

# Inventory of Complicated Spiritual Grief (ICSG)

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## **PURPOSE**

Grieving precipitates a variety of reactions to the loss of a cherished loved one, including, in some cases, complicated grief (CG; Prigerson et al., 1995)—a protracted, debilitating, and sometimes life threatening response to loss. However, for a subset of spiritually inclined mourners, bereavement also elicits an assault to their long-held religious beliefs or spiritual ways of experiencing and understanding the world. A crisis of faith in the context of bereavement that includes the collapse or erosion of the griever's sense of relationship to God and/or the faith community has been termed *complicated spiritual grief* (CSG; Burke, Neimeyer, McDevitt-Murphy, Ippolito, & Roberts, 2011; Shear et al., 2006), and consistently has been linked with CG (Burke & Neimeyer, 2014; Burke et al., 2011; Burke, Neimeyer, Young, Piazza Bonin, & Davis, 2014; Lichtenthal, Burke, & Neimeyer, 2011; Neimeyer & Burke, 2011).

Thus, understanding the association between CG and CSG is important for clinicians, spiritual leaders, and researchers who seek to develop, implement, and evaluate psycho-spiritual interventions to help grievers who are suffering spiritually following loss. Unfortunately, until recently, a scarcity of grief-specific measurement tools existed to assess spiritual crisis in bereavement, leaving professionals forced to use generic measures of spiritual struggle instead. To bridge this critical gap, we developed, tested, and validated the *Inventory of Complicated Spiritual Grief* (ICSG). To our knowledge, the ICSG is the only validated scale available to assess a client's level of spiritual distress specifically in the wake of the death of a loved one.

The ICSG is an easy-to-use, multidimensional measure of spiritual struggle following loss that can be used in a variety of clinical settings and with a range of research samples. In

responding to indicators of spiritual crisis, the ICSG instructs participants to consider their index loss as they select from four response options that best describes their experience in relation to both God and fellow believers.

## **DEVELOPMENT**

The development of the ICSG arose from efforts by Shear and her research team (2006) to assist Protestant pastors at a Pittsburgh church who requested help in piloting a simple-to-use, faith-based intervention for congregants grieving the death of a loved one. Shear's team first studied the bereavement path of 31 African American church attendees in an effort to ascertain how or if their faith was affected by the loss. Self-reports revealed that griever's reactions spanned the full range of responses from "faith stronger than ever" to "faith seriously shaken." The researchers found that 19% of respondents reported that their faith took a turn for the worse during bereavement—a phenomenon that Shear and her colleagues referred to as "spiritual grief" (p. 7)—a grief-stricken spiritual reaction to an ostensibly premature or unfair loss, believed by the survivor to have occurred as a result of God's doing or not-doing, undermining the griever's previous spiritual ability to make sense of life and death. Shear's team argued that experiencing grief in spiritual terms is similar to experiencing grief psychologically, where reactions to loss are viewed on a continuum of *highly resilient to severely complicated* responses, with the most problematic spiritual response being termed *complicated spiritual grief*. Accordingly, the original 28 items on the ICSG were derived from the results of Shear et al.'s (2006) study, focus group research participants (Burke, Neimeyer, Young, et al., 2014), and ongoing collaboration with other church pastors who routinely work with bereaved parishioners. Representative ICSG items include: *I sense the absence of God more than I do the presence of God*, and *I have withdrawn from my fellowship with other believers*. Importantly, because the content of the items originated

with Christian congregants, both African American and Caucasian, it remains to be established whether the scale can be used meaningfully with mourners in other religious traditions. For example, although its focus on a personal relationship with God may be shared by practitioners of other monotheistic, Abrahamic traditions (i.e. variations of Judaism and Islam), it could be inappropriate for use with those who espouse different spiritual frameworks (e.g., Buddhism, Hinduism, or less theistic spiritual or secular world views). In such cases, other measures might be developed to better assess unique spiritual struggles expressed in these terms.

### **FORMAT AND PSYCHOMETRIC PROPERTIES**

To test the ICSG, Burke, Neimeyer, Holland, et al. (2014) collected data from two samples. The first sample consisted of 152 grieving adults, referred to as the *community sample*, and the second consisted of 152 bereaved undergraduate psychology students at a large, mid-South, state university, referred to as the *college student sample*. The ICSG's psychometric properties were established and an 18-item scale, including two subscales—*Insecurity with God* and *Disruption in Religious Practice*, emerged. This two-factor model was supported using exploratory factor analysis with the community sample. Confirmatory factor analysis with the student sample further revealed this model's generalizability. Additionally, internal consistency and high test-retest reliability of both subscales as well as the total ICSG confirmed our expectations in terms of the scale's satisfactory performance in measuring spiritual distress following loss.

Specifically, using item content, Burke, Neimeyer, Holland, et al. (2014) found that the first seven-item factor structure—*Insecurity with God*—assessed the extent to which the mourner experienced anger toward God in the wake of the loss or struggled with feeling confused or unprotected by God. The second factor structure—*Disruption in Religious Practice*—consisted of 11 items and appeared to measure the extent to which the loss interfered with one's fellowship with the

faith community, worship, or other religious practices. The total score for the ICSG represents the sum of all items, including the two subscales.

In terms of convergent and discriminant validity, total scores as well as subscales scores were correlated with representative scales in expected directions. For instance, in relation to convergent validity, ICSG total scores were statistically significantly correlated with the following measures in both the community and college student samples, respectively: Inventory of Complicated Grief-Revised (ICG-R; Prigerson & Jacobs, 2001;  $r = .34$ ,  $r = .49$ ), the negative religious coping subscale of the Brief RCOPE (Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998;  $r = .43$ ,  $r = .50$ ), and subscales of the Religious Coping Activities Scale (RCA; Pargament, Ensing, Falgout, & Olsen, 1990), including Discontent ( $r = .53$ ,  $r = .57$ ), and Plead ( $r = .31$ ,  $r = .23$ ). In terms of discriminant validity, ICSG total scores were found to have a statistically significant negative association with the following measures in both samples, respectively: positive religious coping subscale of the Brief RCOPE ( $r = -.36$ ,  $r = -.50$ ), subscales of the RCA, including Spiritual Based Coping ( $r = -.49$ ,  $r = -.63$ ), Good Deeds ( $r = -.32$ ,  $r = -.45$ ), Interpersonal Religious Support ( $r = -.15$  n.s.,  $r = -.31$ ), Religious Avoidance ( $r = -.27$ ,  $r = -.42$ ), and meaning making as assessed using the Integration of Stressful Life Experiences Scale (ISLES; Holland, Currier, Coleman, & Neimeyer, 2010;  $r = -.28$ ,  $r = -.48$ ). Thus, higher levels of complicated grief, negative religious coping, religious discontent, and religious pleading were correlated with higher ICSG total scores. Conversely, lower levels of positive religious coping, spiritually based coping, religious good deeds, interpersonal religious support, religious avoidance, and meaning made of loss were correlated with higher ICSG scores.

Tests of incremental validity also revealed that severe levels of complicated grief were related to higher ICSG total scores, even when scores on the negative religious coping subscale of

the Brief RCOPE (a non-grief-specific measure of spiritual struggle) were held constant, as was true in both the community ( $\beta = .22, p = .009$ ) and college student samples ( $\beta = .36, p < .001$ ).

Additionally, in the community and college student samples, respectively, the seven items included in the *Insecurity with God* subscale were found to have good internal consistency ( $\alpha = .89$  and  $.87$ ), as did the 11 items included in the *Disruption in Religious Practice* subscale ( $\alpha = .93$  and  $.96$ ), and the 18 items included in the ICSG as a whole ( $\alpha = .92$  and  $.95$ ).

Finally, using a subset of grievors in the college student sample who provided follow-up data 3-4 weeks after the initial assessment ( $n = 31$ ), results revealed high test-retest correlations for the *Insecurity with God* subscale ( $r = .96, p < .001$ ), *Disruption in Religious Practice* subscale ( $r = .95, p < .001$ ), and total ICSG ( $r = .97, p < .001$ ), indicating the stability of the ICSG over time.

## CLINICAL APPLICATIONS

Spiritually distressed clients and clinicians alike often struggle to find the “right” opening in the therapeutic setting to broach the topic of a faith that has been comprised after the death of a loved one. Whether it be a sense of shame and self-disappointment on the part of the griever, or a sense of uncertainty and caution on the part of the therapist, initiating discussions that include sentiments such as disappointment with God, anger toward fellow believers, confusion about how to make spiritual sense of the death, or other complex emotions, thoughts, and responses is difficult for many mourners. Thus, the ICSG can be clinically useful not only as a means of assessing the trajectory of the survivor’s spiritual path throughout bereavement, but also in ascertaining exactly which spiritual/religious issues might surface for a particular believer in the confines of therapy.

To illustrate this, we highlight below how items on the ICSG helped to identify the spiritual struggle of one severely distraught mother in her spiritual quest for meaning and purpose. Elaine is a 65-year-old, married, African American woman whose 24-year-old son had been murdered in the process of a carjacking 6 years prior to our assessment. Her ICSG-R scores indicated exceptionally

high levels of CG symptoms, and yet existing scales of non-grief-specific spiritual crisis failed to capture the depth of her spiritual struggle that was apparent to both her and the clinical team. Prior to its empirical validation, Elaine agreed to participate in a focus group designed to refine the ICSG's content to better reflect the experience of spiritually inclined mourners. The responses of focus group participants revealed an overarching narrative of resentment and doubt toward God, dissatisfaction with the spiritual support received, and substantial changes in their spiritual beliefs and behaviors following the death.

For instance, in regard to withdrawing from fellowship and worship, participant narratives spoke volumes about the source of clinically significant distress in relation to would-be spiritual supporters: *“Most church members don't know how to deal with grief. It makes them uncomfortable. And so it becomes more about their comfort than your pain. So, you choose who you open up to and confide in, and the rest of the people you avoid. You really can't give them the chance to invalidate you or make you feel [worse]—you just keep them at bay.”* As a whole, the group agreed with Elaine's sentiments in relation to both God and the spiritual community: *“We don't like to admit that we get angry at God...because people would condemn us if we say that, so we don't. We're already hurt and we don't want to be hurt more by them condemning us for revealing our true feelings.”*

Thus, clinically, the ICSG can be useful as a therapeutic conversational springboard, perhaps by simply asking clients to complete the measure between or before sessions, and then encouraging them to "Start anywhere... which of these items that you marked would you like to tell me more about—which are salient for you today?" Discussing these then allows the griever to put into words the unspeakable, as the clinician invites deeper exploration of the client's pain in order to craft and use intervention techniques specifically appropriate for the situation. For instance, often the spiritually distressed griever feels at a loss as to where to direct the overwhelming amount and type

of disappointment, discontent, and resentment welling up inside, sensing that to directly target God or a fellow believer is somehow inappropriate. However, the savvy clinician can assist by guiding a chairing experience, for example, where the griever holds an imaginal conversation with God (or a fellow congregant), allowing for full expression of anger, anguish, and sorrow in a safe, supportive setting.

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**Appendix XX.1**  
**Inventory of Complicated Spiritual Grief (ICSG)**

Please think about your loss of \_\_\_\_\_, and then read each statement carefully. Choose the answer that best describes how you *have* been feeling during the past 2 weeks including today. Please answer these based on how you *actually* feel, rather than what you *believe* you should feel.

Items	Not at all true	A little true	Some what true	Mostly true	Very definitely true
1) I don't understand why God has made it so hard for me.	0	1	2	3	4
2) I have withdrawn from my fellowship with other believers.	0	1	2	3	4
3) I go out of my way to avoid spiritual/ religious activities (e.g., prayer, worship, Bible reading).	0	1	2	3	4
4) I no longer feel safe and protected by God.	0	1	2	3	4
5) I find that spiritual/religious activities are not very fulfilling (e.g., prayer, worship, Bible reading)	0	1	2	3	4
6) I find it impossible to pray.	0	1	2	3	4
7) I struggle with accepting how a good God allows bad things to happen.	0	1	2	3	4
8) I find it difficult to surrender my life to God.	0	1	2	3	4
9) I don't feel as comforted by church fellowship as I used to.	0	1	2	3	4
10) I can't help feeling angry with God.	0	1	2	3	4
11) I don't feel very much like joining in fellowship to praise God or to glorify Him.	0	1	2	3	4
12) The strong guiding light of my faith has grown dim and I feel lost.	0	1	2	3	4
13) I'm confused as to why God would let this happen.	0	1	2	3	4
14) I have lost my desire to worship.	0	1	2	3	4
15) I find it impossible to worship.	0	1	2	3	4
16) I feel my loss is unfair.	0	1	2	3	4
17) I sense the absence of God more than I do the presence of God.	0	1	2	3	4
18) I am a faithful believer, so I don't understand why God did not protect me.	0	1	2	3	4

**Notes:** A sum of all items can be taken to compute a total ICSG score. Likewise, items 1, 4, 7, 10, 13, 16, and 18 can be summed to compute the Insecurity with God subscale, and items 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 11, 12, 14, 15 and 17 can be summed to compute the Disruption in Religious Practice subscale.

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