

Oliver's story: A psychologist's perspective

I'm Oliver, and I'm a 43-year-old psychologist and a Christian. I have a special interest in treating people who are experiencing eating disorders.

I occasionally have Christians with eating disorders come to see me because they want a psychologist who shares their faith. I find that this can be really tricky. Our professional bodies do have position statements that encourage mental healthcare professionals to consider people's religious and spiritual beliefs. But I have no training in how to do that safely and effectively. It doesn't seem to fit well into a medical model of care. And I don't really know how a person's religion and spiritual journey might interact with their eating disorder.

I do believe that a person's Christian faith can be a resource for recovery from an eating disorder - another tool in the toolbox. But I don't always feel that I'm utilising that to its full potential. I tend to wait for clients to initiate discussions about spirituality, and then use general counselling skills to help them explore the issues that they raise. I occasionally encourage them to discuss their spiritual concerns with their church leaders. But I do hesitate to do that, because I'm concerned that those leaders might do unintentional harm if they don't know about eating disorders and their potential triggers.

Occasionally I'll share a relevant verse of Scripture or theological concept that I think might be helpful with my Christian clients. But I'm not sure how that aligns with professional boundaries. Would people say I am trying to impose my beliefs on clients? I'm very aware of potential professional reprisals if a client were to complain about me. And I'm also conscious that discussing religion and spirituality could be triggering for some clients if they have a history of spiritual trauma or abuse.

Nonetheless, my faith does help me personally in my work. Helping people through eating disorders is heavy work, though also rewarding. It helps sustain me to know that I'm not finally responsible for the outcome. While I do my best, my clients are ultimately in God's hands and care.