

Spirituality & Healing

How addressing spirit for ourselves and our clients can improve health outcomes.

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Spirituality can play a significant role in healing, disease prevention, and wellness. It is our responsibility as OTs to address this component within ourselves and with our clients.

What is Spirituality?

Spirituality is one part of the mind-body-spirit connection. It may be the most foundational part of who we are. Spirituality conveys a personal meaning for each of us. Like a blueprint, our spirit can impact all aspects of ourselves and our life experiences.

The word spirit comes from the Latin root word "spiritus," which means breath, wind, air, soul or psyche. Metaphysically, it may be referred to as consciousness or personality -- that which is transcendent or a reality beyond what is perceptible to the senses.

According to the Occupational Therapy Practice Framework: Domain and Process, 2nd Edition, Spirituality is "the personal quest for understanding answers to ultimate questions about life, about meaning and about relationship with the sacred or transcendent, which may (or may not) lead to or arise from the development of religious rituals and the formation of community."

Spirituality in Health Care

The World Health Organization states that 80% of certain chronic diseases could be prevented by lifestyle changes and the role that behavior and lifestyle play in health. While OTs address lifestyle and promote better self-care, spirituality is not always addressed, which is inextricably linked to lifestyle, behaviors, and environment.

Spiritual or religious practices, such as prayer or meditation, can lead to better health outcomes, including increased energy, longer lifespan, better coping skills, and overall quality of life during an illness.

Research indicates that there is a strong relationship between the degree to which health care practitioners address emotional/spiritual needs and overall patient satisfaction. 92% of Americans believe in God. 80% of Americans believe in angels, and 82% of Americans believe that prayer can cure serious illness. This gives OTs a greater need and opportunity to address these factors with their clients.

Spirituality in OT

Spirituality was included into the Occupational Therapy Practice Framework in 2008 as a Client Factor, and implies that clinicians address spirituality as a component of client-centered practice. The research in the article "Spirituality in Occupational Therapy: Do We Practice What We Teach?" reveals that there is a gap between education, theory, and practice. Although occupational therapy is intended to be holistic, this study found that therapists require a more

complete understanding of what spirituality is and what the role of the occupational therapist is when addressing spirituality in evaluation or treatment.

Conducting a spiritual screening or assessments by asking questions during the initial client interview will open doors for you and your client to identify areas of concern or strength and potential avenues to explore in the course of their treatment. Creating space for this dialogue can help your client feel understood, empowered, and better able to communicate with you. This helps you to identify areas that need addressing and may give your client pause to think about what is important to them. You can then support you client to further explore healing opportunities within their own spirituality.

Spirituality can come to the forefront during emotional stress, physical illness, or death. Your clients may be struggling with questions such as:

- Why am I sick?
- What's the purpose or meaning of my pain/suffering?
- Will I live/die?
- Will you respect my beliefs?

Supporting your client during this time of exploration may be vital to their health and healing. Helping them find the answers within themselves or through a spiritual community may be the most important thing to them.

You can ask your client questions such as:

- What are your sources of hope, strength, comfort, or peace?
- Are you part of a religious or spiritual community?
- What spiritual practices do you find most helpful personally?
- Are there any specific practices or restrictions I should know about in providing your health care?

Refer to other spiritual resources such as clergy or other spiritual leaders for additional support, if you feel it is needed.

Howard Clinebell, PhD, found over his 30 plus years of psychological counseling and pastoral care that there are seven spiritual hungers that humans have in common:

- Healing and empowerment of love
- Renewing times of transcendence
- Vital beliefs

- Values, priorities, and life commitments
- Inner wisdom, creativity and love of their unique transpersonal/spiritual self
- Awareness of our oneness
- Spiritual resources to help heal

It is within the OT scope of practice to address these needs. OTs can play a primary role in supporting lifestyle choices and spirituality. For example, if a person suffers from a significant health or life challenge an OT can support them in the process to evaluate their life, how they live, what is important or meaningful for them, how they interact in relationships, sleep, eat, play, and how they wish to best utilize their time. Integrating spirituality into their care may prevent further health problems and bring greater healing and quality of life to the person.

Spirituality in Practice

As part of my initial intake, I ask my clients about their spiritual beliefs or religious practices. I ask them whether they meditate or pray, and what gives them meaning or purpose in life. I ask them what helps them relax and feel peace. This opens a door for me to understand their practices and viewpoints. It also helps the client see the connection between health and spiritual beliefs and practices.

There are several ways I help my clients get in touch with or enhance their spirituality. They may learn new skills or enhance their meditation, prayer, imagery, intuition, and energy healing. I help them release restricting or limiting beliefs so they can connect with joy and peace. I support them to find a sense of connection verses separation, and help them to find meaning and discover lessons of their suffering. I help them find ways to forgive themselves and those who have hurt them in the past, and guide them toward self-love, self-compassion, and self-acceptance. They often feel empowered with a newfound sense of peace, joy, and ways to cope with life's challenges.

Self Care and Spirituality

Developing my spirituality has tremendously helped me personally and professionally. While I grew up within a religious context, what was missing was a personal connection to spirit. In my quest to reduce suffering and stress I learned about energy healing and intuition. Throughout our training we regularly meditated. Meditation allowed us to quiet our minds and more deeply connect to ourselves, to feel the subtle sensations that informed us of where the energy was flowing in our bodies or where it was blocked or excessive. Meditation gave us the space to connect with the universal life energy within and around ourselves -- the spirit.

Connecting more deeply with my spirituality has helped me surrender the outcome to a higher power. I let go of my attachments of what I think should be the outcome for my client. Yes, I want the best for them and will work hard to assist them to achieve their goals. However, I now know there is the client's will and a higher will at work creating the experiences meant for the client to have for their personal development and spiritual growth. A person's pain or suffering can lead to healing, joy, gratitude, or reorientation in life.

Our clients are often our biggest teachers. Your client's spirituality and strength may inspire you or their spiritual issues may trigger your own spiritual areas that need addressing. A client may provoke an emotional reaction that may indicate countertransference. This may be bringing your spiritual issues to the surface. Spiritual teachers would say that the clients we encounter are the ones we need to stimulate our own personal development and spiritual growth.

Spirituality Resources

To become more comfortable with addressing spirituality with your clients, you may find it helpful to look at your own spirituality and how it plays a role in your life. Consider asking yourself the spiritual screening questions you would ask your clients.

Read spiritual books, articles, poems, or spend time in nature, with art, music, or visit peaceful, sacred, serene, or holy places and engage in meaningful conversations that stimulate your own spiritual unfolding. This exploration will draw you closer to a connection to yourself and something greater. Take time to connect with what gives you meaning and purpose, inspires you, and find ways to create that in your life.

Take spiritual workshops, go on a retreat, or take classes such as meditation, relaxation, guided imagery, spiritual development, intuitive development, energy healing, or yoga.

The Center for Spirituality at the University of Minnesota has a "Spirituality in Healthcare" module for providers who are interested in how spirituality can impact a person's healthcare experience at www.csh.umn.edu/free-online-learning-modules/index.htm.

To connect with OTs interested in mind, body, spirit medicine, prevention and wellness visit the www.HolisticOT.org website, the Holistic Occupational Therapy Facebook Page, on Twitter, and LinkedIn.

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