



ReStory Consulting: Approach and Understanding of Abuse

While not an exhaustive list, below are several core beliefs we hold at ReStory that inform our practice of church and organizational consulting, especially in cases of abuse or accusations of abuse:

Abuse

Abuse is when one person (or group of people) causes harm or distress in another person (or group of people) that results in the erosion of the person's sense of well being, safety, self confidence, self worth, or trust in their own perceptions.

Typically, abuse goes beyond a singular moment or event, and is tied to a larger pattern of engagement or behavior that repeatedly harms another. However, single events can be considered "abusive" (i.e. impactful and harmful) even if there is not an overarching pattern of abuse.

There are several forms of abuse, including physical, sexual, mental, emotional, and spiritual abuse. While physical and sexual abuse have the clearest and most widely accepted definitions (including by law), we further unpack emotional, mental, and spiritual abuse, especially in church and ministry contexts, below.

Emotional and mental abuse occurs when a person, usually in a leadership position and/or with a role of authority, causes emotional or mental harm/distress in another person through power-over behaviors such as manipulation, humiliation, degradation, threatening, diminishing, bullying, weaponizing information, intimidation, insulting, and raging. While it may or may not be the *intent* of the individual to cause harm, the existence of abuse is indicated by the presence of the behavior and the impact it has on the victim, not by the intent/lack of intent of the one causing the harm. Additionally, while one person may experience the behavior as harmful and another person consider the same behavior as not harmful, any time these behaviors exist are moments of abuse.

- Abuse is the overarching term for harm and damage caused by one person against another, with or without intent.
- Abusive is the descriptor applied to the behavior indicating the presence of harm (i.e. "it was an abusive statement" vs. "it was a kind statement").



- Abuser refers to the individual who perpetrates the harm and damage. There are two ways this term may be used:
 - First, it may refer to a single incident (i.e. “in that conversation, he was the abuser”) where a person causes harm or damage to another.
 - Second, it may refer to an individual who shows patterns of abusive behavior in several contexts (i.e. “in this relationship, he is an abuser”). To have the general characterization of “abuser,” one must be determined as perpetrating abuse (i.e. harm/damage) in multiple contexts and/or with multiple people.
 - Often, our work at ReStory is to investigate the *extent* of the abuse to determine if it involves a single incident or if there are patterns of abuse that extend beyond the original circumstance into other contexts. Therefore, limited investigations into specific incidents may find evidence of abuse without being able to identify an individual as an “abuser” without further investigation.

Spiritual abuse is emotional and mental harm with an added spiritual element. For those in spiritual contexts (i.e. church and ministry organizations), spiritual abuse uses aspects of the faith and/or faith community to control, dominate, or manipulate others. It seeks to override the opinions, feelings and perspectives of another, or require the obedience/submission of an individual using that person’s faith and/or belonging to the faith community as leverage. This goes beyond inviting a person to deeper spiritual growth, which may cause the individual discomfort or an awareness of their sin and further need for Jesus when it is used by the leader(ship) to invoke shame, penance, ex-communication or dismissal, conformity, etc. Spiritual abuse exists when the needs of the spiritual leader (and/or leadership) take precedence over the needs of the people (congregation/constituency). Spiritual power/authority is used to prop up and protect leadership at the expense of those they serve.

At ReStory, we believe all people are sinners, and all sinners do damage and cause harm to one another. This means we must all regularly grapple with the harm we cause others, continually seeking to grow, heal, reconcile, and find forgiveness. This is a normal part of human-to-human relationship.

However, in church, ministry, and business contexts, because of the addition of power differentials, where certain individuals and/or groups (i.e. boards, leadership teams, etc.) take on roles of leadership and authority, there is a heightened responsibility and accountability with regard to harmful and damaging interactions with those in their charge. While all people are capable of harming others, *leaders* must attend even more carefully to the ways by which they may potentially abuse and harm others.



1 Timothy 3:2-3 sets a high bar for those in ministerial leadership:

Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.¹

Therefore, at no time is there *ever* a reason or justification for a person in leadership to manipulate, humiliate, threaten, rage, diminish, weaponize information, bully, etc. at another person, regardless of what they have done or not done. Because of the power differential, this behavior by a leader automatically constitutes abuse and should be treated as such. Rather than ask, “Has abuse occurred?” biblical leaders who follow the way of Jesus ask, “How has this person been harmed under my/our care, and what may I/we do to restore us?”

Ministerial Leadership Responsibility and Accountability

Because of the biblical standards set forth for those in leadership², it is vital for every incident of potential abuse to be treated and considered with utmost care. Any time leaders of an organization become aware of the experience of harm by *any one* in their care, they are called to an extra measure of humility with an attitude that is “eager to serve” (1 Peter 5) the flock.

Rather than moving towards defensiveness and an investigation into the *right and wrong* of the situation, biblical leaders instead consider the hearts, minds, and souls of the individuals impacted. The deepest concern of a biblical leader is not to launch an exacting investigation to determine whether or not abuse occurred according to a precise definition (as might be found in a court case or trial), but rather to enter the conversation to determine where harm and damage were experienced, to offer tenderness and care for those hurt, and to repair the rupture with that individual through ownership, responsibility, and repentance, including humble reparative steps for the impact of the harm. This, we believe, is the posture of Jesus, who sees beyond the presenting situation to the broken-hearted individual. Biblical leaders do not seek to discount, diminish, or dismiss accusations of wrongdoing, but instead move towards understanding and compassion.

Ministry leaders who are committed to 1 Peter’s admonition to “not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock,” will engage these conversations with

¹ NOTE: Each of these admonitions deserves further clarification and exploration as they apply to the role of leaders in ministry contexts.

² In these and several other Biblical references.



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exemplary humility, kindness, generosity, curiosity, awareness, forgiveness, concern, seeking first to understand rather than being understood, and slow to anger and slow to doubt. ReStory believes it is the responsibility of those in ministry to be among the first called to follow Paul's teaching in Romans 12:9-18:

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.