



# Faith, spirituality, and domestic violence

## **A research-based factsheet**

Spirituality and faith often play a key role in help-seeking and coping among domestic violence (DV) survivors in the United States. This factsheet reviews key terms, provides resources, and summarizes research from 2003 to 2026 on Latine communities and faith, spirituality, and DV.

## KEY TERMS

**Spirituality** refers to the connection with oneself and something beyond ourselves that can include religion, morals, values, or a set of principles (Paul Victor & Treschuk, 2020).

**Faith** is defined as something that is believed or trusted with strong conviction and promotes hope (Paul Victor & Treschuk, 2020).

**Religion** is defined as a part of a person's life that offers identity, meaning, strength, and hope (Safe Havens, n.d.).

**Domestic violence (DV)** is defined as abuse between partners in an intimate or romantic relationship. Forms can include physical violence, sexual violence, stalking, and psychological aggression (Domestic Violence Hotline, n.d.).

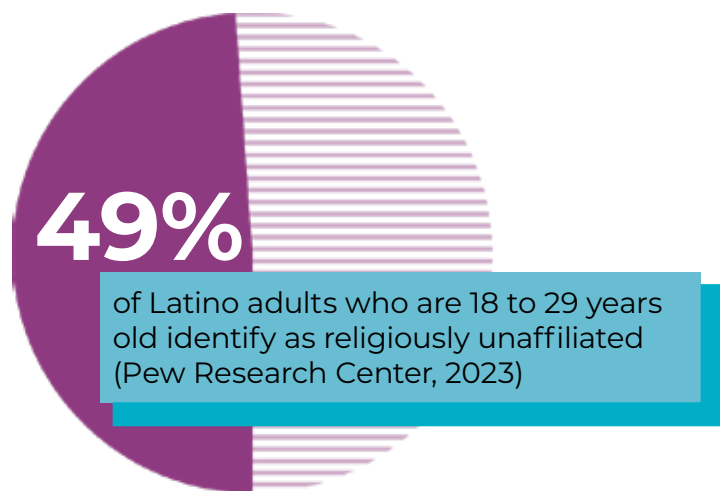
**Intimate partner violence (IPV)** is described as a pattern of behaviors within an intimate relationship that causes physical, sexual, or psychological harm. These include and are not limited to physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological and emotional abuse, and controlling behaviors (Domestic Violence Hotline, n.d.).

**Spiritual abuse** is defined as using spiritual or religious practices and beliefs to manipulate, control, or isolate another person, and it can happen in any religion, belief system, or spiritual practice (Domestic Violence Hotline, n.d.; Safe Havens, 2020).

## Spirituality and faith in Latine communities

Within the Latine community, religious groups and practices vary depending on where individuals were born and live in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2023). Four in ten of Latinos in the United States report that religion is very important to them, especially among Protestant and Evangelical Latinos (Pew Research Center, 2023). Largely, Latine individuals in the United States identify with Catholicism at 43% (Pew Research Center, 2023). This is followed by 15% identifying as Evangelical Protestants, 6% identifying as non-evangelical Protestants, 30% identifying as unaffiliated, and 4% as other faiths. Younger generations within Latine communities in the United States show different trends in religious affiliation.

Along with religion, spirituality practices that exist among the Latine community can include holistic healing practices, mindfulness practices, connection to the land and nature, or traditional folk practices that are influenced by Afro-Latine and Indigenous faiths (Pew Research Center, 2026; Institute for Latino Studies, 2023). The use of traditional healers such as *curanderos*<sup>1</sup>, *sobadores*<sup>2</sup>, *yerberos*<sup>3</sup>, *hueseros*<sup>4</sup>, and *espiritualistas*<sup>5</sup> are highly prevalent within the Indigenous Latine community living in the United States, with a prevalence range from 6% to 67.7% based on demographic differences (Cruz et al., 2022). Curanderismo is a traditional practice that seeks to return the individual's balance, attending to the spirit and body affected by abuse (Hoskins & Padrón, 2018).



## Religion and spirituality in the context of domestic violence

Religion and spirituality play an important role in supporting survivors who have experienced DV. Research has shown that religious coping

1 Curandero/a: A folk healer who uses traditional and holistic medicine to heal the mind, body, and spirit (Torres, E., n.d.).

2 Sobador/a: A folk healer who specializes in deep tissue healing and massage for muscle, joint, and organ ailments (Sandberg, J. C., et al., 2018).

3 Yerberos/a: A folk healer who uses herbal teas, baths, and remedies for physical and emotional healing (Sandberg, J. C., et al., 2018).

4 Huesero/a: A folk healer that specializes in treating broken bones, sprains, and muscle pulls through traditional medicine (Sandberg, J. C., et al., 2018).

5 Espiritualistas: A folk healer who uses traditional holistic methods to heal soul wounds (Sandberg, J. C., et al., 2018).

is linked to a greater likelihood of disclosing abuse to friends or family members (Sabina, 2012) and greater social support among survivors (Gillum T.L. et al., 2006). A study of 54 Mexican American survivors who reported using spirituality as a coping strategy found that those who reported higher levels of spirituality also reported greater resilience, such as the capacity to withstand and recover from stressors (De la Rosa et al., 2016). As a protective factor and coping strategy, this can look like (De la Rosa et al., 2016):

## PROTECTIVE FACTORS



- Providing emotional support and helping manage emotions
- Supporting positive Latine identity
- Creating meaning-making for healing

When survivors seek help for DV based on their spirituality or religion, they often turn to churches or religious institutions (Mercado Diaz et al., 2026; Chaudhry, T., 2025). In a study with advocates, organizational leaders, and Latina survivors (n = 90), findings show the role of churches and religious leaders in DV advocacy can look like (Mercado Diaz et al., 2026):

## ROLE OF CHURCHES AND RELIGIOUS LEADERS



- A physical safe place outside of the survivor's home
- A part of safety planning
- Referrals to other community resources and formal support networks
- Disclosing to trusted church leaders

## Risk factors with faith-based help-seeking

Although religion and spirituality can serve as a protective factor, it can also be a risk factor for survivors (Zapata-Alma, 2022). In Latine communities, religion and spirituality are deeply intertwined with norms such as familismo, marianismo, and machismo (Hernandez, 2003). One qualitative study that explored the experiences of Latina survivors who were exposed to violence and their access to mental health services found that religion was used to justify abuse and discourage leaving an abusive relationship (Zolnikov, 2023). Spiritual abuse can look like (Zapata-Alma, 2022; Safe Havens, 2020):

## SPIRITUAL ABUSE CAN LOOK LIKE



- Guilt and shame around faith
- Isolation from attending religious community or church
- Using religion as a tactic to control behaviors
- Using religion to justify abuse or forgive abuse
- Misusing scripture to impose unhealthy expectations in relationships

## Advocacy and faith-based partnerships

Advocates promote culturally responsive, survivor-centered care by cultivating faith-based knowledge, listening to survivors' spiritual practices, and offering relevant resources and support (Zapata-Alma, 2022). Community-centered care often includes incorporating spiritual coping practices, particularly meaning-making strategies that help individuals interpret experiences of suffering and loss in ways that support healing after traumatic events.

Faith-based partnerships involve community care and training within religious organizations and institutions (Esperanza United, 2021). Faith-based institutions can support Latine survivors through (Esperanza United, 2021; Sullivan et al., 2026):

### HOW FAITH-BASED INSTITUTIONS CAN SUPPORT SURVIVORS



- Challenging harmful traditions or myths
- Partnering with domestic violence organizations
- Providing trauma-informed training for church leaders
- Integrating faith and religious practices into healing processes
- Providing resources such as shelter, food assistance, and childcare

## Resources and tools

- Esperanza United. (2021). *Listening circles with Latin@ faith leaders and community members: Summary*. <https://esperanzaunited.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/APPROVED-Listening-Circles-summary-ENG-08-19-21.pdf>
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