TESSELLATE INSTITUTE

HURMA PROJECT

Project Apology: The Guide

Foreword

by Dr. Katherine Bullock,
co-founder of the Tessellate Institute

Muslim mental health advocates often lament the ways in which the Muslim community struggles when dealing with its mental health. There is a tendency in the community to stigmatise and ostracise individuals dealing with mental illness, rather than offering understanding, support and encouragement. If a person finds their mental health struggles dismissed by their own community, but are afraid or uncomfortable confiding in a non-Muslim therapist, what are they to do?

I embraced Islam in 1994. For many years since, I've been regularly invited by various Islamic groups and Muslim Students' Associations, both in Canada and the United States, to give talks about "Women and Islam" or "Women's Rights in Islam." These speeches were meant to debunk the widespread notion that Islam oppresses women. Often after my talks, a Muslim woman from the audience would approach me and tell me that what I was saying was all very well, but her lived experience was different. She may have been abused by her uncle, or had her life controlled by her parents, or was being kept at home by her husband. It became very hard for me to keep glossing over these realities when speaking of the status of women in Islam. I began to use the Rubic's cube analogy: things would be perfect if all the parts were in their right place, but Muslims being human, they usually aren't – and as long as that is the case, there will be injustice and suffering.

It's a relief to see that the up-and-coming generation is taking the next steps. We have worked through the last couple of decades to make it acceptable in the community to *talk* publicly about the fact that Muslim women face abuse and experience trauma. When I first became Muslim in the late nineties, I was told we weren't supposed to give Islam a bad name by "airing our dirty laundry in public" – especially considering the prevalence of anti-Muslim sentiment in said public. At the time the only brave voices who spoke out against abuse of Muslim women by their fellow Muslims were some Muslim feminists and "progressives;" they were given the limelight since their critiques reinforced negative Western stereotypes of Islam as oppressive. I began to argue that by their public silence, traditional or conservative Muslims could be mistaken for condoning abuse against women, even if privately they condemned it as unIslamic. The Qur'an commands: "O believers! Stand firm for justice as witnesses for Allah, even if it is against yourselves, your parents, or close relatives (4: 135)." Slowly we have seen more and more Muslims rooted in tradition acknowledge publicly the tragedy that Muslims abuse Muslims and speak out against it as being contrary to the mercy commanded by the Qur'an and demonstrated in the Sunnah of our beloved Prophet (peace be upon him).

In this context, Arij Elmi's *Project Apology* does something even more crucial than simply acknowledging the traumas experienced by Muslim women – it offers tools for coping and healing. I am proud of the Tessellate Institute for supporting this critical work.

About Dr. Bullock

Katherine Bullock received her Ph.D. in political science from the University of Toronto (1999). She is a Lecturer in the Department of Political Science, University of Toronto at Mississauga. Her teaching focus is political Islam from a global perspective, and her research focuses on Muslims in Canada. Bullock is President of Compass Books and was a co-founder and past President of The Tessellate Institute.

Foreword

by Dr. Ingrid Mattson,
Founder & Director of the Hurma Project

In my life as a Muslim, I have witnessed individuals inspired by faith become profound agents of goodness, performing acts of love and sacrifice for others. I have also witnessed shocking abuses of power justified by religious texts and traditions. Wherever we are in relationship with others—in families, in congregations, in spiritual communities, in schools, and in nations—both empowerment and oppression can happen. Any Muslim who has reached the age of majority has a moral responsibility (*taklif*) to work for the proliferation of benefits, and the prevention or mitigation of harms, for themselves and for others. Our first responsibility, however, is to protect our *own body*, intellect, and spiritual self from abuse and harm, to the extent that we are capable. Sometimes, this is not possible, but we should know—no matter who wants to convince us otherwise—that it is not piety to accept the harm perpetrated against us by others; their abuse benefits neither them nor us. Our safety is our right.

As a community, we have a collective obligation (*fard kifayah*) to put in place systems of knowledge, oversight, and care to prevent harm when possible, to stop it when it is ongoing, and to provide paths for healing and support for those who have been harmed. In far too many cases, religious authorities fail in their responsibility to prevent or respond to the abuse. Beyond specific instances of abuse, the religious community is implicated when we continue to preach "obedience" to parents, husbands, or scholars rather than focus on the *responsibility* of those who have any measure of power or authority to, above all, do no harm.

These are the values and principles which underlie the Hurma Project. For years, I have tried to respond to individual cases of abuse and attempted to work with various organizations to put procedures in place. It became clear to me that the issues underlying spiritual and familial abuse in the Muslim community were so complex, and the abuse of power so misunderstood, that a major, long-term project of research, education and advocacy was needed to address them. However, I did not want to make abuse the center of our work; instead, our approach centers the concept of *hurma*—the sacred inviolability of the person. The teaching of the Prophet Muhammad that forms the foundation of our work is that an individual's *hurma* is equal in value to the sanctity of sacred times and sacred places. We affirm that human beings are endowed by God with this sacred right, and that nothing can be used to justify its violation.

I am excited about Project Apology because it focuses on the women themselves, giving them space and support to find the words that will enable them to move towards healing. I am grateful to Ms. Elmi for this important, creative, and potentially transformative research, and the Hurma Project is proud to support it.

About Dr. Mattson

Dr. Ingrid Mattson is the London and Windsor Community Chair in Islamic Studies at Huron University College at Western University in Canada. She had previously lectured at the Hartford Seminary and served as Director of the Macdonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations. Dr.Mattson is the former president of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), and the author of the highly acclaimed The Story of the Qur'an. *In 2018, Dr. Mattson founded the Hurma Project, which is dedicated to research, education, training, and developing protocols of professional oversight for imams, chaplains, mosque boards and other community structures.*

What is Project Apology?

Project Apology is a community-based research project and limited podcast series that documents psychic trauma and familial abuse amongst young women in the Canadian Muslim community. The following guide is a companion to the Project Apology podcast available at projectapology.com.

About the Author

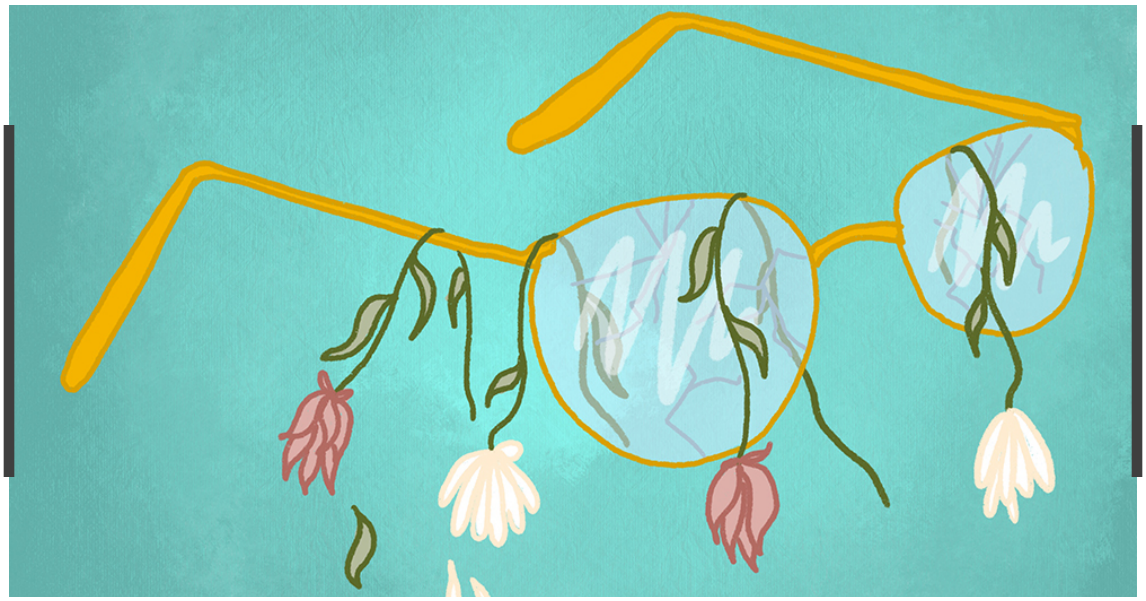
Arij Elmi is a social worker, psychotherapist, and doctoral candidate in Social Justice Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. Her research is situated at the intersections of decolonial humanism, Critical Muslim Studies and Islamic Feminism. Her research has focused on Black and racialized experiences of fatigue, Muslim engagement in pre- and post-marital counseling, and the affective life of Islamophobia. She serves as a board member of both the Tessellate Institute and Hard Feelings Mental Health.

About the Tessellate Institute

The Tessellate Institute is an independent, non-profit research institute that explores and documents the lived experiences of Muslims in Canada. Its projects are community-based and its publications are intended as a valuable resource to academics, journalists, policy-makers, and the general public.

About Hurma Project

Hurma Project is a resource for Muslim community leaders and organizations seeking principles and processes to prevent and respond to abuse in Muslim spaces. Hurma Project is committed to upholding the sacred inviolability of each person in Muslim spaces by elucidating the special responsibilities of those holding power and authority and by educating those who are vulnerable about their God-given dignity and rights.



Disclaimer

This guide, the podcast, and our website are not intended as a substitute for mental health care. Please seek the advice of a qualified mental health provider with any questions you may have regarding your mental health. A list of resources for housing, mental health counseling and family violence is available at our website projectapology.com.

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Overview

What is Project Apology About?

Project Apology seeks to address the experience of psychic trauma in young Canadian Muslim women. **Psychic trauma** refers to a wounding of the soul or the mind. Psychic trauma may occur in tandem with, or as a consequence of, emotional abuse, physical abuse, spiritual abuse, sexual abuse and/or neglect. While psychic trauma occurs in all ethno-racial and religious communities, victims of familial abuse in Canadian Muslim communities may additionally experience a specific genre of psychic trauma known as **cultural betrayal trauma**. Cultural betrayal trauma may occur when both parties in an abusive situation—the injurer and the injured–also experience forms of oppression, including anti-Black racism and Islamophobia. Cultural betrayal trauma has an impact on whether the injured party discloses their abuse and seek mental health care services, as they may fear negatively portraying their community, or losing their community connections, in the process (Gomez & Gobin, 2020). While earlier research has examined whether mental health stigma in the Muslim community is a barrier to accessing mental health services, the framework of cultural betrayal trauma considers whether those seeking help are deterred by experiences of discrimination (Ali & North, 2019; Koenig & Al Shohaib, 2019). In the context of **gendered anti-Muslim hostility**[1] that is endemic in North America, *Project Apology* aims to provide a therapeutic process that allows young Muslim women to respond to psychic trauma related to familial abuse while also minimizing potential cultural betrayal trauma.

In order to learn more about how they experience and cope with psychic trauma, we asked 17 Muslim Canadian women between the ages of 22-42 to participate in an interview that featured a process of unilateral forgiveness. Forgiveness is at the centre of restorative justice models, including the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, and is also increasingly examined as a process for psychological research and therapy. For some, forgiveness may be a tool of emancipation; however, for others, a cultural or religious expectation of forgiveness may actually be used as a weapon in their abuse. As a moral practice, forgiveness draws boundaries around acceptable conduct, constructing what is permissible within a community, and what is not be tolerated. Given the constructive power of forgiveness and its growing use in therapy, our project poses the question of whether therapeutic apologies can be a useful process for addressing young Muslim women's psychic trauma.

Project Apology is interested in a form of forgiveness that we are often less familiar with—**unilateral forgiveness**. Forgiveness is understood to be unilateral "if it is granted independently of—and prior to—any acknowledgement of wrongdoing on the part of the recipient" (Watkins, 2015, p. 20). Unilateral forgiveness differs from more common types of forgiveness because reconciliation and relationship repair are not its aim. We chose the process of unilateral forgiveness to examine whenever it can retain the constructive power that interpersonal forgiveness offers without putting participants at risk of further re-injury.

In the *Project Apology* podcast series, we feature seven young Muslim women from Toronto, Ontario and Montreal, Quebec who each wrote a letter of apology—addressed to themselves—from the perspective of one of their parents. These letters describe the different forms of familial abuse that these women experienced,

[1] Gender anti-Muslim hostility was coined by Dr. Juliane Hammer to refer to the representation of Muslim men as uniquely violent and Muslim women as in need of rescue from them. Gender anti-Muslim hostility also highlights the anti-Muslim discourse that targets Muslim women as targets of hate crimes and discrimination (Hammer, 2019, p. 37-39)

including physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect. After reading her letter, each woman discusses her experience with the process and provides more context to the events and environments described in her letter.

As you listen to the podcast, you will learn more about therapeutic apology and see the impact it had on each woman. Each episode is accompanied by a discussion guide that highlights new concepts that are mentioned and features questions that can help you reflect on what you just heard. After listening, you may be inspired to write a therapeutic apology of your own, either by yourself, with a friend, or with a therapist. To help you, we've included The Apology Guide in the end of this report, as well as a list of some additional resources for addressing psychic trauma you may wish to consider.

Who might find a therapeutic apology beneficial?

Recovery from psychic trauma is understood to involve a three-stage process: **safety and stabilization**; **remembrance and mourning**; and **reconnection and integration** (Herman, 1997). The therapeutic apology can be a useful process in the second stage of trauma. The focus of the second stage—**remembrance and mourning**—is to make meaning out of the psychic trauma. Examples of psychic trauma can include name calling, being physically assaulted or threatened with physical harm, or a parental absence. If you have lingering feelings of anger, shame, or sadness that relate to something you parent did or did not do, and feel that you have the emotional capacity to manage these overwhelming feelings, writing and reading an apology may be a useful process for you.

It's important to recognize that while the therapeutic apology process may change your feelings about your parent and/or your feelings about your relationship with them, it does not change your parent themselves. Even though your feelings towards them have shifted, your parent may continue to be abusive towards you. It is important to consider how you can care for yourself and protect yourself against further abuse.

Who might not benefit from a therapeutic apology?

The *first stage* of trauma, focused on **safety and stabilization**, precedes remembrance and mourning. The safety and stabilization stage prioritizes feelings of safety in one's body and environment. In this stage, discussing difficult emotions that relate to familial abuse may be overwhelming and hard to manage. In the first stage of trauma, you may be coping with difficult emotions by engaging in self-harming behaviours, including drugs or alcohol abuse. You may be experiencing suicidal thoughts. If you believe you may be in the first stage of trauma, please consult our Resources for Addressing Psychic Trauma. The apology may be not be an ideal process for you until you build your capacity for soothing difficult emotions.

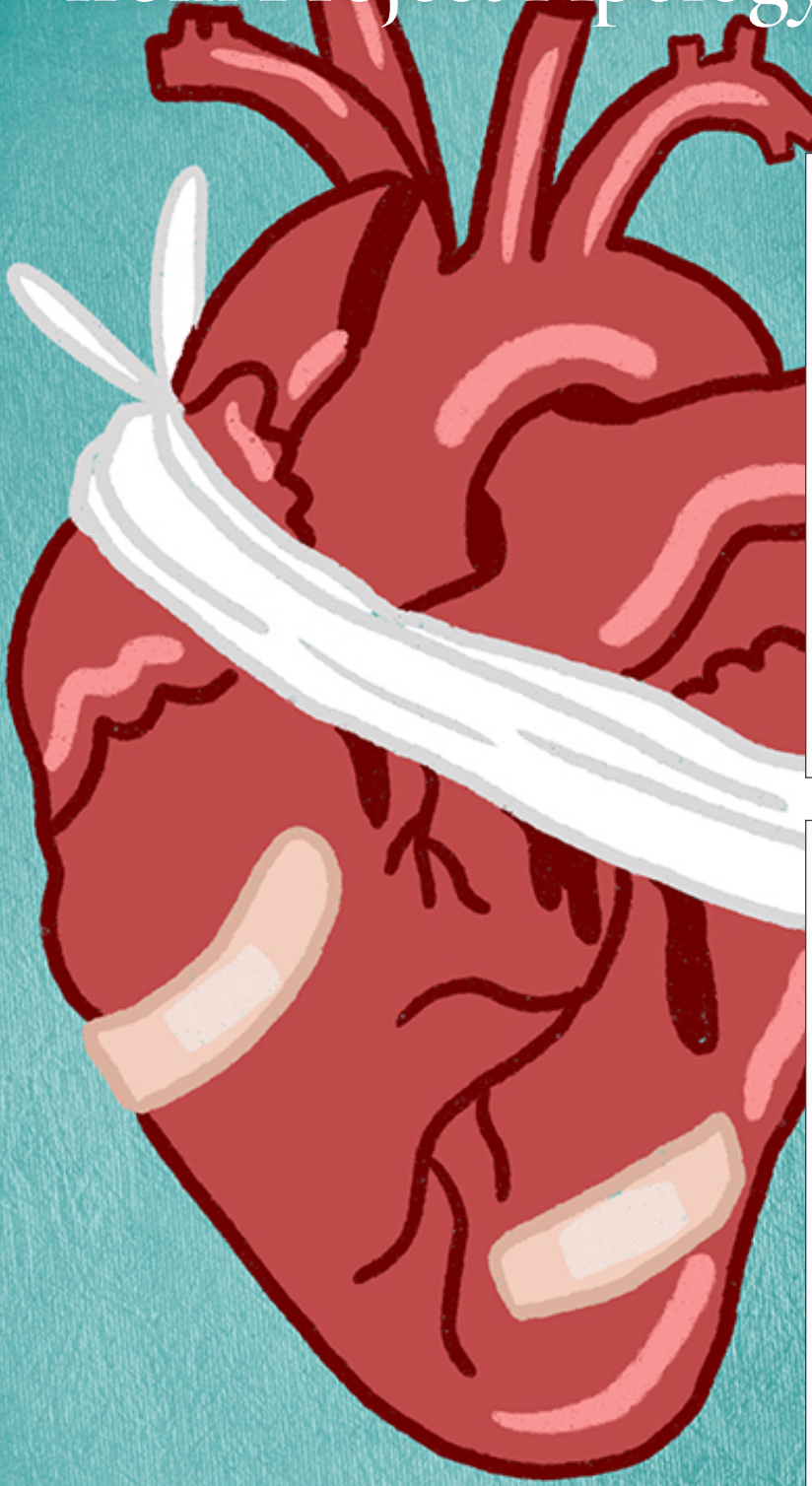
The apology is also not recommended for addressing a parent who has sexually abused you, or if you have a diagnosis of a disorder that impedes your ability to grasp reality, such as antisocial personality disorder, narcissistic personality disorder, posttraumatic stress, or a psychotic disorder. This is based on the assumption that a brief intervention may not be suitable for individuals who are victims of incest or individuals who have a serious mental health issue (Greenberg, Warwar & Malcom, 2008). If you believe the above applies to your situation, please consider seeking the help of a qualified mental health professional.

Origins of the Therapeutic Process

This project uses a modified therapeutic apology process derived from Emotion Focused Family Therapy (EFFT) and Emotion Focused Therapy (EFT). Emotion Focused Therapy (EFT) was developed by South African-Canadian Dr. Leslie Greenberg and has roots in Person-Centered and Gestalt therapies. A key tenet of EFT is dialectical constructivism, which views emotions as central to the process of creating change in external experiences (Greenberg & Pascual-Leone, 2001). EFT practitioners support individuals in ascribing language to previously unconceptualized, automatic emotional reactions. In the EFT framework, we have different parts of ourselves that may criticize us, or cause us to feel anxious/depressed. EFT therapists facilitate conversations between your primary/core self and the critical, or anxious/depressed parts of you. EFT therapists also facilitate conversations between you and an imagined other person that you may have unresolved issues with. Through these conversations, EFT therapists help their clients evoke new and adaptive emotional schemes that can change the ways in which they relate to themselves and others.

Emotion Focused Therapy research has examined both interpersonal and unilateral forgiveness in the context of individual, couple and family therapy. In both interpersonal and unilateral forgiveness, emotional injuries are understood to encompass "a relational transgression in which the foundational expectations of the close relationship are shattered" (Meneses & Greenberg, 2014, p. 52). Thus, emotional injuries relate to events that cause the injured party to have negative feelings such as sadness, anger and blame towards the injuring party. The developers of Emotion Focused Family Therapy, Dr. Joanne Dolhanty and Dr. Adele Lafrance, adapted interpersonal and unilateral forgiveness for use with parents of children with eating disorders. Initial research on the effectiveness of therapeutic apologies demonstrated that parental feelings of self-blame and fear were reduced, and their feelings of self-efficacy were increased (Stillar et al., 2016). Given these findings, there appears to be a connection between unilateral forgiveness and an increase of self-efficacy amongst parents who use the process (Lafrance Robinson, Dolhanty & Greenberg, 2013a). Parental self-efficacy was particularly important, as it was associated with a reduction in their child's depression, anxiety and eating disorder symptoms. In the context of eating disorder research, when the self-efficacy of parents was increased, their child's symptom alleviation continued for six months after their parent's participation in the intervention (Lafrance Robinson et al., 2013b).

Findings on Therapeutic Apologies from Project Apology



"I feel better. I feel like that was a really long time coming. Like a lifetime coming and something that I carry all the time and effects everything in my life. And you just sort of push through. Even growing up, you know something is wrong. But it's not until now in my 30s when I'm actually examining it and really trying to do the work of seeing how this has impacted me. But I feel better. I feel like it had to come out. It was supposed to come out." – Jasmine

"I think before writing this I couldn't tangibly name my needs in terms of what I wanted to hear or have them acknowledged. But now I can say this is what I need to hear from him or have for myself now. Like it's almost like when you're experiencing emotional abuse or harm and you can't always name it. Or you can't make it a tangible thing. Now for me, the harm that he's done isn't just this thing that's lingering in the air. I can be like hey he did these things, the impact was this and I need this acknowledgement. It's more like articulated." – Lily

"I found this to be relieving to be honest. I don't speak about this in therapy sessions. I haven't really found a therapist that I connect with to really go deeply into these things. And I don't go deeply into them unless I feel there is a sense of safety there." – Farah

"I think what this apology has done for me personally is that it's helped reinforce that yes this is what you're experiencing and yes this is what she's experiencing but now…that's why I started that, where do we begin? Where do we begin from here?" – Reem

"Catharsis. Much needed catharsis. Because what I feel a lot of people around me struggling with is their idea of not being able to verbalize what they feel. Or not allowing themselves that opportunity because it just bottles up and it just bottles in there and they don't want to express it. And it does come out in other ways that they don't even realize. So yes, it's an exercise which could just allow you to relieve yourself of the emotions and the words in it." - Hajar

Conclusion

> "...if Muslim women don't give themselves the gift of speaking about their experiences, there's other younger women and older women who really are going to believe that they are paranoid and that whatever they are feeling is not real. So, every time I speak my truth, I know that I participate in rooting another woman in her truth."
>
> – Idil, *Project Apology*

As Idil articulates so poignantly above, Muslim women deserve to have the space, whether private or public, to address their psychic traumas in a safe and meaningful way. In our research project and resulting podcast, young Muslim women reconcile with psychic traumas that not only challenged their relationships with their parents, but also served to challenge the boundaries of what it means to be Muslim. From hiding a queer identity from a parent to reconciling with a parent's inadequate response to a child's disclosure of childhood sexual abuse—the topics that may divide us as a community are being first faced within the home, and within the context of a parent-child relationship. Through *Project Apology*, we learned that therapeutic apologies, like other forms of forgiveness, also carry constructive power.

We hope you will join us in these critical conversations, and in ensuring that young Muslim women have the space to root themselves through their speech, writing and creativity.

The Apology Guide

This experiential activity is derived and adapted from Emotion Focused Family Therapy (EFFT).

Step One

To begin the process, write a letter from your parent/caregiver addressed to you. This letter will have five parts:

1- Say what they are apologizing for;

> Clarify the events that your parent is apologizing for.

2- Validate the painful emotions these actions or events created in you;

> Express appreciation for what it was like for you.

3- Acknowledge the unique impact of the painful emotions (label the specific emotion);

> What has been the impact of the emotional experience caused by the pain? In what ways has this shaped your life?

4- Apologize;

> Say sorry.

5- Say what they should have done differently;

> State what could have been, and what will change.

Step Two

Deliver this apology **from the perspective of your parent to you**.

> Sit in one chair across from an empty chair.

> Imagine yourself in that empty chair. How old would you have been when the events took place? Imagine yourself at that age.

> Read the apology that you have written to the empty chair.

Notes

Write the apology from the 'pure' side of your parental figure. If you anticipate that they would be defensive, reflect on what might be behind that defensiveness. What is it that they are too afraid to acknowledge and apologize for? This is an opportunity for them to 'own their part' and acknowledge how their actions impacted you.

Step one, part two: it is important to validate the painful emotions that resulted from the injury. Try to validate at least three different emotions. Use the following prompts as needed:

> You must have felt so scared because…

> You must have felt so sad because…

> You must have felt so ashamed because….

> You must have felt so angry because…

Step one, part three: it is important to acknowledge the behavioural patterns that stem from the painful emotions. In what ways do you avoid feeling sad/scared/ashamed/angry? How have the painful emotions contributed to your own emotions? Emotional avoidance strategies may include over/under eating, self-harm, excessive worrying, not making decisions, substance use/abuse, avoiding romantic relationships, etc.

Step one, part five: many of the painful emotions derive from meaning violations, which are events that "[shake] the foundations of what we thought we understood" (Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012). What did you believe your parental figure should have done? Protect you? Nurture you? Acknowledge those expectations here.

The apology can evoke strong emotions such as anger and sadness. Be sure to ground yourself after writing and delivering the apology. Grounding activities that relate to the body include: taking a deep breath; releasing gripped hands; standing tall; taking a brief walk; listening to a song you enjoy; orienting to and labeling objects in the room; and/or calling a friend you trust (Frankford, nd). Grounding activities that relate to Islamic spirituality can include: making dua (meditation); making wudu (ablution); reading or listening to Qur'an; praying two extra rakats; listening to your favourite nasheed; and reading about the female Sahaba.

Resources for Addressing Psychic Trauma

Getting Bigger Than What's Bugging You

focusingresources.com/?portfolio=get-bigger-than-whats-bugging-you

Free Five-Day e-course that introduces the concept of focusing for addressing difficult emotions

Emotional Self-Exploration

www.youtube.com/watch?v=mN1r_Qnt0cw

Using principles of Emotion Focused Therapy, this video provides a four-step process for moving through a trigger

Mindfulness Training for Emotional Resilience

www.rachaelfrankford.com/materials.html

Using principles of mindfulness training, this resource offers meditations for the senses, breath, standing and self-compassion

Addressing Childhood Sexual Trauma

Haines, S. (2007). Healing sex: A mind-body approach to healing sexual trauma. San Francisco, CA: Cleis Press.

Addressing Racial Trauma

Menakem, R. (2017). My grandmother's hands: Racialized trauma and the pathway to mending our hearts and bodies. Las Vegas, NV: Central Recovery Press.

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