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Coping After Shunning: Experiences of Former Jehovah's Witnesses in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

The process of being shunned by the Jehovah's Witnesses community for failing to meet its expected moral and behavioural standards is a complex experience that may significantly impact individuals' physical and emotional well-being. This study explores qualitatively the coping strategies adopted by individuals who have experienced religious shunning, drawing on a specific segment of findings from a broader United Kingdom-based study. Twenty-one former Jehovah's Witnesses who were officially shunned were interviewed online or by phone, and the data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Two overarching themes were identified: personal stagnation and personal progression. Some participants initially adopted coping strategies shaped by their previous experiences within the community, including risk-taking behaviours and emotional withdrawal, which reflected the continued influence of the group's belief system and hindered their psychological recovery. In contrast, the majority of participants demonstrated resilience and psychological growth. They employed adaptive coping mechanisms such as cognitive reappraisal, information seeking, social support, and acts of advocacy that enabled them to reframe their experiences, distance themselves from the group's control, and reclaim a coherent sense of self. These findings underscore the varied responses to religious shunning and the significance of identity processes in shaping post-shunning adjustment.

Keywords Religious shunning · Jehovah's Witnesses · Coping mechanisms · Personal challenge · Personal progression

Shunning is one of the oldest sanctions adopted to regulate an individual's behaviour (Forsdyke, 2000, 2005). It is a form of reproof for conduct or a way of thinking that deviates from approved

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norms, and it can take the form of a sporadic, brief episode, such as silent treatment, or a targeted treatment that extends over time (Forsdyke, 2000, 2005). Shunning can take place in different social settings (e.g., Harvey et al., 2019; Quadrelli et al., 2023), including religious contexts, with different religious denominations adopting shunning in various ways, from the unrepentant individual losing the privilege of partaking in the ecclesiastical blessings and sacraments to more extreme forms of discipline that involve the religious community's complete negation of any social interactions with the wrongdoer (Aebi-Mytton, 2017; Wesner, 2015). This article focuses on one specific religious group that, to this day, applies religious shunning, namely, the Jehovah's Witnesses community.

The Jehovah's Witnesses established their presence in Britain in 1881 (Watch Tower Bible & Tract Society of Pennsylvania, 1959, p. 32), and, according to their official website, as of 2024 there are 144,579 publishers (those who are active in evangelising) in Britain organised into 1,565 congregations, with 2,372 new individuals baptised in 2025 (JW.ORG, 2026).

When Jehovah's Witness individuals fall short of the community's expected moral and behavioural precepts, they can be shunned after their case is reviewed by a panel of elders. Religious shunning, as practised by Jehovah's Witnesses, involves the entire community, including the individual's own family, suspending social interactions with shunned individuals. This extends to deliberately avoiding and ignoring the individual who has been removed from the congregation (JW.ORG, 2002, 2013).

Research indicates that the impact of ostracism and social exclusion on individuals' lives is serious and may be long-lasting, ranging from deterioration of physical well-being to psychological and emotional impairment (Jin & Josephs, 2017; Leschak & Eisenberger, 2019; Rudert et al., 2021; Williams & Nida, 2011). Although the specific phenomenon of religious shunning is still under-researched, current research seems to indicate deleterious effects on individuals who have been shunned by a religious community (Berger, 2015; Grendele et al., 2022; Ransom et al., 2021). These include a decline in physical and psychological well-being, emotional struggle, contemplation of suicide, and suicide (Grendele et al., 2023; Ransom et al., 2021).

Individuals subjected to religious shunning may adopt different strategies to manage and cope with their new circumstances. According to Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck (2016), the concept of coping encompasses the way an individual "detects, appraises, deals with and learns from stressful encounters" (p. 350). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) conceive coping as a mediating factor between a stressor and its repercussions on the physical and psychological well-being of the individual. As Freire et al. (2020) state, "Coping would come to be defined by cognitive and behavioural efforts employed in response to external or internal demands that the individual deems to be threats to their well-being" (p. 2).

Despite the abundance of research on the coping strategies individuals adopt to counterbalance challenging or traumatic experiences, studies that examine how former members cope with being shunned by religious communities are scarce. Therefore, this article addresses the gap in the scholarly literature by exploring in depth the participants' behaviours and reactions in response to being shunned by the Jehovah's Witnesses community.

Method

This study was designed as exploratory qualitative research, aiming to valorise the depth and intensity of participants' experiences of coping with religious shunning (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Central to this approach is the view of participants as

knowledgeable agents whose subjective interpretations and meaning-making processes are essential to understanding the phenomenon. Within this framework, participants shared personal accounts of how they made sense of and coped with being shunned, providing insights into the psychological, social, and emotional impact of this event in their lives.

The research received ethical clearance from the School of Human and Social Sciences Ethics Panel of the University of West London. Twenty-one British Jehovah's Witnesses who had been officially shunned were recruited by posting an invitation on social media platforms, such as Reddit and Facebook, that host large communities of former members. Written informed consent for participation in the study was obtained from all participants before scheduling videoconferencing or phone interviews. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2019) was used to analyse the rich data, and two themes and six subthemes were identified (Fig. 1).

This article presents a specific subset of findings from a broader study conducted as part of the first author's PhD, the full results of which are reported in the final thesis (Grendele, 2022). The study explored three aspects of the religious shunning experience, namely, the individuals' journey from becoming a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses community to leaving the group (Grendele et al., 2024), the impact that shunning has on individuals' lives (Grendele et al., 2022), and the coping strategies adopted by former members to normalise their new circumstances post-shunning.

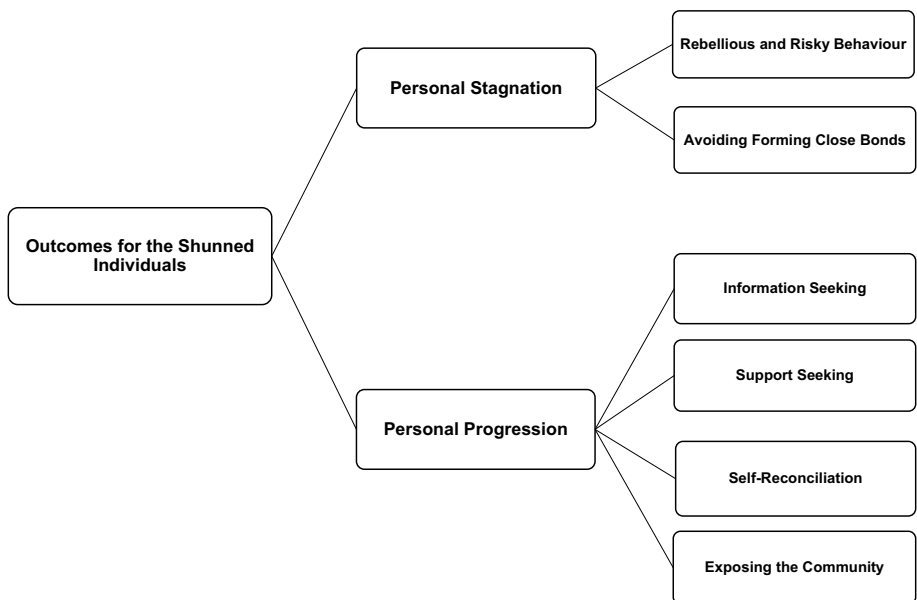


Fig. 1 Cognitive map of themes and subthemes

Results

Two overarching themes were identified in the data analysis: Personal Stagnation and Personal Progression. These themes encompass the various coping mechanisms adopted by shunned individuals, in the form of both personal challenges and personal development.

Personal Stagnation

The initial part of this article delves into the accounts of those participants who expressed feeling unprepared to cope with the experience of being shunned. Even though they were no longer active members of the community, their decisions bore the imprint of their experiences within Jehovah's Witnesses to some extent. Despite being liberated from a controlling environment through the process of shunning, participants continued to be influenced by the community's belief system. Consequently, they adopted coping mechanisms that reflect a sense of personal stagnation. Two prominent subthemes emerged; one highlighted coping mechanisms characterised by rebellious and risky behaviour, while the other emphasised how some participants deliberately avoided forming close connections with others.

Rebellious and Risky Behaviour Several participants expressed a desire to defy the moral code of the Jehovah's Witnesses community after leaving, leading to engagement in rebellious and risky behaviours. For instance, Emma says,

I lived, whilst I was abroad during that period, a life that was extremely hedonistic. It would be fair to say that I was like a child let loose in a sweets shop—I wanted to try everything. I wanted to learn about everything. I put myself in some very dangerous situations or very risky situations, and some of the consequences were quite awful.

She further explains:

I took drugs, I had sex with loads of people, I went to concerts. I enjoyed all of the things I had been forbidden before 30 years of age."

Other participants adopted a similar lifestyle after they were shunned. Tom, for example, says, "

I became quite hedonistic for a while."

From the Jehovah's Witnesses' perspective, it appears that some participants' moral compass of what is deemed right and wrong behaviour changed and with it their approach to life, which participants described as hedonistic. The desire to experiment and the new lifestyle they adopted were contrary to their previous lifestyle. The transition from the tightly bound and prescriptive moral code enforced within the Jehovah's Witnesses community resulted in the need to unleash themselves. Thus, it seems likely that when leaving a controlling environment, the sense of freedom the individual suddenly experiences can play out to the extreme.

Without restraints, insatiable for what freedom has to offer, the individual ends up putting themselves in “very risky situations” (Emma), paralleling some of the experiences of children who grow up in an authoritarian environment (Trinkner et al., 2012). The extremism that characterises an individual’s life outside the community appears to be a strategy towards self-affirmation and independence:

My attitude was sort of “screw you,” along and again, find new friends, and not be a Jehovah’s Witness. . . . And I spiralled a bit out of control, actually. I was partying a lot and had, you know, quite dangerous behaviour, being quite unsafe. And I think that was my way of coping with things. (Erin)

The participants’ accounts suggest that the individuals attempted to free themselves from the Jehovah’s Witnesses label, removing themselves from their past life, their initial identity, and the rules they had to follow. This new, intemperate lifestyle appeared to be a defiant declaration of emancipation. The individual engaged in a set of behaviours that were diametrically opposite to the community’s standard of conduct as a way of rebelling against the Jehovah’s Witness authority. The risky behaviour that participants engaged in could also be interpreted as a strategy to process and cope with the pain of rejection by the community. A similar process has been reported among children and adolescents who are victims of trauma and may engage in risky behaviour in order to mask, escape, or regulate painful emotions (Kianpoor & Bakhshani, 2012).

Erin’s account provides further depth in understanding the possible reasons for engaging in unhealthy behaviours as an attempt to cope with religious shunning:

The sex with people I thought at the time would buy me love. I think that’s in hindsight what I was trying to do.

She described engaging in unhealthy behaviours as an attempt to establish an emotional connection with people. Some individuals who have been shunned by Jehovah’s Witnesses may engage in sexual promiscuity to secure immediate feelings of closeness in an effort to fill the emotional void left by losing their family and friends.

In some cases, risky behaviours also appeared to be a form of self-punishment.

I know from my friend when she came out . . . in her mind, she still believed that if Armageddon would come, she was going to be destroyed. So, she said to me, “If that happens, I’m going to be destroyed. I’m going to be killed. I might run wild because I’m going to die anyway.” And so, she said she ended up becoming very immoral, she lost a lot of her intrinsic values because she thought, “Well, what is the matter, I’m dead in God’s eyes, who’s going to destroy me anyway.” (Carrie)

According to the research data, shunned individuals may develop disempowering emotions because of the high level of indoctrination that they were exposed to when they were members. These disempowering feelings ensue from harsh inner criticism that mirrors the messages received from the community, and the individual may feel compelled to continue perpetuating the messages of punishment and retribution. This aligns with Maier and Seligman (1976), who posit that following constant exposure to uncontrollable negative events, the individual may develop the belief that they are unable to control or change the situation, which can lead to a sense of inevitability, passivity, and resignation. The individual then chooses to fully unleash themselves because of the punishment that they are convinced

they will face. From the participants' accounts, following a highly moral path seems futile because retribution appears to be unavoidable. This suggests that, although an individual may physically leave the community, the detachment process from the community's beliefs is not straightforward. The rebellious behaviour some of the participants engaged in was not the result of regained mental freedom; rather, the behaviour perpetuated the doctrine they had been taught. Despite opportunities outside the community, some of the participants' religious beliefs appeared to be deeply ingrained, and, therefore, they were unable to assimilate into their new life:

But deeply inside, despite my behaviour, I still believed everything that I had been brainwashed with. And so therefore, the immense sense of guilt that I carried with me was the most, I would say, contributing factor to the psychological breakdown. (Emma)

Emerging from what the participants said, the individual appears to be torn between their past self, who is still judged according to Jehovah's Witnesses' criteria, and their new self, who is trying to surface as an independent and self-reliant person. The individual stagnates, still psychologically tied to the community, "unable to cut themselves free from the interdictions of their past moral and belief frameworks" (Hookway & Habibis, 2013, p. 10). As Maggie put it, "

It's painful to recondition your head because you are very programmed. And you have to constantly break the trigger, break the trigger."

This suggests that the individual, in order to progress and achieve mental freedom from the community's influence, has to undergo a reconditioning process by "constantly breaking the trigger," as Maggie underlines. However, this process is both painful and effortful:

You don't need them to tell you what to do because it indoctrinates you. . . . That's how it works. You don't need to be sitting on a chair in the Kingdom Hall. It works to control you because you beat yourself. . . . [Now] I'm actually looking in the mirror and say, "I'm okay. I'm alright. I'm not upsetting God and I'm not upsetting the elders." (Maggie)

From the participants' accounts, the concept of the panopticon emerges, becoming a powerful symbol of normative power that extends into the everyday life of the individual. The individual's diminishment and submission appear to be no longer granted by the persistent presence and intervention of the authority but by the internalisation of such a presence. Authority seems to change from being an external, physical entity to being an internalised omniscience that then develops as self-discipline (Foucault, 1995). The individual converts to being their own judge and then the executor of the punishment.

Avoiding Forming Close Bonds The data revealed another prevalent theme, which is that participants actively avoided forming close bonds. Identity is maintained through principles, such as continuity, distinctiveness, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. However, shunning threatens core identity principles (Breakwell, 1986, 2001). To protect their sense of self and identity, individuals may avoid contexts in which those principles could be threatened again and distance themselves from others to preserve a sense of control and

self-coherence, alleviate emotional pain and distress, and safeguard themselves from potential recurring experiences: “

I’m quite careful about who I allow to become close to me and it’s very few people. I have a massive, massive fear of rejection and abandonment. And it’s very, very clear where that comes from” (Emma).

Per the respondents’ accounts, a shunned individual may begin to avoid closeness to minimise the possibility of re-experiencing feelings of abandonment. Because of past interpersonal wounds caused by being shunned, individuals may develop a heightened sensitivity to rejection, which can lead to social withdrawal, defensive behaviour, and reluctance to form close bonds for fear of being hurt again (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Some participants seemed to appraise shunning as a traumatic event as their fear of future rejection and abandonment is poignant and enduring. To avoid re-experiencing rejection, the individual may recoil from forming close bonds. Dylan described a similar preventive measure.

I mean, I just had to go through a whole new process of trying to find new friends and make new friends and get involved in this new social group, something, which was hard for me but then there’s also this certain like wall I have to build up to protect because, I mean, I’ve been hurt so badly. . . . I wanted to make sure I didn’t get hurt again. (Dylan)

The findings suggest that some individuals experience a significant sense of betrayal post-shunning. Losing meaningful connections with family and friends is painful. Feeling betrayed by trusted people and the fear of re-experiencing a repeat in the future appear to be the underlying reasons some former members fortify any relationship, fearing that they will be hurt by others. There is a parallel between the behaviour of those participants who actively avoided forming close bonds with others and that of some survivors of childhood interpersonal abuse. Individuals who have experienced trauma at the hands of trusted relationships and family members are prone to avoid closeness (DePrince & Freyd, 2007). This type of trauma has been termed betrayal trauma (Freyd, 1994). Because of betrayal trauma, the fear of being hurt again may hamper the formation of new close relationships or reliance on a supportive network.

To alleviate painful emotions, some participants appeared to turn inward to cope with an experience they appraised as being traumatic. Emotional turmoil is concealed and goes unnoticed by an external observer, who may perceive the individual’s closure as being unapproachable instead of a way for self-preservation:

It’s just like a fear . . . I can just shut off, shut off what people are saying, I can just concentrate on something I enjoy, sometimes even just staring into space and just try and block out everything that I’m feeling and the world around me or just like a little bubble to protect myself at first. (Dylan)

Drawing from the participants’ accounts, it appears that a process is initiated whereby emotions are detached from memories and feelings connected to the shunning experience. This protected space, described as a bubble, possibly represents the individual’s way to block the world outside and to ‘un-feel.’ Emotional numbness seems to be a state in which the individuals actively seek to retreat into their little bubble, where they are able to feel nothing or focus on happy thoughts, in order to buffer emotional pain (Maier & Seligman,

1976). This strategy appears to be a form of denial adopted as a protective barrier to cope with trauma. Feelings are buried deep and hence ignored.

This section has discussed the coping mechanisms adopted by the participants in response to their experiences of religious shunning. Some respondents, upon leaving the community, exhibited a desire to break free from the moral constraints imposed on them, leading them to engage in risky behaviours. Such behaviours, along with avoiding the development of close bonds, serve as a means to mask the emotional pain they have endured. These coping strategies appear to be influenced by the lingering hold that the religious community still exerts on the shunned individuals. Instead of progressing through the pain caused by religious shunning, they seem to become stagnated and are paralysed by the fear of potential future betrayal and abandonment. This state of stagnation suspends their ability to form new trusting relationships and hinders them from actively regaining control over their lives. Instead, their efforts are directed towards self-protection, denial of pain, avoidance of trauma-related feelings, and evading closeness to prevent re-experiencing betrayal (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Roth & Cohen, 1986).

The adoption of these coping strategies appears to stem from the enduring emotional damage resulting from their previous life within the Jehovah's Witnesses community. These behaviours can be seen as a defiant response to their past, a way of resisting the constraints imposed upon them. However, paradoxically, by behaving in this manner, these individuals continue to perpetuate the influence that the teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses had on them, thereby reflecting a sense of personal stagnation. Furthermore, these coping strategies indicate difficulties in fully disengaging from the religious community's belief system. Individuals' emotional ties to their community persist, preventing them from embracing new perspectives and fully moving forward with their lives. As a result, they appear trapped in a cycle of resistance and rebellion and are unable to transcend the emotional barriers imposed by their past experiences.

These coping mechanisms reflect a complex interplay between defiance and emotional entanglement with the religious community. On the one hand, individuals seek to break free from the restrictive moral framework and continue to grapple with the emotional repercussions of their past affiliations. This duality highlights the need for further exploration of the long-lasting impact of religious shunning and the intricate process of disentangling oneself from deeply ingrained beliefs and behaviours. Addressing these coping strategies requires a comprehensive understanding of the underlying psychological mechanisms at play, offering potential pathways for therapeutic intervention and support for those navigating the aftermath of religious shunning.

Personal Progression

Although some respondents initially exhibited emotional and behavioural responses that hindered their complete liberation from the community's influence, they later developed effective coping mechanisms. Implementation of these coping skills leads to a sense of personal growth, allowing individuals to break free from the community's belief system and moral constraints, thus regaining control over their lives (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). Positive coping strategies involve cognitive reappraisal, seeking information and support, and self-reconciliation. Additionally, exposing the community became a valuable strategy participants used to redefine their experiences and shift their focus from themselves to others.

Information Seeking Engaging with external sources of information is discouraged within the Jehovah's Witnesses community. However, for many respondents, information seeking emerged as a valuable coping strategy as the individual is exposed to material that has not been filtered by the community. Based on the analysis of the results, this exposure enables individuals to gain a broader perspective and make informed decisions outside the confines of their community's beliefs. Jacob reported, “

We were in tunnel vision with the Witnesses, but we've got a very wide scope now.”

The participants described seeking in-depth knowledge about the community's beliefs, history, development, and drastic changes in beliefs and policies periodically implemented by the Jehovah's Witnesses leadership. As the respondents reported, the factor that initiated the search for information was the search for truth. As Jacob said, “

We just wanted the truth, whatever was called 'truth.' That's what we wanted.”

However, the search process appears challenging because it places the individual in a position of ownership, this being the first step towards breaking free from the community's control system. Perhaps this is because Jehovah's Witnesses diminish the sense of agency and autonomy of their members. Rather, the community directs members' decisions and choices, hampering their ability to become independent thinkers. From this perspective, the participants' accounts suggest that information seeking provides the individual with external validation and independent thinking. The new knowledge acquired reassures the individual of their new position. This also reinforces the individual's determination not to re-affiliate. Furthermore, seeking information empowers individuals (Zimmerman, 2000) as they experience a switch from feeling shame and guilt towards taking a stand against the community and holding the community accountable.

And then I just started to do my own research. And what I did was . . . I felt that I owed it to myself and to the Watchtower Society that I had been born into, I decided that I would check every single fact that I was now being presented with, and I decided that I would do that from the point of view of defending the Jehovah's Witnesses. So, rather than looking at everything and thinking, “Yes, that supports my thought!” I decided to play devil's advocate and say, “I need to prove that this is wrong, because if this is wrong, then, then the Watchtower is right after all. And that's the course that I need to follow for my family.” So, I spent six months trying to defend the Watchtower's position to myself throughout all my research, but it was totally indefensible. (Eric)

The participants' accounts suggest that seeking and checking information is not done lightly or hastily, especially when an individual is still a Jehovah's Witness. This is possibly because much is at stake; seeking knowledge can drastically change a member's life. The individual has devoted a considerable amount of time, energy, and resources to being a member of the community, and then, by leaving the community, the risk of losing both family and friends is concrete. Thus, for Eric, for example, trying to defend the community was the starting point. He began learning more to disprove critiques. Nonetheless, he soon realised that the community's teachings were indefensible. This information-seeking process seems to prompt a change in an individual's mental disposition by challenging their

established beliefs. From denial and resistance, individuals then experience a new awareness, which finally leads them to accept and embrace the evidence. From this perspective, knowledge endows individuals with the means to cut the umbilical cord which still binds them to the community. By gaining knowledge, individuals regain control over their lives and are able to progress.

Support Seeking Another coping strategy used by participants to cope with religious shunning was to secure and make contact with other former members.

I did kind of go on the Internet a lot and connect with other groups of people that had gone through the same thing. . . . I did find it quite encouraging just to kind of, you know, know that there were other people that had experienced the same because it is quite a rare process to go through and it's not something that a lot of people would understand. (Oliver)

Oliver's narrative resonates with that of several participants, highlighting the significance of seeking others who have experienced shunning as it is an uncommon and peculiar process to outsiders. This inclination to contact fellow shunned individuals is perceived as encouraging, providing a sense of safety and reducing vulnerability. Participants also expressed concerns about professionals' limited preparedness when offering adequate support to those who had been shunned.

Over the past 20 years, we've been able to help a lot of people coming out of the Witnesses or coming to terms with their experiences while they've been Witnesses. And that couldn't have been done effectively if we hadn't the experience of being Witnesses. . . . It's given us an insight into a world that a lot of people can't understand. When people are dealing with people who are coming out of the Witnesses, who have never been Witnesses themselves, they just don't get it, why they waited so long or why they want to jump through all the hoops and why they conform their lives to these rules and regulations. . . . But we understand the dynamics of what makes people do it, you know. (Jacob)

Some participants reported educating their therapists about the shunning practice, highlighting the lack of information on religious shunning which may result in a therapist's limited understanding of the phenomenon. The widespread lack of awareness of religious shunning seems to have discouraged participants from seeking professional help, leading them to prefer support from former members. According to most respondents, there is a need to raise awareness of health services about religious shunning. It is also important to acknowledge this form of trauma, to provide the necessary emotional assistance to people leaving Jehovah's Witnesses and other groups that implement religious shunning as a discipline.

I think the health service, and mental health services, well, should be better informed. We live in a society that is all politically correct, the Jehovah's Witnesses have fitted in well, in the sense of portraying themselves in a certain manner. . . . There's an outward image that's portrayed by the Watchtower and by its people. And therefore, I don't think society or the health services understand that those who [exit] are so badly damaged and so in need of support. (Luke)

The individual who is not able to find adequate support or afford the cost of regular therapy finds comfort in making contact with former members. According to the respondents, this community represents a safe place where they can find solace from estrangement and isolation and where they are free to express their feelings and confident that they will be understood. As the respondents pointed out, the individual feels encouraged when they realise that they are not alone.

From the data analysis, it appears that people who have been shunned may rely on others not only for emotional support but also to gain an understanding of how to conduct themselves on a day-to-day basis. Tom stated, “

I would just watch people for hours to work out how you're meant to behave under the circumstances.”

The findings of this study suggest that experiencing shunning leads to a significant shift from a familiar to an entirely new cultural environment. The participants described experiencing a certain level of anxiety in navigating everyday social norms, often relying on observation to adapt. Observing others is a means of gaining confidence in adopting socially accepted behaviours. However, seeking direct help is initially hindered by a learned fear of expressing doubts or weaknesses, possibly stemming from fear of reproach.

For those shunned from tight-knit communities such as Jehovah's Witnesses, adapting to the broader society's social cues and culture may be a stressful experience of culture shock, creating a sense of being an outsider (Oberg, 1960). Acquainting oneself with a new cultural system involves learning new rules to fit into the new social setting. Observational learning allows individuals to mimic and learn appropriate social behaviour, helping them navigate social situations, albeit with some social anxiety. Over time and with continuous exposure to the new environment, the data suggest that individuals appear to gain better control over the anxiety associated with feeling like outsiders, turning this learning process into a stimulating and knowledge-gathering experience.

Self-Reconciliation The data suggest that self-reconciliation is a pivotal and innate facet of participants' coping processes in response to religious shunning. This intricate and transformative journey entails positively reframing their lives, finding inner tranquillity, and actively engaging in self-forgiveness, thereby empowering them to navigate life beyond the confines of high-control religious groups. One participant, Noah, exemplifies this concept through his acceptance of his family's decision not to communicate with him, which grants him closure and liberation from feelings of guilt and selfishness.

I used to blame myself for that, thinking me being selfish and not wanting to be a part of their life, but I now realise it's their decision not wanting to speak to me. And I made that very clear in the text messages that I've sent to all of my family that I'm here any moment in time, you know, whenever they want to speak to me, I am here. Now I feel not guilty in that respect anymore. So, it's all up to them.

At the core of self-reconciliation lies the profound recognition and acceptance of one's inability to control others' behaviour. This transformative journey empowers individuals to liberate themselves from the emotional burden of shunning, fostering an environment conducive to embracing their present reality and relinquishing negative sentiments. Moreover, self-reconciliation demands profound introspection. This introspective process seems

to enable participants to comprehensively re-evaluate their experiences, unburdened by regrets, particularly concerning the role they played in other people's lives:

We've been victims of something, but then inadvertently we've victimised other people by just carrying on the process, you know, but you've got to forgive yourself for that" (Jacob).

Within the context of the community, a complex duality emerges from the participants' narratives in which members can be perceived as both victims and perpetrators. This realisation may evoke profound feelings of guilt, underscoring the significance of self-reconciliation as a crucial step towards emotional recovery for some former members. This profound awareness ultimately paves the way for self-forgiveness. As Samuel describes, the transformative act of drawing a line between their past and present selves fosters personal growth and inner tranquillity.

The real danger in living in that world forever is that constantly your life . . . is defined by what happened 10 or 15 or 20 or 40 years ago, that you were a Jehovah's Witness, when it really isn't. . . . So, for me, it would be, dwell there for a little while. Think about the lessons, have a bit of compassion for the people because they, they're doing what they think is right, and then at some point, draw a line and say, "Move, move forward."

This journey of self-forgiveness appears to necessitate acknowledgement of one's actions and active engagement in making amends and repairs, ultimately enabling individuals to transcend feelings of guilt and shame, attain inner peace, and foster personal growth (Wenzel et al., 2012). Overall, self-reconciliation emerged as a fundamental coping mechanism among the participants, enabling them to navigate the complexities of shunning and foster emotional healing and resilience as they embarked on their journey beyond the confines of their past affiliation.

Exposing the Community A salient coping mechanism that emerged from the data is the participants' proclivity to engage in actions that expose negative aspects of the community and make amends, not only for their own past actions but also to protect others from becoming entangled with the community. For instance, Susan and her husband took the initiative to apologise to the individuals they had contacted while proselytising and also disclosed information about child abuse within the community:

"My husband went and visited all the people . . . and he told them he was sorry to go in there and teach them a bunch of blah blah blah. And told them about child abuse" (Susan).

Such efforts may be perceived as part of a larger process towards self-forgiveness and reconciliation with past actions. Participants demonstrated a sense of responsibility by not only apologising for their teachings but also actively raising awareness about the community's flaws. Importantly, the pursuit of raising awareness is not limited to interactions with non-members; rather, participants extended their efforts to awaken current members, including their own children. This act of advocacy emerged as a strong motivator for participants to stand resolute in their actions. Some participants demonstrated a proactive commitment to nurturing critical thinking in their children, actively challenging the community's narrative that being a Witness is a prerequisite for happiness and a fulfilling life:

I focus on my children and helping them to become . . . critical thinkers. . . . And because of the dad, they live half of their life as Witnesses and half of their life with me. . . . I've actually got to be really strong for them, like my, my best weapon against them being Witnesses now is to show them that actually what they were told is rubbish, that you can be happy not being a Witness. You don't have to be a Witness to be a good person. [Nor do you] have to be a Witness to have good friends. . . . And so that really helps me, knowing that I've got to be an example for them more than anything. (Liza)

By doing so, participants empowered their children to make informed choices about their beliefs and lifestyles while simultaneously reinforcing their own conviction about their separation from the community.

While many participants described shunning as deeply distressing, the dominant narrative that emerged is personal progression. Most respondents demonstrated resilience and adaptability and developed new coping strategies that supported their movement forward in life. Rather than remaining anchored in the pain of the past, they pursued a future-oriented outlook and actively worked to disengage from the community's influence, thereby fostering a trajectory of personal progression. Notably, not all individuals experienced shunning as traumatic to the same degree. For some, the psychological impact appeared to be mitigated by effective coping, including disidentifying from the group and affiliating with new communities or belief systems. As Lido et al. (2020) suggest, changes in external circumstances or internal values can shift identity salience and alter group affiliations, behaviours, and attitudes, which in turn can reduce the distress associated with social exclusion.

Discussion

This article delves into the contrasting coping mechanisms of personal stagnation and personal progression that emerged from the accounts of the participants, shedding light on the various ways in which individuals deal with the experience of religious shunning. Building on these findings, this study uncovers a potential gap in how mental health practitioners conceptualise the client's experience of being shunned. This gap appears to stem largely from limited knowledge about the phenomenon and the specific cultural context characteristic of Jehovah's Witnesses. Without this understanding, therapists may struggle to provide effective and appropriate care to those who have experienced such a deeply isolating and psychologically complex experience. Consequently, the importance of gaining an in-depth understanding of Jehovah's Witnesses' culture, the intricate social dynamics within the community, and the use of religious shunning as a means of control becomes evident. Such insights may enable therapists to design and implement interventions tailored to address the unique challenges faced by shunned individuals.

The data also suggest that the influence of social, psychological, and identity-related forces varies across individuals depends on personal characteristics and the salience of the psychological needs being fulfilled at any given time (Breakwell, 1986, 2001; Lido et al., 2020). The highly individualised nature of the experience refers to both the psychological impact and the coping strategies adopted, which can differ significantly from one individual to another (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Roth & Cohen, 1986). In addition, rather than unfolding in fixed stages, the journey towards regaining ownership and autonomy post-shunning appears to follow a fluid continuum, emphasising the dynamic nature of the

healing process, in which appraisal and coping processes evolve over time. This underscores the need for multimodal, ongoing, and person-centred support tailored to each client's specific needs. The findings suggest that coping following shunning is not merely about managing emotions or stress in isolation but involves navigating profound threats to identity, meaning, and social embeddedness. Whether individuals engage in adaptive or maladaptive coping depends on their appraisal of the situation, prior experiences of rejection, identity flexibility, access to supportive networks, and underlying psychological resources. Understanding these processes is essential to developing trauma-informed support and interventions for those who experience exclusion from high-control communities. At the same time, the data highlight that the journey of leaving is not only a loss but may also lead to unexpected rewards and personal growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). This often culminates in a cognitive shift, with individuals reclaiming moral agency and autonomy of thought.

Implications for Practice

The findings of the present study suggest that coping after shunning involves movement along a continuum between two primary states: personal stagnation and personal progression. Participants described a range of coping responses that either maintained a sense of being stuck or supported movement towards rebuilding their lives. This conceptualisation of coping has implications for practitioners who support individuals shunned by high-control faith-based groups. In this context, the practitioner's role is to understand how an individual is currently coping and to support a gradual shift towards more adaptive forms of coping.

Although shunned individuals may present with similar levels of distress, the findings indicate that they often cope in markedly different ways. Therefore, practitioners may need to prioritise assessing not only what the individual is feeling at a given moment but also how they are coping with those feelings. Consistent with participants' accounts of varied coping responses, during assessment, clinicians could explore how clients are managing the loss (e.g., through avoidance, suppression, overthinking, or withdrawal), whether their coping strategies are maintaining stagnation or facilitating progression, and the internal and external resources which are available to them. This type of assessment will aid the therapist in understanding the processes that are maintaining distress rather than solely focusing on symptoms. This also supports a trauma-informed practice, which emphasises understanding coping responses within the individual's broader context (Isobel, 2021).

Another important implication for care involves identifying coping strategies associated with stagnation. Participants experiencing personal stagnation often described coping tactics that, while understandable in context, appeared to maintain distress over time. These included suppressing thoughts and emotions; remaining psychologically tied to the group due to ongoing fear of divine punishment, guilt, and self-blaming narratives; social withdrawal and isolation; and a perceived inability to regain ownership and autonomy. Such coping mechanisms should not be challenged prematurely. Instead, practitioners can support clients in understanding how these responses may serve a short-term protective function while contributing to feeling stuck in the longer term. This can be achieved through psychoeducation and exploration of coping patterns over time. At this stage, routine risk assessment should be considered a crucial part of clinical consideration as the findings suggest that risky behaviours and suicidal ideation characterise the coping of some shunned individuals.

Conversely, participants who described experiences of personal progression reported coping strategies that supported adjustment and recovery. These included the gradual acceptance of losses incurred through shunning, rebuilding identity outside the group, developing independent thinking, and creating new meaning and direction in life. Therapeutic work can therefore focus on gently strengthening these forms of coping at a pace that feels safe and manageable to the client. Supporting meaning-making and identity development in this way aligns with evidence highlighting their role in trauma recovery (Liu et al., 2024).

A key finding of the study is that individuals do not move in a linear way from stagnation to progression. Given that many participants experienced elements of both simultaneously, practitioners may frequently work with clients' ambivalence between staying stuck and moving forward. For example, a client may express a desire to move on while still experiencing guilt and fear or may seek independence and personal ownership while also missing the structure and certainty previously provided by the group. Considering this, practitioners should normalise this ambivalence and work with it directly rather than interpreting it as resistance to change. Supporting clients in tolerating this tension is often a central part of the coping process.

Coping after shunning also appears to be closely linked to identity reconstruction. Many participants described uncertainty about who they were outside of the group. Helpful interventions in this context may include exploring personal values separate from those of the group, supporting decision-making and agency, encouraging small steps towards autonomy, and validating uncertainty as a normal part of the process. This approach aligns with evidence-based practices that emphasise understanding the individual's broader functioning and social context as central to effective intervention.

The findings further show that coping is not solely an internal process but is also relational in nature. As reflected in participants' accounts of social withdrawal, an individual may cope by withdrawing from others due to loss of trust, fear of rejection, and limited social skills outside the group context. Also, for many participants, shunning involved the loss of an entire social network, which further complicated re-engagement with others (Grendele et al., 2023). At the same time, movement towards progression was often supported by rebuilding interpersonal connections. Practitioners can therefore explore patterns of withdrawal, support gradual re-engagement with others, and help clients develop safe and supportive relationships. This reflects the relational focus of trauma-informed care (Novilla et al., 2024).

Participants also differed in how they made sense of their experiences. Some rejected their previous belief systems, while others continued to struggle with them. Practitioners should allow space for this meaning-making process, avoid imposing alternative belief frameworks and instead supporting clients in developing their own understanding over time.

Finally, the findings highlight the importance of timing in tailoring interventions according to where the individual is positioned along the stagnation–progression continuum. Individuals experiencing stagnation may require a greater focus on safety, stabilisation, and understanding their current coping strategies. In contrast, those moving towards progression may benefit more from work focused on identity development, goal setting, and building new connections. Interventions should be carefully paced as participants' accounts suggest that attempts to promote rapid change may increase distress or reinforce withdrawal. Overall, this approach underscores the need for flexible, individualised interventions grounded in careful assessment and formulation.

Limitations

This study has certain limitations. For example, the study is based on a small U.K. sample and does not distinguish between first- and second-generation members of the Jehovah's Witnesses. To address these limitations, the authors appreciate the need to conduct cross-cultural research to shed light on whether coping strategies adopted when an individual is shunned differ among particular nationalities and cultures. In addition, there is a need to conduct further research by delineating the specific experiences of first- and second-generation respondents to enhance understanding of how these two groups may respond to the challenges that shunning poses. For instance, individuals who join the community as adults typically do so through an act of voluntary commitment, entering the Jehovah's Witnesses with pre-established identities, external points of reference, and coping resources formed outside the group. Their engagement with the new belief system and community expectations is therefore mediated by their prior sense of self and by the interpretive frameworks they bring with them.

By contrast, second-generation members encounter the community as their primary developmental and socialisation environment. Being raised within an enclosed ideological system may limit opportunities to form an external baseline for evaluating norms and to develop alternative relational templates and worldviews. This can shape an identity structure that is deeply interwoven with the community's framework and may amplify vulnerabilities associated with developmental trauma, particularly in contexts where autonomy or independent exploration is restricted and discouraged.

Recognising these fundamentally different starting points is necessary in developing a better grasp of the distinct patterns of attachment to the community, different thresholds for questioning or leaving, and varied psychological outcomes the two groups may exhibit. Conducting this further research will add a more nuanced appreciation of religious shunning, specifically, the coping mechanisms adopted by individuals from varied cultural backgrounds and generations of Jehovah's Witnesses, and the implications for identity reframing and development.

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Author Contribution Dr. Grendele designed, planned, and operationalized the study as part of her PhD. Dr. Grendele performed material preparation, data collection, and analysis. To ensure the quality and trustworthiness of the analysis, Dr. Bapir-Tardy and Dr. Flax cross-checked the themes and subthemes generated. The manuscript was written by Dr. Grendele, and all authors contributed to the development of the manuscript by commenting on and providing feedback on the manuscript drafts and the final version. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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Data Transparency The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to their containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

Declarations

Conflicts of Interest/Competing Interests The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Ethical Approval The research received ethical clearance from the School of Human and Social Sciences Ethics Panel of the University of West London. To further ensure high ethical standards, the present research adhered to the British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct (2009, 2014).

Consent to Participate and to Publish Written informed consent was obtained from all the participants. The participants also provided informed consent for the dissemination of research findings through the publication of journal articles. Pseudonyms are used throughout the article to protect the participants' anonymity.

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