches like attachment theory, grief therapy, and somatic therapy show promise but lack sufficient evidence-based studies on their effectiveness for issues related to religious disaffiliation. Furthermore, there is a shortage of guides available for counsellors to incorporate these methods into their practice.

Finally, educational institutions should consider ways to incorporate curriculum more sufficiently regarding assessing and integrating religious and spiritual content into their counselling programs. The literature cites a need for comprehensive training and education on integrating religion and spirituality in counselling (Cashwell & Young, 2011; Kreil, 2022; Paloutzian & Park, 2013). Counsellors will be more confident working with disaffiliated evangelicals and other religiously affiliated clients if they receive sufficient training and education.

Personal Reflexivity

Certain individuals who have disengaged from fundamentalist Christian denominations seek support to address issues stemming from harmful experiences within their religious communities. However, disaffiliated evangelicals may not receive sufficient counselling support due to various factors. One of these factors is the limited knowledge among counsellors regarding mental health challenges associated with religious harm, particularly since many of these counsellors are less religious themselves. While some counsellors may be familiar with the sexual abuse scandals within the Catholic Church and the consequences of leaving cults, they

may not recognize that Adverse Religious Experiences and religious trauma can also arise within mainstream denominations. During discussions about this project with colleagues, acquaintances, friends, instructors, and even strangers, it became evident that many individuals are unfamiliar with the concept of religious trauma and are keen to gain a deeper understanding of it. Therefore, the primary objective of composing this paper was to develop a valuable resource for counsellors seeking a more comprehensive comprehension of individuals like me who have departed from evangelicalism and require mental health support. The aim is to inspire and assist counsellors in establishing a secure and non-judgmental atmosphere for addressing the grief, loss, and harm resulting from their fundamentalist upbringing.

As I embark on my professional journey in the field of counselling, my intention is to apply the insights gained from this project to my own practice. My desire is not only to establish a nurturing environment for individuals and families to navigate Adverse Religious Experiences and trauma but also to advocate for other counsellors to overcome their reservations about discussing religious matters. It is imperative to incorporate religious and spiritual assessments into the intake procedures for counselling, especially because individuals may not initially express a desire to address religious trauma when they seek counselling; instead, it may emerge during sessions as they discuss their symptoms and concerns. Counsellors who find themselves working with individuals transitioning out of high-demand religious groups would benefit from consulting with experienced colleagues and supervisors who possess knowledge in this area and further educating themselves to provide optimal support.

Through the process of composing this capstone, I have come to realize my desire to collaborate with and offer guidance to fellow counsellors through workshops. My goal is to enhance their understanding of how to effectively assess and assist disaffiliated evangelicals and

individuals with religious affiliations. In addition, I eagerly anticipate creating spaces for individuals like myself, allowing them to courageously address the repercussions of religious harm and lead authentic and liberated lives following their departure from religion.

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Appendix A

Competencies for Addressing Spiritual and Religious Issues in Counseling

Preamble

The Competencies for Addressing Spiritual and Religious Issues in Counseling are guidelines that complement, not supersede, the values and standards espoused in the ACA Code of Ethics. Consistent with the ACA Code of Ethics (2014), the purpose of the ASERVIC Competencies is to "recognize diversity and embrace a cross-cultural approach in support of the worth, dignity, potential, and uniqueness of people within their social and cultural contexts" (p. 3). These Competencies are intended to be used in conjunction with counseling approaches that are evidence-based and that align with best practices in counseling.

Culture and Worldview

1. The professional counselor can describe the similarities and differences between spirituality and religion, including the basic beliefs of various spiritual systems, major world religions, agnosticism, and atheism.

2. The professional counselor recognizes that the client's beliefs (or absence of beliefs) about spirituality and/or religion are central to his or her worldview and can influence psychosocial functioning.

Counselor Self-Awareness

3. The professional counselor actively explores his or her own attitudes, beliefs, and values about spirituality and/or religion.

4. The professional counselor continuously evaluates the influence of his or her own spiritual and/or religious beliefs and values on the client and the counseling process.

5. The professional counselor can identify the limits of his or her understanding of the client's spiritual and/or religious perspective and is acquainted with religious and spiritual resources, including leaders, who can be avenues for consultation and to whom the counselor can refer.

Human and Spiritual Development

6. The professional counselor can describe and apply various models of spiritual and/or religious development and their relationship to human development

Communication

7. The professional counselor responds to client communications about spirituality and/or religion with acceptance and sensitivity.

8. The professional counselor uses spiritual and/or religious concepts that are consistent with the client's spiritual and/or religious perspectives and that are acceptable to the client.

9. The professional counselor can recognize spiritual and/or religious themes in client communication and is able to address these with the client when they are therapeutically relevant.

Assessment

10. During the intake and assessment processes, the professional counselor strives to understand a client's spiritual and/or religious perspective by gathering information from the client and/or other sources.

Diagnosis and Treatment

11. When making a diagnosis, the professional counselor recognizes that the client's spiritual and/or religious perspectives can a) enhance well-being; b) contribute to client problems; and/or c) exacerbate symptoms.

12. The professional counselor sets goals with the client that are consistent with the client's spiritual and/or religious perspectives.

13. The professional counselor is able to a) modify therapeutic techniques to include a client's spiritual and/or religious perspectives, and b) utilize spiritual and/or religious practices as techniques when appropriate and acceptable to a client's viewpoint.

14. The professional counselor can therapeutically apply theory and current research supporting the inclusion of a client's spiritual and/or religious perspectives and practices.

*In the spirit of professional collaboration, ASERVIC endorses the counseling competencies that have been established by the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development (**AMCD**) and the Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues in Counseling (**ALGBTIC**). In so doing, these three divisions seek to enhance the counseling of clients and the training of students by intentionally focusing on honoring the many facets of diversity.*

Appendix B

Spiritual and/or Religious Intake Questions

The following questions relate to your spiritual and/or religious beliefs and experiences. You may skip to the remainder of the form if you do not want to complete this section.

1. Do you believe in God, a higher power, universal spirit, or other?
_____ Yes _____ No _____ Somewhat

2. Would you like to discuss this belief/absence of belief with the counsellor?
_____ Yes _____ No _____ Maybe

3. Are you affiliated with any religious denomination and/ or spiritual practice?
_____ Yes _____ No _____ Somewhat

4. How would you describe your religious or spiritual beliefs and practice history?

5. What role has religion and/or spirituality played in your life?

6. Has religion and/or spirituality contributed to any stressors in your life?

7. Have you experienced any changes in religious affiliation since childhood?
_____ Yes _____ No _____ Somewhat

8. Are there any spiritual and/or religious resources you feel are a source of strength?
_____ Yes _____ No _____ Somewhat

9. If so, what resources have you found most helpful?

10. Have religious and/or spiritual influences currently or historically contributed to any stressors in your life?
_____ Yes _____ No _____ Maybe

11. Are you interested in giving the counsellor permission to consult with religious/spiritual leader(s)?
_____ Yes _____ No _____ Maybe

12. Are you interested in trying new spiritual or religious interventions?
_____ Yes _____ No _____ Maybe

(Cashwell & Young, 2011, p. 146)