

# Seminarians who experienced childhood abuse are much more likely to struggle with God.



## WHAT WE STUDIED

Drawing upon survey data from 535 seminarians, we explored the impact of childhood abuse on students' struggles with God, organized religion, and faith.



## WHAT IT MEANS

For students with significant trauma in their backgrounds, it may feel that the faith that drew them to seminary is slipping through their fingers. Struggles with God can further amplify struggles with mental health. Addressing both together rather than separately can aid the path to healing.



## WHAT COULD HELP

**Trauma-Informed Formation:** Pastors-in-training need spaces where their pain can be acknowledged and met with care.

**Healing Before Helping:** If seminary students are going to care for others, they need to understand how trauma may subvert their efforts to lead others.

**Dealing with Doubt:** Offer spiritual formation opportunities that deal honestly with doubts and religious struggles, drawing from the wisdom of the theological tradition.



## WHAT WE FOUND

Our previous research found that seminary students are more likely to have experienced childhood abuse compared to the United States population:

- **Over 50%** reported experiencing emotional abuse.
- They were **twice as likely** as the general population to have endured sexual abuse.
- And the weight of these early traumas doesn't disappear when they enter seminary—it follows them.

In this study, we found that seminary students who experienced childhood abuse are much more likely to experience religious and spiritual struggles, too. These struggles can also contribute to students' mental health, explaining **up to 35% of the connection between childhood trauma and anxiety or depression.**



## WHY IT MATTERS

To echo Henri Nouwen, our wounds can offer healing to those experiencing suffering. But a wounded healer has little to give if their woundedness overwhelms them.

\*from Upenieks, L, D.E. Eagle, and A. Holleman, "Childhood Abuse and the Mental Health of Seminary Students: The Mediating Role of R/S Struggles." *Review of Religious Research* (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034673X241302420>.