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Integrating Spirituality in Counseling Practice

Gerald Corey

Effective counseling addresses the body, mind, and spirit. The field of counseling has been slow in recognizing the need to address spiritual and religious concerns. There is now widespread interest in the role of spirituality in both assessment and treatment. Evidence for this interest is found in the many books and articles written on spiritual and religious values in counseling. Counselors ask just about every imaginable question about a client's life, yet often do not inquire about the influence and meaning of spirituality and religion in an individual's life. If a counselor does not raise the issue of how spirituality influences clients, then clients might assume that such matters are not relevant for counseling.

The major professional organizations are recognizing the importance of spiritual issues in counseling practice. Spiritual and religious matters are therapeutically relevant, ethically appropriate, and potentially significant topics for the practice of counseling in secular settings. Counselors must be prepared to deal with their clients' issues of the human spirit.

Religion and spirituality are often part of the client's problem, but can also be part of the client's solution. Because spiritual and religious values can play a major part in human life, spiritual values should be viewed as a potential resource in therapy rather than as something to be ignored. During the assessment process, it can be ascertained how certain beliefs and practices of the client can be a useful focal point for exploration.

Religious faith, or some form of personal spirituality, can be a powerful source of meaning and purpose. For some, religion does not occupy a key place, yet a personal spirituality may be a central force. Spiritual values help many people make sense out of the universe and the purpose of our lives on this earth. Like any other potential source of meaning, religious faith or spirituality seems most authentic and valuable when it enables us to become as fully human as possible. It can help us get in touch with our own powers of thinking, feeling, deciding, willing, and acting.

Spirituality and religion are critical sources of strength for many clients, are the bedrock for finding meaning in life, and can be instrumental in promoting healing and well-being. There is growing empirical evidence that our spiritual values and behaviors can promote physical and psychological well-being. Exploring these values with clients can be integrated with other therapeutic tools to enhance the therapy process.

Counseling can help clients gain insight into the ways their core beliefs and values are reflected in their behavior. Clients may sometimes discover that they need to reexamine these values. Clinicians must remain open and nonjudgmental, recognizing that there are multiple paths toward fulfilling spiritual needs. It is not the role of the counselor to prescribe any particular pathway. Counselors can make use of the spiritual and religious beliefs of their clients to help them explore and resolve their problems. To effectively be able to address spiritual concerns in assessment and treatment, counselors need to have competencies in working with values. Training programs must incorporate discussions on how to work with values as a part of the therapeutic process.

The Dalai Lama has a number of thought-provoking ideas about the role of spiritual values in daily life, which are summarized here. According to the Dalai Lama, religions are aimed at nourishing the human spiritual. Diversity in religions can be celebrated, and it is important to respect and appreciate the value of the different major world religions. Religion can be used to help reduce conflict and suffering in the world, not as a source to divide people. Involvement in any religion can create a feeling of belonging and a caring connection with others. Religious beliefs can provide a deep sense of purpose and meaning in life. These beliefs can offer hope in the face of adversity and suffering and can offer a perspective when we are overwhelmed by life's problems. However, the Dalai Lama acknowledges that the majority of people on this earth are nonbelievers in religion, and what is essential is to help them become good and moral human beings

without any religion. The ultimate goal of all religions is to produce better human beings who will demonstrate caring and acceptance of others.

The Dalai Lama teaches that religious beliefs are but one level of spirituality, and he makes reference to *basic spiritual values*, which include qualities of goodness, kindness, love, compassion, tolerance, forgiveness, human warmth, and caring. All religions have the same basic message in that they all advocate these basic human values. Love, compassion, and forgiveness are not luxuries, but essential values for our survival. Compassion, an essential part of one's spiritual development, involves caring about another's suffering and doing something about it. Whether we are believers or nonbelievers, this kind of spirituality is essential. True spirituality results in making people calmer, happier, and more peaceful, and it is a mental attitude that can be practiced at any time.

Mother Teresa, who became known to the world for her selfless work with the poor people in Calcutta, India, talks about compassion in action. She believes that God and compassion are one and the same. Much like the Dalai Lama, Mother Teresa views compassion as attempting to share and understand the suffering of people.

Rabbi Harold Kushner believes that encountering God consists in doing the right thing. He contends that we make room in our lives for God when we do things that make us truly human, such as helping the poor, working for social justice, and keeping in check our exaggerated sense of self-importance. The Dalai Lama, Mother Teresa, and Rabbi Kushner seem to agree that leading a religious life is characterized by action. Acting on our beliefs is what matters.

At this point, what do you think is the heart of your spirituality or religion? Reflect on the following questions about your religion or your spirituality to determine whether it is a constructive force in your life:

- Is the way that I live my life congruent with my religion or spirituality?
- Does my religion or spirituality assist me in better understanding the meaning of life and death?
- Does my religion or spirituality allow acceptance for others who see the world differently from me?
- Does my religion or spirituality encourage me to put my beliefs into action?
- Does my religion or spirituality provide me with a sense of peace and serenity?
- Is my religious faith or value system something I actively choose or passively accept?

- Do my core religious and spiritual values help me live life fully and treat others with respect and concern?
- Does my religion or spirituality help me integrate my experiences and make sense of the world?
- Does my religion or spirituality encourage me to exercise my freedom and to assume the responsibility for the direction of my own life?
- Are my religious beliefs or spirituality helping me become more of the person I would like to become?
- Does my religion or spirituality encourage me to question life and keep myself open to new learning?

Suggested Reading List

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