

Spirituality in Counseling: Implications for Contemporary Counsellors

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Abstract

In this article, we investigate the influence that spirituality and religion may have in therapeutic procedures. We examined the distinctions between spirituality and religion that might be made and highlighted the ways that some authors believe they overlap or merge into one another. The authors investigated claim that religion and spirituality may benefit therapy by fostering a client-therapist relationship and enhancing the therapeutic process by instilling both parties with a shared set of values and guiding principles. The client's religious practices and beliefs brought to the therapy setting should be highlighted. Respect as a core value for the therapeutic conversation and connection has a significant role in reducing some of the negative impacts of the religious/spiritual intervention. Though they shouldn't take the place of medical care, clinical interventions, or counseling, religion and spirituality should be incorporated into therapeutic interventions if they may help patients in various types of therapy.

Keywords: Counseling, Psychology, Psychotherapy, Psycho-spiritual, Religion, Spirituality

Introduction

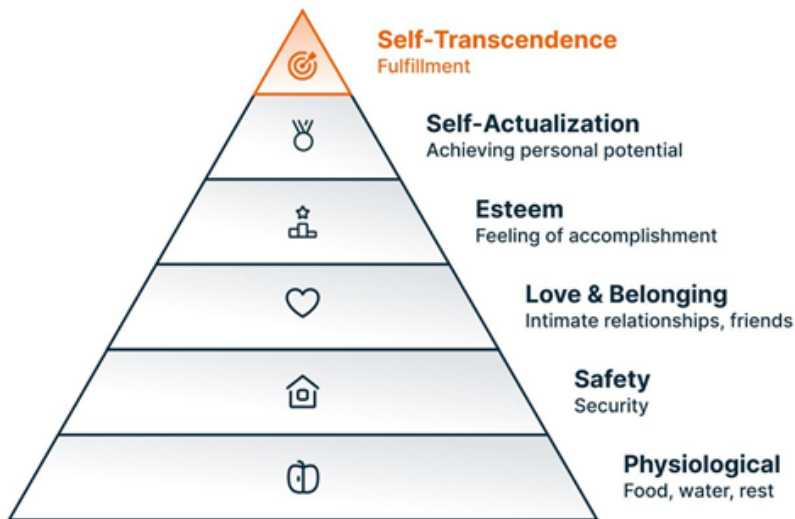
In the therapeutic relationship, contemporary counsellors often have challenges to deal with the human spiritual experience. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1956) was cited by Ponds (2014) to say that we are not human beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human experience. This shows that human beings are not just corporeal, but also spiritual in nature. A human person has both body and soul. The body is matter, and the soul is form (Egunjobi, 2004) making the soul the real essence of a person. Koelzer (2021) explains that our soul, that part of us that observes quietly behind what we do, think, believe, and feel, existed before this human life, and will continue to exist after our present physical life transitions. For each of us, our soul is where unconditional love, unending forgiveness, compassion, harmony, peace, and joy reside. Our Soul is a little piece of the Divine, here to experience this life and its lessons. We are, indeed, Spiritual Beings having a human experience.

In this regard, Maslow (1943) shows the needs of every person following a hierarchy of needs, which he presented in a pyramid with the more basic needs at the bottom. Once needs on the more basic level are met, a person can move up the pyramid to focus on higher needs (Poston, 2009). Maslow (1943) referred to the first four levels of needs as deficiency needs. People's behavior is often motivated by the lack of these things. The bottom level contains physical needs (e.g., food and water and, according to Maslow, sexual fulfillment). The next level is security needs (e.g., safety and stability in one's environment). Next level is love and belonging needs (e.g., relationships with family and friends) followed by esteem needs (e.g., self-esteem and respect from others). At the top of the pyramid are growth needs, which Maslow termed as self-actualization. The idea here is that, when the basic needs are met, people have the desire and ability to grow and realize their full potential. Self-actualization dominated for many years Maslow's famous hierarchy of needs. However, self-actualization is now considered a step lower to Self-Transcendence which is the ultimate or peak level of development. That is, Self-Transcendence should be the focus instead of self-focused. It concerns higher goals than those which are self-serving (Ackerman, 2018).

According to Maslow, self-transcendence brings the individual what he termed peak experiences in which they transcend and see from a higher perspective. These experiences often bring strong positive emotions like joy, peace, and well-developed sense of awareness (Messerly, 2017). With human spirituality, a person becomes one with the universe. Maslow's hierarchy of human needs is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Maslow Hierarchy of Needs



Source: Go Beyond (2021)

Jung (1969) also shows the importance of spiritual growth in counselling. Fernando (2014), in her thesis, found that applying Jungian psychology has been life-giving, and it has become the lens through which she looked at spiritual growth. Jung's discoveries about the unconscious, both personal and collective, have shed enormous light on our understanding of the way in which God works within individuals.

The understanding of dreams, as taught in the Spiritual Directors' Formation Program, is largely informed by Jung's research on dreams. The desire for the directee to 'go deeper', is because s/he believes that God is found deeper, i.e., at the unconscious level; and s/he wants God to become more conscious. The belief that symbols, metaphor, art and poetry can be important in spiritual direction stem from a sense that these things help make the unconscious conscious. This is to say that God is found in the unconscious. Therefore, the role of the director is to bring God from the unconscious to the conscious which can help the directee to wholeness. That is why Adler viewed spirituality as a life task that can contribute encouragement and meaning into clients' lives. Adler used spirituality purposefully.

Adler's view about religion is important, because spirituality can be used for the treatment of the client. For instance, Adler might ask to know if the client uses religion (or spirituality) to promote and cope with challenges of life such as separation and violence on one hand, and unity or compassion on other hand (Bluvshstein et al., 2015). This shows the importance of spirituality in counseling (Sommers-Flanagan 2018).

Understanding of Counselling/Psychotherapy

Counseling can be understood as psychotherapeutic relationship in which an individual receives help from a counselor, to release negative feelings and thus, clear the way for positive growth in personality. Shivangi (2022) stated that counselling has the following seven characteristics:

1. Counselling is a highly personal process.
2. It has close contact of two or more persons.
3. It is a joint quest of counsellor and counselee.
4. The counsellor should have full understanding of his task.
5. It involves intense conversation between the two persons – counsellor and counselee.
6. Counselling deals with the problems of abnormal behavior and emotional problems.
7. Counseling releases the counselee from the feeling of inferiority and compulsion.
8. The purpose of counselling is to make counselee cheerful, to gain confidence for social responsibility.

Today, according to Bhargava (2021), professional counseling still includes clinicians in its practice who are problem-avoidance and growth-oriented, but the field is considerably broader than that. The emphasis is on wellness, development, mindfulness, meaningfulness, mattering, and progress as well as the treatment of mental diseases for individuals, groups, couples, and families across the lifespan.

Traditionally, psychotherapy (or therapy) has focused on serious problems associated with intrapsychic disorders (such as delusions or hallucinations), and internal conflicts and personality issues (such as dependency or inadequacy in working with others). It has dealt with the establishment or recovery of adequacy. As such, psychotherapy, especially analytically based therapy, has emphasized (a) the past more than the present, (b) insight more than change, (c) the detachment of the therapist, and (d) the therapist's role as an expert (Gladding, 2018).

Spirituality and Counselling

Spirituality can be used in counseling to threat the human person. That is why Egunjobi (2019) found that the biopsychosociotechnospiritual view of the human person can be an approach in psycho-spiritual counseling. This shows that every human person can be understood from the biological, psychological, social, technological, and spiritual perspectives.

In the same line, the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC, 1998) perceived Spirituality as the drawing out and infusion of spirit in one's life. It is experienced as an active and passive process. According to Farmer (2017), spirituality is also defined as a capacity and tendency that is innate and unique to all persons. This spiritual tendency moves the individual toward knowledge, love, meaning, peace, hope, transcendence, connectedness, compassion, wellness, and wholeness. Spirituality includes one's capacity for creativity, growth, and the development of a value system. Spirituality encompasses a variety of phenomena, including experiences, beliefs, and practices. Spirituality is approached from a variety of perspectives, including psychospiritual, religious, and transpersonal. While spirituality is usually expressed through culture, it both precedes and transcends culture.

In this sense, spirituality can be seen as man's force to surpass himself and his ability to transform existence according to the characteristics stemming from the recognition of spiritual values. That is why in terms of counseling activities, what seems important is the transformative force that can be set into motion by man, and the metamorphosis that can be initiated at the level of his own existence through valorizing spirituality (Frunza, 2019). This view seems not to be shared by all.

Negative Views of Spirituality in Counseling

Freud (1933), in his book *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, suggested that religion is an illusion, and it derives its strength from its readiness to fit in with our instinctual wishful. Thus, epilepsy was associated with behavioral changes and religious fervor since the time of Hippocrates. Since these ancient times, seizures were thought to be due to demonic or divine influences. Some believed that the

visions and deep spiritual experiences of several famous prophets, including Ezekiel, Buddha, Mohammed, and Joan of Arc, were in fact epileptic in origin (Garcia-Santibanez & Sarva, 2015).

Corey (n.d.) explained Wendell's view about religion by saying that Christianity militates against human development in such vital areas as self-esteem, sexuality, and social interactions. The tragic end result of Christian conditioning is too often antisocial behavior, sexual dysfunction, poor psychological development, anxiety, and even major psychiatric illness.

He continues by saying that Christian indoctrination is not simply a problem affecting individuals or single families; the noxious effects of its teachings over nearly two millennia pervade society at large, even those who are not Christians, and in ways that seriously undermine human welfare and the quality of life.

He concluded by saying that in the face of so much human suffering resulting from Christian doctrine, it is imperative that health care professionals, recognizing the Christian belief system as an addictive disease, develop a religious status examination to help evaluate how notions about life derived from Christian god-talk compromise individuals' healthy functioning.

Positive View of Spirituality in Counseling

According to Corey (1969), 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.

Integration of Spirituality and Counselling

In recent decades, spirituality has become an important subject of study in psychology. As research begins to elucidate the role of spiritual beliefs and behaviors in mental health and the influences of spirituality in psychotherapy, there is an increase in the development of therapist skills in this area.

About 85% of the world population are religious and much more are spiritual. An example is given in the World Population Review (2022), and shows that approximately 2.38 billion people practice some form of Christian spirituality, approximately 1.91 billion practice Islam, 1.16 billion people practice Hinduism in the global population. This indicates that about one-third of the world's total population is Christian. Even though Christianity has several denominations, and the largest is the Catholic Church, the integration of Christian spirituality can help in counseling active members.

Briggs and Rayle (2011) state that spirituality has received increased attention in the counseling field and has been acknowledged as important aspect of multiculturalism. The role of spiritual beliefs is mentioned throughout the Standards of the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), and guidelines for working with spiritual issues within various cultural paradigms are emerging. Nevertheless, many counselor educators seem unsure about how to infuse spiritual issues into courses. This shows that many people see the importance of integrating spirituality in counselling.

In this sense, Lietz and Hodge (2012) said that spirituality represents an important internal and external strength that can support clients when facing a variety of problems including substance misuse and addiction. Spirituality is commonly included in peer-run mutual aid support groups for addiction, while

incorporating a client's spiritual preference is less common in professional substance abuse counseling. This means that it is possible to use one's spiritual beliefs to support him or her in the healing process.

Plumb (2011) observed that most of the research on incorporating spirituality into counseling, in the field of counselling psychology and psychology in general, has a predominantly Judeo-Christian bias. For him, 76.0 percent of the adult Americans were questioned in *the American Religious Identification Survey 2008* identified as Christians. Africans are generally viewed as religious people. These indicate that incorporating spirituality based on client's beliefs can also be helpful in counselling.

Psycho-Spirituality

Research shows that religious and spiritual beliefs and practices are beneficial for improving and maintaining good mental and physical health, and that they have benefits for people dealing with mental illness. Such benefits include, according to Plumb (2011), (a) greater strength in coping and decision-making, (b) enhanced social support, and (c) personal coherence or wholeness. Religion and Spirituality can have a positive impact on mental health. In some ways, they provide the same impact (Estrada, et al., 2019).

Spirituality influences many decisions that people make. It encourages people to have better relationships with themselves, others, and the unknown. Spirituality can help you deal with stress by giving you a sense of peace, purpose, and forgiveness. It often becomes more important in times of emotional stress or illness (Brennan, 2021).

According to research, many therapists are incorporating religion and spirituality into counselling through "intrapersonal integration" (interventions based on one's own religious experience) (Plumb, 2011). This can be problematic because it increases a risk of therapists imposing their own values or applying religious or spiritual interventions inappropriately. These findings are supported by a study by Frazier and Hansen (2009), which found that psychologists who identified as religious or spiritual were more likely to report engaging in religious or spiritual psychotherapy behaviours, such as the use of prayer, biblical allusions, and religious metaphors.

Eseadi et al. (2015), found that using religion as a therapeutic tool is a little controversial and still emerging, and techniques include use of prayer during a session, ways to direct clients to pray, spiritual journaling, forgiveness protocols, using biblical texts to reinforce healthy mental and emotional habits and working to change punitive God images.

In this Psycho-spirituality, Akwash (2020) uses spiritually guided forgiveness protocols to help clients deal with emotional problems that resulted from harm inflicted by friends or family members. Thus, using religious teachings on forgiveness can direct clients to let go of unhealthy anger and move past an abusive situation without justifying the abuse. Egunjobi (2022) mentioned techniques, practices, and interventions of spiritual nature that can be integrated in counselling process. These are, mindfulness, mindfulness meditation, pranayama, dream interpretation, bibliotherapy, therapeutic storytelling, fierce grace, prayer, compassion, healing family tree, and forgiveness.

The Spiritual Impact on Client's Life

Doehring (2019) explains how during assessment, she asked clients about religious and spiritual backgrounds if they pray and if it helps or not. And if they do have a belief in a personal God, what they think God wants from them right now, and that leads them to talk about their experience with God. Doehring found that the sum of that conversation that helps her to understand what religion's impact is on their life. With religious or spiritual clients, that sensitivity and willingness to interact in a religious way helps them to trust the therapist and can bring a beautiful aspect of the human experience into the therapy

room. She added that some people describe the beauty of spiritually guided therapy as experiencing a third presence in the room—a spiritual presence or a God presence. There was a mystery being revealed to the patient in that presence. She concluded by saying that it was a sort of an epiphany that can be extremely useful in therapy.

Implication for Contemporary Counselors

Corey (1969) found that clinicians should 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.

The therapist would not see themselves as the task-centered expert imparting knowledge; rather they would see themselves from a client-centered disposition that explores the understanding of the client's life to create meaning-making interventions. It is an environment of presence between the therapist and client (Rieck, 2021).

Corey (2015) argued that religion and spirituality should be viewed from a multicultural perspective, inclusive of the spiritual, religious, and ethnic context and themes that have “healing influences including love, caring, learning to listen, compassion, challenging clients’ basic life assumptions” and asking questions of “who am I?” and “what is the meaning life”

Arczynski et al. (2016) suggested that creating a context or understanding of the relevance of spirituality in a client's life requires multicultural counseling competence. The authors suggested that the therapist needs to be self-aware and sensitizing themselves to their clients' spiritual cultures. Integrating spirituality and religion requires the therapist's ability to create that context of matching psychotherapy processes by mirroring the client's language attuning interventions to their clients' preferred modes of expression of spirituality.

Therapists should

1. Never impose their spirituality on the client
2. Be respectful of the client's spirituality
 - Be open to assess client's spirituality during intake, informed consent, or during counseling process before tapping into the client's spirituality to help the client
1. Seek consultation or go supervision when experiencing conflict of spirituality
2. Make referral if not spiritually competent to journey with a client whose spirituality is important in the counseling process.

Conclusion

Spirituality can enhance counseling, especially in the context of empathy and compassion. The therapist's goal is to capture moments and apply an existential approach to engaging the client in a way that captures those moments, which could be called “sacred” or “transcendent moments”.

Spiritually integrated psychotherapy will never compete with nor replace other forms of treatment. It can be interwoven into virtually any psychotherapeutic tradition”, including psychodynamic, cognitive-behavioral, family systems, interpersonal, experimental, humanistic, and existential.

Therapists need to know when to see it, know where it starts and stops, and know how it operates in people’s lives.

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