

Creating a Space for the Sacred in Therapy



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Bio-Psycho-Social-Spiritual.

Outline.

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- Religion, Spirituality, and Mental Health
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Spirituality Defined.

The meaning gained from life experiences, which may or may not be implicit within the context of religion.

And/or:

One's subjective experience with the sacred and the personal subjective expression of one's religious experience.

Religion Defined.

- A belief in and connection with a superhuman or divine power to which forms of worship and other ritualistic practices are directed.
- A set of symbolic forms and acts that relate man to the ultimate conditions of his existence.
- A system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with the ultimate problems of human life.

Religion and psychology have not had the most harmonious past.

Credit goes in part to Freud... and later Ellis.

However, things are starting to **change.**

How Do We Know Things Are Changing?

Influx of Studies Showing:

Benefits in physical and mental health.

Better clinical outcomes.

The impact on personal happiness.

Religion, Spirituality, and Mental Health.

Positive spiritual beliefs and religiosity are associated with:

- Longevity
- Lower stress and increased ability to cope with stress
- Lower rates of suicide
- Lower rates of substance abuse and increased recovery outcomes
- Lower rates of anxiety and depression
- Lower levels of psychological distress
- Increased hope, optimism, well being, happiness, and life satisfaction
- Purpose and meaning in life
- Greater social support and less loneliness
- Greater marital stability and satisfaction

Chris's Story

Context: Why Clients Might Be Reluctant to Address R&S in Therapy?

There is a sense of reserve regarding R&S in our society.

"Don't ask, Don't Tell."

A belief that therapy is a secular space.

Fears of being disrespected, discriminated against, judged or even pathologized by the therapist.

Leah's Story

Context: Why are R&S typically excluded from Therapy?

Lack of education in graduate training programs

- ❖ Therapists are unprepared.
- ❖ Lack of Training: A silent message that this is not a serious or relevant topic to address in therapy.
- ❖ Adherence to the myth that one must be an expert before venturing.

Context: Why are R&S typically excluded from Therapy?

Only 48-60% of therapists identify as religious and/or Spiritual.

However, most Canadians and thus most clients actually identify themselves as religious. 84% to be specific.

(Stats Canada 2001 census)

Why is it important to create a space for R&S in Therapy?

- 94% of North Americans believe in God,
- 93% identify with a religious group,
- 90% report that they pray,
- 84% try to live according to their R&S beliefs,
- 81% prefer having R&S beliefs and practices integrated into therapy,
- 80% report that religion is very or fairly important in their lives,
- 75% want their therapists to address R&S issues as part of their care,
- 58% feel the desire to experience spiritual growth,

Spiritual connectedness is a need in and of itself –

It is a part of our human makeup.

Why is it important to create a space for R&S in Therapy?

Religious beliefs and identities as indivisible.

Permeate most aspects of the self.

Psychotherapy as a space for exploration, introspection, and personal growth.

Clinical Process.

Ethical Responsibility

Therapist to Initiate

Develop a Deep Curiosity

Be Open and Present

Clinical Process.

Not Required to Agree

Are Required to be Respectful

Self-Exploration and Reflection is important

Clinical Process.

One of the most basic issues clients come to therapy for centres around **disconnection** and **isolation**.

Religious communities are often rich source of social connection.

Religion and Spirituality in Treatment.

What does it mean to be a spiritually sensitive therapist?

The focus is on the client's R&S beliefs and practices.

Gain consent before using explicit R&S interventions.

Questions to ask: Things to consider.

Act out of respect and sensitivity

- Might R&S be contributing to the current problem?
- Might R&S help alleviate the problem?

Invite clients to share their R&S concerns, issues, and values in the same way they share any other area of their life.

Questions to ask: Things to consider.

Clients may offer little 'crumbs'.

Be open and willing.

See the depth after safety and trust are established.

George's Story

Questions to ask: At Intake.

Address the topic in some way right from the beginning

Potential Intake Form Question:

- ❖ “Do you consider yourself a religious and/or spiritual person?”

Intake sessions can include a number of open-ended questions regarding a person’s spirituality and religion.

- ❖ What gives you meaning and purpose in life?
- ❖ Do you consider yourself a religious and/or spiritual person?
- ❖ Do you belong to any religious organizations or institutions?
- ❖ Do you and your family share the same religious or spiritual beliefs?

Questions to Ask: During Assessment.

During assessment may want to look at and explore:

- Religious rituals, beliefs, and practices
- Participation in religious community
- Level of religious knowledge
- Supportive connections to pastor or clergy
- Guiding values and ethical positions
- Areas of strength or dysfunction within their R&S life
- How the client believes R&S is involved in their current life circumstance
- The congruence between beliefs and current lifestyle
- Ways they incorporate R&S into coping or problem solving

Questions to ask: In Session.

- What is the importance of R&S in your everyday life?
- Are you content with your belief system? What role has faith played in your life, now and in the past?
- What gives your life purpose and meaning?
- Are there certain things in your life that are sacred to you?
- What was your religious upbringing? Are your beliefs different now?
- What specific religious practices, rituals, or activities do you engage in? What value do these provide for you?

Adapted from: Bienenfeld, D., & Yager, J. (2007). Issues of spirituality and religion in psychotherapy supervision. *The Israeli Journal of Psychiatry and Related Sciences*, 44(3), 178-186; Saunders, S.M, Miller, M.L., & Bright, M.M. (2010). Spiritually conscious psychological care. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 41(5), 355-363

Questions to Ask Regarding their Problem.

- Is there someone in your R&S community that you can go to for support and talk to about this problem?
- Has your current problem affected your relationship with God/higher power?
- Is your R&S important to this problem?
- How do you see your R&S relating to this or other problems?
- Have you used any aspects of your R&S to help you deal with this problem?
- **How do you want to have these issues addressed in therapy?**

Discussion Questions.

In groups of 3 or 4 please discuss and make a list of:

Some potential concerns about bringing Religion & Spirituality into therapy?

Some potential concerns about **NOT** making a space for Religion & Spirituality in therapy?

Ethical Considerations.

Avoid imposing one's own beliefs onto clients.

Avoid directly challenging religious values.

A shared belief system does not necessarily result in a shared understanding.

Sharon's Story

Ethical Considerations.

Stereotyping

Trivializing R&S

Consult and collaborate

Boundaries: Psychotherapists are not clergy

Know when to refer

Ethical Considerations.

Professionals are also encouraged to:

Read books,

Attend workshops, trainings and seminars,

Seek out supervision and consultation,

Learn more about the religious traditions of the clients they typically work with.

The Take Home Message.

- Essential to **incorporate** this integral component of the person into therapy (when appropriate).
- Important to **ask** oneself why one hasn't in the past and then take necessary steps to do so.
- **Monitor** and assess ourselves during the process.
- Approach this sacred topic with **respect**.
- Be **patient** with clients – this is a deeply personal topic.
- Be **open** and curious.
- Let the **client** lead and teach.

For Further Learning.

- Aten & Leach (2009). Spirituality and the Therapeutic Process: A Comprehensive Resource from Intake to Termination.
- Cornet (1998). The Soul of Psychotherapy: Recapturing the Spiritual Dimension in the Therapeutic Encounter.
- Miller (1999). Integrating Spirituality into Treatment.
- Paloutzian & Parks (2005). Handbook for the Psychology of Religion.
- Pargament (2007). Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy: Understanding and Addressing the Sacred.
- Richards & Bergin (1997). A Spiritual Strategy for Counseling and Psychotherapy.
- Sperry (2001). Spirituality in Clinical Practice: Incorporating the Spiritual Dimension in Psychotherapy and Counseling.

Thank You.

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