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Article 13

College Student Spirituality: Helping Explore Life's Existential Questions

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As classes begin at colleges and universities across the nation, numerous college students are presented with an unfamiliar situation of living away from home. Although many enjoy this newfound freedom, the lack of parental supervision also creates additional responsibilities: getting to class on time, completing homework and assignments, learning to live and work with others, paying bills, and budgeting money. By enrolling students that come from varied experiences and backgrounds, universities create an environment where students learn to live and function as responsible, socially-conscious individuals. Furthermore, learning these personal responsibility skills provides college students with the opportunity to become productive and successful members of society.

Despite the personal development skills that college students may establish throughout their college experience, recent events on university campuses have confronted students with additional concerns, such as the need to quickly select a college major, determine a career path early in college, and maybe financially supporting oneself during and after college. College students may also express concerns related to authenticity and developing an identity. A more serious concern has developed after terrorist attacks and other deadly events on university campuses, where college students may disclose fears related to personal safety. These concerns depict awareness among college students that life consists of difficult situations, issues, and events over which one has no control, and that there is little about which one can be certain. Existentially speaking, these college students express concern over issues of being: meaning versus

meaninglessness, purpose versus futility, security versus uncertainty, identity versus confusion, life versus death, and good versus evil (van Deruzen, 2001). By exploring these existential concerns, counselors are positioned to assist college students in conceptualizing negative life events and finding one's grounding in a fast-paced, confusing, and complicated world.

Recent studies related to college student activities indicate a growing interest in, and exploration of, spirituality and religion. College campuses appear to provide many outlets for students interested in spirituality, from loosely-organized gatherings to intentional and focused meetings hosted by churches, structured religious groups, and/or parachurch organizations (Rooney, 2003; Schaper, 2000). Svoboda (2005) suggests that this increasing interest in spirituality is not merely a fashionable trend soon to disappear, as college students are reporting genuine concerns in existentially-laden issues. They are facing an increasingly complex and global society that stimulates many questions and concerns not explored by their parents (Speck, 2005). Thus, college students and parents alike find themselves ill-prepared to answer questions concerning safety, stability, meaning, and purpose. From an existential perspective, exploration of the spiritual dimensions of living and being human has the potential to provide some answers.

Despite the reports of increased interest in exploring spirituality and religiosity (Bryant, Choi, & Yasuno, 2003; Scheindlin, 2003), students find little support within traditional college and university settings to facilitate the development of a spiritual identity (Speck, 2005). One service available to most students, however, is counseling. In the student counseling context, more emphasis has traditionally been placed on personal development as it intersects with academic and career concerns. Because the exploration of spirituality encourages personal development, college student counselors are a logical choice to assist students in their search for purpose and meaning. Although many counselors have reported feeling unprepared to assist their clients in a spiritual journey (Miller & Thoresen, 2003; Souza, 2002), evidence suggests that the counseling profession is beginning to respond to this need (Cashwell & Young, 2004).

Current trends in counselor scholarship indicate a growing interest in training counselors to increase their knowledge in, and appreciation of the use of spiritually-based therapeutic interventions (Graham, Furr, Flowers, & Burke, 2001; McGee, Nagel, & Moore, 2003). Long-considered a taboo topic in the counseling session, spirituality is becoming an important aspect of counseling, which is demonstrated in numerous research studies (Young, Cashwell, & Shcherbakova, 2000; Young, Wiggins-Frame, & Cashwell, 2007) and in the recent development of coursework integrating spirituality into counseling curriculum (Pate & Hall, 2005). This research indicates that the integration of spirituality and counseling has demonstrated a positive relationship with physical well-being, a greater sense of hope for the future, an increased ability to cope with life events, the development of wellness and holistic methods, and in the development of identity and maturation. Additionally, Ma (2003) indicates that the formative college years are important in the development of these factors, especially with respect to identity development; this is further supported by the research of Beckwith and Morrow (2005) and McGee et al. (2003). As such, counselors are uniquely positioned to assist college students in the development of a healthy lifestyle, coping with negative life situations, making difficult life decisions, and determining options to make beneficial and well-informed choices.

To assist counselors in competently addressing spiritual and religious issues in counseling, the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC) has published a list of 14 competencies (ASERVIC, 2009). These 14 competencies are suggested to provide both a “what is it?” and a “how do we use it?” to integrating spiritual and religious concepts into counseling. Devised to better facilitate self-awareness and embracing diversity, these competencies encourage the intentional development of the understanding of and the appreciation for the spiritual dimension of being. As such, the first competency is designed to promote consideration of the common characteristics of spiritual and religious groups, as well as understanding the differences. All 14 competencies combine to address the spiritual and existential concerns of being human. Use of these competencies can provide a useful tool to working with others, especially those who are seeking answers to existential questions about life.

Spirituality Among College Students

The increase of college student interest in spirituality has been tied to swelling numbers of students enrolling in religion and theology courses, increased involvement with spiritually-oriented organizations, larger numbers of these spiritually-oriented campus groups, and increased church attendance (Bryant et al., 2003; Rooney, 2003). These findings are further supported by surveys of national interest, noted in Gallup polls (2004, 2007), which suggest that an increase in spirituality is representative of the American population. Noticing this similarity, Spaid (1996) speculated a variety of reasons for the interest in spirituality, and recent research has studied the reasons for the increasing interest in spirituality. For example, the Gallup Organization (2004, 2007) suggests several possibilities including a desire to find a sense of inner peace and harmony, the pursuit of comfort in spiritual/religious experiences, and perceived affiliation with religious organizations. These concerns are noticeable on university campuses.

As Ma (2003) states, the years a student studies at a college or a university are considered to be “among the most formative” (p. 323). Many of the difficult decisions and situations facing college students entail exploring questions of being; Spaid (1996) details that several issues college students may currently be facing are issues involving human suffering, issues concerning consistency and stability, concern for their safety, love and acceptance, and deciding what is true and what is not. Although some college coursework is designed to assist in the development of critical thinking skills, the current design of higher education offers limited opportunities for in-depth, guided exploration of moral- and/or value-based decisions (Jarvis, 1993).

Human Suffering

Spaid (1996) suggests that college students are engaging in spiritual experiences to seek stability for a variety of reasons, such as the rising rate of crime and violence found in neighborhoods and schools. Rising crime and violence both result from and lead to human suffering. Recent events, such as terrorist attacks in the Middle East, the 2001 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, and the 2007 Virginia Tech tragedy are frightening examples of how violence can create vicarious trauma for those not directly involved in the event. The existential crisis of human suffering is a crisis of purpose and

meaning as individuals strive to make sense of traumatic life events. College students may not truly experience a sense of safety because of increasing violence and instability in the world. Especially after the student deaths at Virginia Tech, and in 2008 at Northern Illinois University, college students may not feel safe, thinking a similar situation might occur again. Students may also seek to understand why such an event occurs. Frankl (1984) indicates that fears must be confronted to achieve a sense of safety, as negative events are more easily endured when given purpose and meaning.

The terrorist events of September 11 provide insight into the ability to find spiritual meaning in a tragic event. Briggs, Apple, and Aydlett (2004) state: “Since the tragic events of September 11, 2001, many Americans have drawn on spiritual and religious connections to cope with the ensuing world crisis” (p. 174). Other studies (as cited in Briggs et al., 2004) suggest, “...tragic life events are often associated with an increased role in spirituality in the lives of the individuals affected” (p. 174). For many, increased awareness and practice of spirituality may occur through experiencing pain and suffering. The value of enduring a painful experience appears to be in gaining the ability to look outside oneself or to something greater than oneself. This remedy may be found in seeking closure through a spiritual connection to or seeking assistance from a higher power that is greater than an individual human being and that holds an ultimate authority over unexplained situations.

Questions concerning the meaning and purpose behind suffering and pain are not new topics among counselors. Individuals suffering from the death of a loved one, loss of an important relationship, or the loss of job may undergo a significant amount of distress. Facing similar events, college students likewise seek solace in times of loss, searching for a greater meaning from negative experiences. The anticipation of relief from suffering suggests that hope may be derived from spirituality. A variety of studies indicate that many individuals pursue spiritual experiences to cope with negative life events (Briggs et al., 2004). Furthermore, Lindsley (2005) suggests that pain indicates that something has gone wrong in the world. If one does not believe, or at least hope, that life can or should be different (i.e., better), then one would not seek out or expect alternative solutions. Engaging in spiritual investigation may not remove or relieve suffering, but research indicates that hope derived from the process helps cope with these negative experiences. Viktor Frankl (1984) often quoted Friedrich Nietzsche: “He who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how” (p. 101); he believed that once meaning is established, a person can endure almost any type of suffering. Frankl (1984) stated that a belief in a better future is an instrumental characteristic of using spirituality to cope with negative experiences, giving meaning to suffering and fostering a belief that life will be better.

Consistency and Stability

College students are “... aware things are adrift, and they want some kind of anchoring security” (Spaid, 1996, para. 6). Spaid claims that college students are seeking stability because the world is fast-paced and constantly changing. These changes, such as considering the availability of jobs or the discovery of new information that contradicts a previously-held belief creates crises of being: struggling with defining one’s identity, being confident in one-self, or with confusion of integrity as it relates to changing standards and values. As college students are constantly faced with new situations and new information, in which politics, economics, culture, social factors, and philosophies

are continually changing, they may find security and stability in a personal spiritual experience, which can remain relatively unchanged in a rapidly-changing, ever-evolving world.

Despite the increasing interest in becoming involved with a spiritual and/or religious experience, the literature reveals a plethora of definitions for these terms (Speck, 2005), which illustrates the difficulty in professionals assisting others in spiritual development. Existing definitions of spirituality encompass issues and concepts that are often value-laden; meaning that spirituality is based upon an individual's set of beliefs, experiences, and their worldview. In this manner, spirituality encompasses that which cannot be explained within the self or through intellectual or natural reason alone (Lewis, 1947/2001). Although an individual's understanding of spirituality is based upon experiences, perceptions, and the influences of contemporary culture, spirituality reaches beyond the individual. Therefore, because the higher power and/or greater good associated with a spiritual experience are outside the influence of the physical world, it remains unscathed by fluctuation and change.

Spaid (1996) states that working with college students is challenging because many do not have spiritual or religious convictions, making a search for meaning and purpose more difficult. Although Ma (2003) indicates that college students are "optimistic about their future" (p. 324), many college students also appear to experience higher levels of stress. Anxiety related to anticipating the future is a common theme among college students. The diminishing availability of well-compensated careers fuels these insecurities. With little knowledge of the workplace, uncertainty about declaring a major, and no established goals for life after college, students may find themselves without a clear sense of purpose for their life; they may feel overwhelmed with questions about life, self-worth, and a sense of security. Feelings of anxiety may be accompanied with feelings of anger and resentment. With training to provide vocational guidance, professional counselors are positioned to assist college students in developing goals, discovering alternatives, and encouraging them to engage in self-exploration activities to further develop a sense of self.

Safety in a Violent World

The violence occurring in neighborhoods and schools indicates another area of existential crisis related to personal safety and finding a meaning for human suffering. Suffering can exist on several levels, however, the concept of human suffering is more difficult to grasp when it occurs through intentional and organized efforts to destroy and kill. With consideration of contemporary terrorist activities, Briggs et al. (2004) conducted a study to measure spirituality among college students. The results suggested that "individuals exposed to a tragedy may have an increased need in their lives for various aspects of spirituality" (Briggs et al., 2004, p. 179). More specifically, the experimental group scored significantly higher in transcendence, which mainly consists of response items "... oriented toward achieving healing and finding connections with others by moving outside the self and the situation" (p. 180). A desire to promote healing through connections with others suggests a desire to find and provide safety through a common desire to end suffering and violence.

It is important to note that engaging in the spiritual will not establish a metaphysical shield that will protect an individual from physical or emotional harm.

Counselors may choose to utilize existential counseling theories in order to assist college students in understanding and accepting that negative life events occur. From this perspective, an awareness and acceptance of death, loss, and grief, allows a student to live more freely. Unfettered by a fear of negative life events, or by seeking greater good in negative situations, college students may become more self-actualized, find stability, a sense of meaning, and increased feelings of self-worth through looking outside the self.

Love and Acceptance

Spirituality based within the structure of a religious organization may provide a personification of love and hate through characteristics attributed to a higher power or to something greater than the individual. The personification, and the potential personal relationship with a divine being, can provide a source of hope, love, and acceptance. As with any relationship, the more time and effort invested in the spiritual experience creates a closer and more satisfying relationship with a higher power. Because of this personification, the characteristics of spiritual relationships are demonstrated in human relationships. In fact, Frankl (1984) reflects upon his experiences in the Nazi concentration camps: "... that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. ...*The salvation of man is through love and in love*" (p. 57; emphasis Frankl). Frankl (1984) claims that love ultimately provides hope and meaning for human beings. Love is a characteristic of spirituality which demonstrates that purpose and meaning may be derived from concern and care for others.

Love closely weaves spirituality into religion. Love promotes personal and social change and growth. In addition to other concerns, college students may also seek answers to questions about love, relationships, as well as creating personal change – all are existential questions of being. According to Svoboda (2005), college students are expressing differing opinions from their parents, often calling for tolerance for others and an open environment in which to explore moral issues. Furthermore, by providing unconditional acceptance for others, there is greater opportunity for change to occur (Corey, 2008), thus demonstrating the power of caring for and of loving others.

College students have the capacity to accept the dissimilar beliefs of others. Svoboda (2005) indicates that college students also appear to have a tremendous amount of tolerance concerning different religions and spiritualities and appear to have little interest in creating or maintaining schisms. Moreover, students appear to be comfortable with the diversity of individual views by indicating they can disagree yet respect another person's opinion thus providing an example of acceptance through a loving attitude. Spirituality encourages relationships, not only with the transcendent, but also with fellow human beings. Love and acceptance demonstrate a positive approach to exploring existential concerns over interpersonal relationships and of being.

Counselors are given the opportunity to instill the value of love in others. According to the concept of *unconditional positive regard*, counselors cannot encourage or promote change within an individual without providing acceptance and support (Corey, 2008). Unconditional positive regard is defined by Corey (2008) as "...a deep and genuine caring for the client as a person" (p. 178). Accepting another individual does not mean that all behavior is acceptable, but rather that an individual is allowed the right to maintain their beliefs and values. Svoboda (2005) indicates that many college students

demonstrate a positive approach to this issue of being, providing a valuable insight to counselors into the efficacy of unconditional positive regard.

The Search for Truth

Finding consensus for an absolute truth in spirituality is a difficult task, which means that while an individual may hold very strong beliefs about the spiritual, it is extremely unlikely that a unanimous agreement is possible. However, it seems to be essential to some college students that absolutes do exist (Svoboda, 2005). Coming from a culture where definitions and answers are available nearly instantaneously, stepping into spiritual ambiguity is difficult; searching for truth through spiritual experiences may not easily provide clear answers. According to Spaid (1996), college students are looking for consistency upon which they may base their decisions and belief structures; this search for consistency is also found in seeking fundamental truths upon which to base decisions. Svoboda (2005) writes about a college student interview, “In class, I kept being told, „There is no such thing as absolute truth...” But that’s not always good. If nothing is true, then what’s your basis for making decisions in life?” (p. 16). If an absolute truth exists, then seeking it requires one to develop values that shape an understanding of identity, good and evil, and purpose and meaning, as well as an understanding of life and death.

The search for truth leads into the spiritual realm, where absolutes can exist; it delves into the very meaning of life. Lindsley (2005) writes of pain as evidence of a good world gone wrong. By Lindsley’s suggestion, truth cannot be found within the confines of a world in which suffering, pain, violence, hate, and evil exist; otherwise, truth becomes tainted with the same negative characteristics. Thus, truth cannot originate unstained within a closed system in which it is not exemplified. If truth cannot be found within an individual, a philosophy, or even a religion, then the search must continue in other ways and in other places.

However, selecting between truth and untruth is a complicated process. “Truth, by its very definition, excludes that which contradicts it” (as cited in Jones, 2002). Jones’ (2002) statement reveals the fundamental conflict in seeking truth: how to determine if something is true or false when considering many competing and contradictory ideas. Engaging in spirituality provides a vehicle necessary for this search, although it may also require accepting a belief that cannot always be demonstrated through empirical evidence alone. College students may face this dilemma when attempting to discern between competing beliefs, such as various religious and secular perspectives (Svoboda, 2005). This struggle may occur for all who seek to engage in the spiritual; if absolutes do not exist, then a sense of stability is more tenuous.

The spiritual cannot be experienced through the five senses, as spirituality is not physical. Spirituality is metaphysical, thus transcending any physical characteristics. Several clues suggest the existence of a metaphysical world: hope for the future, the desire to end suffering (the idea that the world can and should be better), and the desire for consistency and stability (Lindsley, 2005). College students appear to be searching for truth in these areas, which suggests that greater truths exist than just the relative truths of the physical world. Although the search for truth engages the physical senses, it is only through the metaphysical sense that one can engage in and find a spiritual experience.

Summary

Counselors must be willing to discuss and seek spiritual experiences if they are to assist college students in seeking truths that will become a foundation in their rationale behind life choices. These spiritual experiences must not be approached as the fulfillment of purpose and meaning, but as a vehicle used to seek transcendence. Counselors may encourage college students to participate in a variety of activities, with each activity providing a different path to engage in a spiritual experience. These activities have been called *spiritual disciplines* or *spiritual formation* (Foster, 1998). Spiritual formation involves the pursuit of exercises that promote personal growth in the spiritual. Tennant (2005) quotes Dallas Willard, an author and philosophy professor: “Spiritual formation in a Christian tradition answers a specific human question: *What kind of person am I going to be?*” (p. 42, emphasis Tennant). Although written from a Christian perspective, Willard’s question is applicable to any religious or spiritual identity, because pursuing spiritual experiences elicits change in an individual. The focus must reach beyond the individual since the purpose of the spiritual disciplines is to improve the individual to become a better person. The search for truth, from a counseling perspective, is not designed to produce an absolute truth, but to encourage growth and change along the journey.

Implications for Counselors

Because of the ambiguity surrounding spirituality, as is evidenced by the large number and variety of spiritual practices as well as by the difficulty in its definition, it presents a difficult topic to engage. This review suggests that spirituality is a method of exploring and evaluating meaning in existential life concerns. Many college students utilize spiritual experiences to find purpose and meaning, love and acceptance, and a personal identity. Although the application of spirituality into counseling may be challenging, research has indicated that it provides several benefits including wellness, sense of meaning and purpose, sense of security, and a worldview (Miller & Thoresen, 2003).

Benefits of Spirituality

Although many benefits of spirituality consist of existentially-oriented topics, an increasingly important benefit, even among the medical community, is the idea of complete and holistic wellness (Miller & Thoresen, 2003). Considering the importance of spirituality in well-being, spirituality fits well into medical wellness models. Adams, Bezner, Drabbs, Zambarano, and Steinhardt (2000) described a wellness model consisting of six dimensions: physical, social, psychological, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual. Adams et al. contend that one or more missing or constricted dimensions of wellness will lead to illness. Any change within one or more dimension(s) will affect and be affected by the other dimensions. If progress is to occur in counseling, change must be effected in such a way as to promote positive movement throughout the whole person.

Other suggested benefits of spirituality are of an existential nature, as indicated throughout this paper. Research has consistently illustrated the necessity of spirituality in

counseling, as is evident in the wellness model presented above (Adams et al., 2000). The importance of finding purpose and meaning in one's life is also well-supported by research, according to Adams et al. (2000). Likewise, Frankl (1984) discusses the importance of placing meaning and significance in one's life. Even as spirituality encourages finding meaning in being, it also promotes a sense of safety. If one's focus is on the metaphysical realm, the limitations of this physical world may seem less important; this means that shifting one's focus to the eternal allows one to dismiss the fear of pain and suffering, thus providing a sense of safety. Through this process, an individual may embrace and find fulfillment in a different worldview.

Although not always specifically expressed in literature, a spiritual worldview provides an individual with a philosophy of life, a philosophy of the universe and the metaphysical world that cannot be physically experienced. Through the spiritual, an understanding of life is redefined according to what is significant and/or meaningful to an individual. Through the spiritual worldview, an individual experiences the world according to this spiritual lens, which promotes the transcendent ideals of the individual through everyday actions.

Limitations of Spirituality

Despite the many positive aspects of spirituality, some limitations exist that may prevent some individuals from fully accepting the experience of the eternal and transcendent. For some, the idea of spirituality is too closely correlated to religious organizations, creating negative connotations that "organized religion is too dogmatic or judgmental, [and] worship services are too cold or perfunctory" (Schwartz, 2001, p. 30). Other limitations include the unclear separation of spirituality and religion, fanatical or radical belief structures, the definition given to spirituality, the ambiguity of the spiritual and the metaphysical, and the difficulty in recording empirical research evidence on spirituality (Miller & Thoresen, 2003; Speck, 2005). These limitations may ultimately prevent some from utilizing spirituality; however many currently accept spirituality as a viable option (Gallup Organization, 2004, 2007).

A definite relationship exists between spirituality and religion. According to Svoboda (2005), spirituality exists within a religious organization, but it may also exist "without defining a specific set of principles" (p. 16). Svoboda's study also indicates that spiritual groups, unattached to any religious organization, are on the rise among college students. However, Schaper (2000) reports that removing organized religion from spirituality destroys the sacred and creates a "me-first" spirituality that Speck (2005) would call narcissism. Spirituality cannot become completely independent of religion any more than religion can become independent from spirituality. To divorce spirituality and religion is to remove the meaning from religion and the foundation from spirituality.

Because some tie spirituality to religion, the definitions become complicated, especially because not all share this view. Because of the many current definitions of spirituality, it becomes necessary to more carefully and consistently define spirituality and religion in certain scenarios to avoid confusion (Speck, 2005). The plethora of definitions creates additional ambiguity to an already indistinct topic. Spirituality delves into the metaphysical; the physical senses cannot fully understand spirituality, although spirituality can be experienced in physical forms. For example, Lindsley (2005) suggests

that spirituality experienced through the spiritual is best exemplified in pain: “when we are in the depths of despair and agony, we cry out to God in a way that we seldom – perhaps never – do otherwise” (p. 58). In this manner, a psychological emotion (despair) and a physical sensation (agony) not only encourage looking to the spiritual for assistance, but also create an acute awareness (through hope) that something greater than the individual human being can change a painful situation.

Discussion

Spirituality provides counselors with an opportunity to practice holistic counseling, thus engaging the mind, body, and soul. The existential issues presented in this review are not new to the counseling profession; however, incorporating spirituality into therapeutic interventions and theoretical orientations has become a new trend. The increased interest in spirituality among college students may or may not signify a temporary trend (Spaid, 1996), but it does indicate that an important dimension of development and exploration of existence and being, used to form a philosophy of life, is missing when a spiritual component is not included. Because higher education appears uninterested or uncommitted to approaching this topic outside of a religion or theology department, the counseling profession is presented with an opportunity to fill this void by encouraging college students to fully explore life’s existential questions. Counselors may offer workshops or therapy groups designed to explore existential questions, which may integrate discussion of the spiritual contexts of these questions. As this paper notes, the desire among college students for a means to develop and explore spiritual issues is appearing on campuses (Spaid, 1996). Workshops, seminars, and groups can provide training and assistance in experiencing the spiritual in meaningful and healthy ways.

The counseling professional cannot afford to ignore the potential benefits of integrating spirituality into counseling, as well as of incorporating spirituality into treatment plans, therapeutic interventions, and counseling techniques. As college students explore existential questions of being, the spiritual provides significance in their search. Spirituality is not meant to be an arcane and mysterious idea; it must be freely and openly discussed in an attempt to better understand what it means to be human. Counselors can encourage these discussions among those they serve through facilitating healthy and beneficial change.

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