



2012

Transcendent Worldviews: Understanding Spirituality in Practice

- 1 Approaching Spirituality as a Client Strength
- 2 Spiritual Influence Throughout Life
- 2 Helping Practices and Positive Youth Development
- 3 A Role for the Religious Community in Family Counseling
- 3 Holistic Planning With Families in Recovery
- 4 Embracing Spirituality in Practice: Confronting the Unknown to Gain Client Trust



Approaching Spirituality as a Client Strength

It is common for people to question the reasons behind events, the purpose of life, and if there is a God or an afterlife. Such questions, and the beliefs behind them, can influence encounters between social workers and clients, making issues around religion and spirituality important for practitioners to be aware of and comfortable discussing with clients.

Some practitioners may tend to avoid spiritual matters because of confusion around spirituality and religion. Religion, in particular, can hold negative connotations because it is frequently equated with rigidity and dogmatism, as well as perceptions about unequal treatment of women or gender stereotypes. Spiritual issues can seem much more consistent with social work's holistic approach that recognizes the significant impact of a myriad of issues in shaping individual experience. Social work, in operating from a strengths perspective, can utilize religion and spirituality with many clients, as the spiritual nature can often serve as another strength.

In practice, it is beneficial to create a spiritually conducive atmosphere by conveying to the client that the social worker acknowledges the legitimacy of the topic and that spiritual discussions are acceptable. However, clear agency guidelines and training are needed to provide reassurance and direction to social workers, and avoid ethical and legal implications of using spiritual methods in federally funded programs. If appropriate, the social worker can then choose

from a multitude of tools for gathering spiritual information, such as the mandala, a family or spiritual genogram, a time line, or a spiritual history.

Before utilizing intervention methods such as Gestalt techniques, journaling, bibliotherapy, metaphor, or prayer, it is important to establish general guidelines for dealing with spiritual issues. Because spiritual issues bring out strong reactions in people, it is essential that social workers remain nonjudgmental of client beliefs and practices. It is likely that the worker will possess a spiritual orientation different from the client, in which case the practitioner should acknowledge the difference and invite the client to explain their beliefs.

In order to avoid imposing one's values on clients, self-knowledge is essential. Before addressing spiritual matters with a client, practitioners should examine personal, unresolved conflicts of a spiritual nature, explore biases, and be cognizant of their own issues to minimize projective and countertransference reactions. They must also assess their knowledge of spiritual resources in the community, either to supplement work with the client or to make necessary referrals. After a thorough self-examination, social workers can determine their level of comfort in approaching spiritual matters with clients.

Incorporating Spirituality Into Social Work Practice: A Review of What to Do
T. Cascio

Related Articles

Family Reactions to Religious Change: The Case of African American Women Who Become Muslim

D. Roer-Strier, R. G. Sands, & J. Bourjolly

The Impact of Schizophrenia on Clients' Religious Beliefs: Implications for Families

J. Walsh

The Use of Prayer in Group Work With African American Women Recovering From Chemical Dependency

O. G. M. Washington & D. P. Moxley



Spiritual Influence Throughout Life

As diversity increases in American society, the social work profession requires flexibility in its approach to practice. This includes understanding how spiritual worldviews affect client perception and functioning throughout life. Arguments such as, “I work for a state agency, and I’m not allowed to discuss religion,” or, “I must observe separation of church and state,” are misguided and inapplicable to human services. It has never been inappropriate to assess a client’s spiritual beliefs, issues, and supports. What is wrong is the imposition of the worker’s beliefs on the client. (See below for specific guidelines.)

There are four discrete periods in the life cycle, and each has particular issues that interact with spirituality. They significantly impact individual and family functioning in the context of the social environment. To explore the influences of spirituality, particularly on family life, there are specific issues in the life cycle periods that human services professionals should be aware of.

At birth, children may be deemed spiritually bad or good, with parents making decisions based on saving a child from evil or praising a revered child. Children from ages 6 to 11 tend to identify with their parents, including the spiritual worldview. During adolescence, social experience may differ from parents’ stated experience, causing youth to examine their beliefs. The young adult’s spiritual worldview depends upon their resolution of issues surrounding sexuality, in-group vs. intergroup relations, and the ability to conform personal behavior to spiritual beliefs. For an adult, worldviews regarding spirituality and belief systems are likely to be firmly established, and responsibilities of adult life cause many to categorize their spiritual role in the context of family, career, and social life.

*Understanding the Life Issues of Spiritually-Based Clients
D. A. Pellebon & S. C. Anderson*

When working with clients at any life stage, the following guidelines can aid in being spiritually sensitive:

- Gain a broader perspective by learning about various religious beliefs.
- Understand strengths of spiritual clients, such as values of right and wrong and understanding roles and responsibilities.
- Frame the client’s spiritual worldview as the client’s cultural perspective.
- Create an atmosphere of support by acknowledging the client’s spiritual reality.
- Resist the inclination to objectively assess the truth of a client’s belief system, except in situations where it directly interferes with functioning or brings harm.
- Explore the meaning and importance of client spiritual worldviews early on.
- Advocate for any client whose spiritual worldview is trivialized or demeaned in a professional setting.
- Develop spiritually grounded resources in the community and utilize them as part of the action system when appropriate.

Helping Practices and Positive Youth Development

Researchers and theorists suggest spirituality is an important aspect of adolescent development and overall life experience for the formation of identity and sense of meaning. It is often relevant for positive youth development, making it important to consider the range of spirituality-based helping practices that may be applied in youth work. Spirituality is a significant aspect of positive youth development, as youth is an important time to explore spirituality and make decisions about relating to religious upbringings. Adolescence is a particularly intense period of ideological hunger, a striving for meaning and purpose, and desire for relationships and connectedness.

Positive youth development connotes a focus on supporting or promoting the positive developmental processes that advance the health and well-being of youth as well as the capacity of youth to make contributions to benefit family and society as they grow into adulthood. It aims at promoting young people’s positive development and strengthening their capacity for productive personal and social relationships. Its value base and orientation toward practice is highly consistent with the strengths perspective.

In the youth development field, spirituality is tied specifically to thriving amidst adversity. Spirituality is at the heart of the thriving process because it motivates young people to contribute to something greater than themselves. Thriving youth exhibit not only the absence of negative behaviors but also indicators of positive development. Spirituality has

been shown to be most related to having an orientation to help others and inversely related to participation in activities of self-interest. Youth spirituality is regarded as young people’s developmental search engine for being in touch with what is most vital to life, and opens youth to an adult life of personal meaningfulness and social responsibility.

Adolescence is an important time for maturation and remodeling of the brain to support regulation of emotions, cognitive sophistication, and prosocial awareness and behavior, all of which are related to spiritual development. Additionally, belief in moral values has been shown to be a factor that helps prevent self-destructive and antisocial behavior.

Despite the generally salutary effects of spiritual growth and religious participation for youth, it is important to consider the possible deleterious effects, including religiously rationalized abuse and neglect of youth, and discrimination, oppression, and persecution of youth within religious minorities. Social work can promote positive youth development by seeking to prevent, ameliorate, and redress these concerns while focusing on youths’ spiritual aspirations, strengths, and resources.

*The Meaning and Engagement of Spirituality for Positive Youth Development in Social Work
J. Woong Cheon & E. R. Canda*

A Role for the Religious Community in Family Counseling

In working with families in which religion is important, our counseling model allows for incorporation of religious resources as integral to family counseling. It respects and views religious choice or tradition as an essential part of family identity and an important influence for treatment.

The underlying principle in work with religiously oriented families is empowering the family's network or natural support system, including the extended family, friends, clergy and religious community, family physician, and school system. By connecting with as many members of the extended network as possible, practitioners access their expertise on the family's structure, history, culture, and goals for change. The approach mobilizes the professional support system at the beginning of counseling work, with the clear goal that through collaboration the family will become more reliant on its own resources and its natural support system rather than outsiders.

The first step is to identify the inherent strengths religion offers by assessing resources and strengths of the family's religious community and the nature of the family's involvement in the community. The church's authority needs to be recognized to help reduce resistance from family members and church leaders. Leaders of the religious community are thus viewed respectfully as consultants to the social worker. With this model, religious leaders, especially when they are involved

in the referral process, become part of the counseling subsystem.

Second, appropriate members of the religious community should be asked to assist in the counseling process. The practitioner begins by defining their role as a consultant to the family and network, and certain members of the natural support system are regarded as "consultants" to the worker and the remainder of the network. The consultation approach defines the role of the social worker as temporary, while viewing the natural support system as competent and permanent. The "linking" part of the model specifies a particular member of the family or natural support system network as a "link family counselor." This person functions as a "counselor" to the family and is selected by the network.

Next, strengths, resources, and goals are identified to develop plans and interventions that make use of family and community resources, and are consonant with community values.

The early family network sessions involve consultation, and move toward counseling as family, friends, and religious representatives identify problems and objectives and design interventions. The process is completed when the practitioner withdraws from the family system, allowing the family and community to maintain skills and perspectives gained from the work.

Social Work Practice With Religious Families

J. M. Nakhaima & B. H. Dicks

Related Articles With Continuing Education Courses

Ethical Considerations About Spirituality in Social Work Course 100728

Developing Spiritual Competency With Native Americans Course 101475

Critical Consciousness and Cross-Cultural/Intersectional Social Work Practice Course 101435

Accepting the Unacceptable: Religious Parents and Adult Gay and Lesbian Children Course 101354

Cults & Families Course 100655

Spirituality and People With Mental Illness Course 100727

Assessment and Formulation: A Contemporary Social Work Perspective Course 101474

Visit CE4Alliance.com for more information and additional online courses.

Holistic Planning With Families in Recovery

When encountering families in the recovery process, service providers are ignoring a key resource if they neglect spirituality, since it is considered by many researchers to be integral to substance abuse recovery. The inclusion of a family's spiritual worldview during assessment is particularly important because it has been shown to provide resilience to young children at risk and protection against alcohol and drug abuse. It follows that incorporating spirituality into service plans and delivery may be imperative in families where parents are in recovery.

When working with whole families or families in a holistic way, case managers' assessment and practice must include spirituality in order to reflect and be consonant with the family if that is one of their values. Families can be true partners with professionals in planning and shaping their behavioral health needs and their futures. Professionals' comfort and skill at addressing the deeply held spiritual beliefs of families are important keys to building these partnerships.

An underlying context is one of values, especially the value of the family voice in

decision making. This presents a challenge for administrators: "It is one thing to prescribe techniques and types of behavior for ideal professional performance; it is quite another to promote a pervasive quality of partnership such that families' perspectives, ideas, and efforts are sincerely valued as an integral part of the service delivery process" (DeChillo et al.). The need for proactive administrative or policy support is critical to ensuring that programs are responsive to what families identify as important to their well-being. Specific areas that require administrative or policy attention include the need for programmatic and fiscal support and flexibility, expanded administrative support for necessary adaptations in clinical and service programs, support for participation of family members, and new roles and skills for staff.

Expressions of Spirituality in Parents With At-Risk Children

C. J. Evans, R. S. Boustead, & C. Owens



Embracing Spirituality in Practice

Confronting the Unknown to Gain Client Trust

Spiritual concerns are relevant in many people's lives. Many clients' thoughts and feelings are rooted in spiritual beliefs which serve as the foundation for everyday life. Mental health clients may be powerfully influenced by their sense of the spiritual, yet social workers often avoid this potentially charged subject. Excluding spirituality from social work practice leaves clients caught between secular and spiritual outlooks, a dichotomy that stems from the mental health field's attempt to gain legitimacy by allying itself with science. This neglect of the spiritual dimension deprives clients of a full spectrum of treatment.

Religion can foster a spirituality that serves as a bastion of strength, providing emotional consolation, inspiration, guidance, structure, and security; however, clients frequently don't discuss their beliefs in therapy for fear of being judged—an ill-informed psychiatric worker might dismiss religiosity as part of mental illness, or avoid it altogether. But a client's spiritual values are important to proper diagnosis, since diagnosis cannot be based exclusively on objective scientific facts; the line between a spiritual or psychotic experience can become blurred.

The influence of religion can be complicated, not only regarding the client's mind, but also as it affects the client-therapist relationship, as it is the therapist's beliefs and values that shape the interaction. Underneath the broad social work ethic of client self-determination is a range of value assumptions that each social worker brings to practice, and those value assumptions frame how the work is done—which questions are asked, how problems are defined, and parameters of answers derived. Without accounting for the value system of the therapist, a client is vulnerable. A conflict between the values of the social worker and client is a

frequent dilemma, and religion adds another layer to the dynamic. A person seeking therapy is subjected to values that may contradict their own beliefs.

Discussion about spirituality and religion is often avoided since each person's values and experience of them varies, and it is often considered to be too personal or intimate to discuss. Workers may have a confusing mix of what they believe and what they were taught, with their views likely to align with being spiritual and/or religious but not able to acknowledge others' beliefs; being uncertain about religious and spiritual beliefs and wary of entering into this territory; or being turned off altogether by religion or spirituality.

Regardless of one's beliefs, working with spiritual and religious issues can trigger fear in practitioners. The need to seem competent and knowledgeable is compounded by a certain omniscience that some clients project on the worker, who simply cannot have all the answers, particularly about existential questions. Furthermore, the worker can feel useless if belief in God's will eclipses the worker's helping role.

Ultimately the topic of spirituality brings the worker into the realm of the unknown. Social workers inevitably confront the limits of their knowledge and control. As with other areas of social work practice, the worker is not without their own challenges and questions. But to be open and sensitive to religion and spirituality, thereby allowing clients to bring it into the session, facilitates trust in the therapist and allows clients to better integrate this part of themselves.

The Spiritual Dimension in Clinical Social Work Practice: A Client Perspective
R. Gotterer

Key points on spirituality for practitioners:

- Spirituality can be a strength.
- Spirituality can cause confusion, passivity, pain, or conflict.
- A therapist's values may clash with the client's religious values or spiritual background.
- The influence of culture in what appears to be a mental health problem can distort the assessment of mental status.

Keywords

spirituality, spiritual, religion, religiousness, cultural competency, worker-client relationships

Find additional related resources by using these keywords to search the *Families in Society Online* archives: FamiliesInSociety.org/search.asp