

Integration of Spirituality in Counseling

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Integration of Spirituality in Counseling, a Step Above

People come to counseling for many reasons, “feeling lost” and “disconnected” are common phrases clients use in explaining why they are seeking counseling. The often accompanying confusion, indecision, and a loss of confidence frequently suggest a need for understanding and support on a much deeper level. Kenneth Pargament, Professor of Psychology at Bowling Green University who is published extensively on the vital role of religion and spirituality in coping with stress and trauma, stated, “Illness, accident, interpersonal conflicts, divorce, layoffs, and death are more than just “significant life events”. They raise profound and disturbing questions about our place and purpose in the world, they point to the limits of our powers, and they underscore our finitude... These deep questions call for a spiritual response” (Pargament p.11). Psychotherapy that does not integrate spirituality fails to address some of the most influential aspects of how a person’s struggles, concerns, hopes and fears may have come to be. Moreover, any form of counseling or therapy that does not explore one’s spirituality is missing foundational pieces of how an individual makes sense of their identity, purpose, and overall sense of meaning.

Counseling has become much more multi-culturally aware in the past decades. This new philosophy of counseling encourages counselor’s awareness of and respect for the client’s culture, sexual identity, age, gender, socio-economic status, education level, abilities and, spiritual beliefs and practices. In essence these are each pieces that make up the identity of the client and contribute to their strengths and areas of growth. Many of the above areas of diversity are addressed in detail in counselor training programs; however, spirituality receives little, if any, attention. Approximately 18% of graduate counseling psychology programs offer a course that focuses on religion or spirituality. (Pargament, 2007, p.9) Interest in integrating spirituality into the counseling profession has increased in recent years. This growing desire indicates there is and has been something missing in terms of acknowledging, addressing and realizing the potential meaning of one’s struggles. In an effort to promote awareness of the importance of spirituality in counseling, the American Counseling Association formed a division called ASERVIC.

Spirituality is defined by the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC) 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” (p. 1). All of these attributes of spirituality are in-line with the goals of counseling. Therefore, integrating spirituality within the counseling sessions can be a potent tool used to promote healing and increase awareness of self in relation to others. “Spirituality, at its best, gives the individual the ability to look within and to trust. This promotes a deep sense of belonging, of wholeness, of connectedness and of openness to the infinite” (ASERVIC, 2010, p. 1). When spirituality and counseling work together it is a holistic healing approach where the client receives validation of all aspects of themselves.

Spiritual Counseling Promotes Healing

According to Pargament, (2007) “While over 90% of the U.S. population reports belief in a personal God, only 24% of clinical and counseling psychologists do. When it comes to religion, therapists and their clients come from different worlds.” (p. 9). This dissonance leaves issues of spirituality outside of the therapy office. This inability to present their whole selves within therapy can be limiting to the therapeutic relationship and potentially damaging to the client. “Their (spiritual) beliefs have a profound impact on their worldview, relationships, self-concept, and problem-solving approaches” (ASERVIC, p.2). In essence counseling without allowing and accepting the person to share their spiritual perspective is like trying to put a puzzle together without the picture. It is hard to see where the pieces are coming from, where they are going and where they fit in relation to each other. Spirituality can be a resource, a tool and a gift for both the counselor and the client. Anything less is neglecting a crucial innate agent of healing.

Historically, “religion and medicine were virtually inseparable for thousands of years, the advent of science created a chasm between the two (Canadian Associate for Spiritual Care p. 1)”. In the past, scholars were forced to choose between the path of spirituality or science with very little middle ground. The later part of the 20th century has witnessed a rise in the scientific study of religion and spirituality with regard to health and well-being. Many scientific studies prove spirituality promotes health on many levels including mental, physical and emotional. Harvard cardiologist Herbert Benson stated, “I am astonished that my scientific studies have so conclusively shown that our bodies are wired to be nourished and healed by prayer and other exercises of belief” (Canadian Associate for Spiritual Care, p. 2).

The highly beneficial experience of integrating spirituality and counseling has been empirically validated in a number of studies. In a review of 1200 studies from North America, Europe, and Israel, Koenig et al. (2001, as cited in Hussain, p.1703) found that more than two-thirds of these studies revealed significant correlation between religious and spiritual activities and improved mental and physical health. In terms of research done in connecting spirituality and health, “Across the board, surveys confirm a remarkable rise in spiritual concern” (Gallup & Jones, 2000, p.27). When reviewing the literature, studies conducted that empirically validate spirituality as a resource for health and healing appear limitless. A small sample is listed below:

-Koenig, who used the terms spirituality and religion interchangeably, found through reviewing empirical studies that "religious people are physically healthier, lead healthier lifestyles, and require fewer health services" (Koenig, 2000; as cited in Hussain, p. 1708).

-The Somerset Spirituality Project, headed by Dr. Nicholls of the Mental Health Foundation, has provided evidence of the importance of spirituality for some people with severe mental health problems and additionally the study illuminated the difficulty clients experience having the spiritual aspect of their lives taken seriously by professionals (as cited in Merchant et al, 2008, p.9).

-Pargament et al (2004) studied medically ill elderly patients and found that struggles with the divine, that might be recognizable by statements such as, "God has abandoned me", predicted increases in depressed mood, declines in physical functioning status, declines in quality of life and, a 22-33% increase in mortality after controls.

- Lindgren and Coursey (1995) studied 655 people with serious mental illness. Sixty-five percent of the individuals stated that they would like to talk about spiritual concerns with therapists while only 35% have felt comfortable enough to initiate this dialogue (as cited in Pargament 2007).

-Conway (1985) conducted a study which found that the most frequent method of coping among black and white elderly women with medical problems was prayer. Prayer was used more often than resting, seeking information, prescription drugs, or, going to a physician (as cited in Pargament 2007).

-Malik (2009) did an in-depth qualitative interview that showed that religious coping strategies were perceived as effective with depression and schizophrenic symptoms. However, this same study revealed the participant's fear of being misunderstood by health professionals (as cited in Merchant et al, 2008, p.7).

- Tepper et al (2002) surveyed 400 people with serious mental illness. It was found that 80% cope with their symptoms and daily problems through religion, 65% found religious coping helpful, 30% say religion was the most important resource. Additionally, more religious coping over time was tied to less frustration, less depression and hostility and fewer hospitalizations (as cited in Pargament 2007).

Based on similar studies, several counseling organizations, including the American Counseling Association (ACA); the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC); and the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) have observed the effect spirituality can have in the Counseling process and have been increasing their efforts toward the integration of spirituality into the professional counseling field through training and practice. Such recognition validates the merit, relevance, and value of addressing spirituality when working with clients (Miller, as cited in Nichols, 1999).

Ideally a person's spiritual beliefs will be interwoven into therapy as it is interwoven into the individual's life. (Pargament p.21) A person's spirituality is their own unique belief system that, when well integrated, helps them establish and maintain healthy mental and physical well-being. It also enables them to find meaning, hope and, resilience when faced with problems. A person's spirituality can help them string together seemingly disconnected chapters of their personal stories. Moreover, a client's spiritual beliefs influence the choices they make regarding how they want to be treated and supported thus having a great impact on interpersonal relationships. Talking about

their spiritual needs may help them discover how they can support themselves, taking responsibility for themselves and their choices, thereby gaining congruency and integrity.

To overlook spiritual influences that have helped shape and create how people relate to themselves and others, not to mention how they have come to make sense and meaning of their lives, is to overlook the very center of what it means to be human. In a profession that is based on empathizing with others and forging an authentic, therapeutic relationship, getting on the same page might include opening whatever religious or spiritual literature they may bring. “The majority of persons in the United States profess some form of religious belief, even if they are not active participants in a particular religion and their beliefs have a profound impact on their worldview, relationships, self-concept, and problem-solving approaches” (ASERVIC p.2).

According to Elkins (1995) “Medical and mechanistic models have made useful contributions that should be integrated into any comprehensive theory of psychotherapy, but when these models serve as the foundation of our profession, they produce a psychology that is barren of soul. Thus, they unintentionally participate in the further desacralization of our society and in the de-souling of individual lives. Make no mistake: Soulless therapies produce soulless results. When our psychotherapies... become permeated with the same desacralization assumptions that often cause our clients problems in the first place, then perhaps it is time for us to ask what we are doing as therapists and to seek other approaches that support rather than destroy the soul (as cited by Pargament, 2007)”

Spiritually Integrated Counseling at Samaritan Counseling Center

The Samaritan Counseling Center of the Fox Valley has more than forty years experience in integrating counseling and spirituality, respecting and serving a diversity of faith backgrounds. There are 500 Samaritan Centers in 355 cities making the Samaritan network one of the largest counseling providers in the country integrating psychology and spirituality in cost effective counseling. A common feature of these centers is the philosophy of looking at the whole person including *body, mind, spirit, and community* in understanding the client’s needs and in developing appropriate treatment plans.

Samaritan incorporates *body* into their counseling by collaborating with physicians and other physical healers. The Samaritan Center is the only mental health service provider in the rotation for physicians in the Fox Valley Family Medicine Residency Program of the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health. The Physicians in training attend the case review meetings so that counselors can call upon their area of expertise to help problem solve around areas of physical illness as they relate to the problems clients are facing.

Samaritan counselors are skilled professionals who incorporate healing of the *mind* with proven methods of psychotherapy and mental health care in counseling to address the issues of emotional, sexual and physical abuse, alcohol and drug issues, anger, attention deficit, hyperactivity disorders, bi-polar disorder, co-dependency, conflict resolution, eating disorders, gambling, grief and loss, men’s issues, occupation and careers, phobias, sexuality, spiritual and faith issues, stress, post-traumatic stress and, women’s issues. The counselors have specialties in diverse areas such as gambling,

addictions, family therapy, mental health needs of individuals with developmental disabilities, cultural diversity, child and adolescent development, and grief counseling. They also have a variety of tools available to facilitate the healing of clients including talk therapy, art therapy, dream work, sand tray therapy, body awareness, imagery, play therapy, relaxation techniques, EMDR and counseling in English, Spanish and Portuguese.

Of course, integrating *spirituality* in counseling is Samaritan's specialty. Samaritan specifically trains its counselors on how to respectfully approach the topic of spirituality within sessions and how to use the client's beliefs as the compass for healing. At Samaritan the counselors view a client's faith as an integral component to the emotional healing and growth process. Addressing one's spirituality can offer hope, inspiration, and direction...crucial resources for emotional healing and growth. Adding the faith component to traditional therapy helps children, youth, adults and faith communities "put it all together" with their core beliefs. Grounded in historic Judeo-Christian heritage, Samaritan welcomes and respects those from all walks of faith and spirituality. Samaritan helps each person, each couple, each family and each faith community use their own belief system to heal and to plan for a better future.

Samaritan reaches out to the *community* in various ways to optimize the benefits to many segments of the population even when financial resources are not available to clients. In 2010, 37% of the clients Samaritan served were uninsured. Samaritan offers counseling services in Menasha, Oshkosh, New London, Kimberly and at UW-Fox Valley. In addition Samaritan is home for a Foster Treatment Program where foster parents and children can learn skills and coping strategies to promote success. Samaritan also offers Clergy and Congregation Care through which our trained staff help congregations use their own wisdom to strengthen and renew their faith communities. They do this by clarifying congregational gifts and developing clear visions for the future so that they can move forward with confidence set in place.

As you can see, Samaritan epitomizes their tagline: Healing Mind, Body, Spirit and Community. With the societal trend toward holistic healing, Samaritan is on the forefront of mental health providers in making this vital service available to such a wide range of clients, such as the one quoted here. "Thank you so much for your listening ear and good counsel! I felt respected, heard, challenged and prayed for! I so appreciate our times together. You have my respect and honor. You did help me, and I do feel human again, have healed a bit more. ... Slowly but surely grace is winning."

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