



## spirituality and mental health : current perspectives

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Spirituality, mental health, religion, WHO.

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**ABSTRACT** *Spirituality and mental health are inter-related. This short commentary looks at the current perspectives on the relationship between spirituality and mental health and factors connected with the two. A few basic concepts regarding the definition and scope of spirituality and religion are discussed followed by an elucidation of the positive benefits of spirituality. This is then followed by a section of important studies that demonstrate that spirituality benefits mental health. The negative effects of spirituality on mental health though few have been documented and discussed. The paper concludes with methods and simple guidelines to include spirituality into daily clinical mental health practice.*

### INTRODUCTION AND BASIC CONCEPTS

**Spirituality** is a well-known and globally acknowledged concept. Spirituality can be described as a belief in a higher power, an awareness of life and its meaning, awareness of purpose in life. It also implies living with moral standards. It involves belief and following to a powerful force called as God, who controls the universe and the destiny of all human beings. **Religion** is well organized and public belief system of worship and practices that generally has a focus on a god or supernatural power. It generally offers an arrangement of symbols and rituals that are meaningful and understood by its followers. Spirituality is based on our biology, whereas religion is based on our culture.

#### ❖ Spirituality fulfills following needs-

- Gives meaning to life, illness, various crises and death
- Imparts sense of security for present and future
- Acceptance or rejection of other people
- Provides psychosocial support
- Gives strength when someone is facing life's crises or problems
- Facilitate healing of psychological disturbances

### MENTAL HEALTH PERSPECTIVE OF SPIRITUALITY

World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as a state of well-being in the physical, mental, social and spiritual domains. The spiritual domain of health has started receiving attention and recognition nowadays. Mental health does not mean only absence of mental illness but it also includes socially well-adjusted personality that effectively involves in well-being of community.

Mental health includes sense of well-being and freedom from mental illness such as depression, schizophrenia, mania etc. Positive and optimum mental health indicates a harmony between cognitive, affective and behavior domains i.e. a balance between thinking, feeling and action.

In a review article, the concept of spiritual health is very well explained, it states that Emotional Health (EH) is the language of the state of Mental Health (MH) at affective domains<sup>1</sup>. Individual expresses and understands the feelings of others and oneself through emotional health. Spiritual Health (SH) not only includes mental health only but

also emotional health and goes further to focus on concepts of self-fulfillment, self-actualization, increasing consciousness and wanting to go beyond five senses [1].

Sigmund Freud considered religion as an illusion and neurosis, Carl Jung considered the psyche as a carrier of truth, powerfully rooted in the unconscious mind [2]. Religion is involved directly as well as indirectly in the aetiology, diagnosis, clinical features, treatment and prognosis of psychiatric and physical illness. Many of the psychiatric symptoms can have a religious content. e.g. - the loss of interest in religious activities is a common symptom of depression while excessive and distorted religious practices and beliefs are common in patients of schizophrenia or mania.

Various researchers have found some evidence between spirituality and mental health. However, it is not completely understood how this link works. Spirituality affects the overall well-being of individual as it incorporates a significant role in peoples' lives, thoughts, and behaviors. Being part of a spiritual community can bring support and friendship. Spirituality can bring the feeling of being connected to higher power and it might help people to understand their life experiences and behaviors [3]. Spirituality can also help people in addressing their inappropriate beliefs about reasons for their illness, large number of people believed that they are sick or developed illness because of their past sins. Individuals can be diagnosed as psychosis when they express spiritual experiences such as beliefs in angels/demons or hearing the voice of god. Even though such experiences are features of psychosis or not, medical and paramedical staff should respond sensitively to people having such symptoms and show respect for their spiritual belief [4].

A generally positive relationship appears to exist between spirituality and wellness, but the exact mechanisms behind this correspondence have yet to be understood in a scientific way. The concept of spirituality develops throughout the life span of human, from childhood to old age, and contributes uniquely to the achievement of a satisfactory life [5]. Spirituality has a strong impact on cognitive phenomena, affect and emotion, and personality that is being

shaped and developed within a specific environment [6]. Spiritual people often have positive social functions and are often involved in welfare programs [7].

Studies mentioned that the way people interpret, tolerate and accept adverse events in their lives affects their ability to recover and reinstate after facing such negative events [8]. Spirituality appears to prevent persons from mental illness and it also helps all -

- a. To develop healthy behaviors and lifestyles
- b. Find psychosocial support
- c. Deal effectively with sufferings and problems of life
- d. Empowers to handle negative emotions such as stress, anxiety, fears, anger and frustration [9].

An interesting finding noted in meta-analysis of 147 studies that involved nearly 100,000 subjects; the meta-analysis reported that there was a consistent inverse relationship observed between spirituality and depression [10].

In a Canadian population study, it was observed that those who worship god and attend worship had less severe depressive episodes, shorter stays at hospitals, higher life satisfaction and lower rates of alcohol consumption as compared to 'no or less worship attenders [11].

#### RESEARCH ON SPIRITUALITY AND MENTAL HEALTH

Variety and multitude of research had been done since many years on the topic of spirituality and mental health as well as various domains of spirituality and its implications on individual. Few of the research findings are mentioned below:-

- Study of heart transplant patients at University of Pittsburgh for medical compliance states that those who participated in religious activities and said their beliefs were important showed, better compliance with follow-up treatment, improved physical functioning at the 12-month follow-up, higher levels of self-esteem, less anxiety and fewer health worries [12].
- Coping and Bereavement – In a Study of 145 parents of children who died of cancer, it was shown that 80% parents reported receiving comfort from their religious beliefs one year after their child's death, those reported better physiologic and emotional adjustment while 40% of those parents reported strengthening of their own religious commitment over the course of the year prior to their child's death [13].
- Thomas Ashby Wills developed a scale that determines how important was religion to people and were administered to 1182 children in New York. It was found that religiosity kept children from smoking, drinking and drug abuse by buffering the impact of life stresses [14].
- In the study of 108 women undergoing treatment for gynecological cancers asked about what helped them cope with their cancer of which 93% patients answered that their spiritual beliefs helped them, 75% expressed that their religion had a significant place in their lives while 49% became more spiritual after their diagnosis [15].
- A 10-year follow up study on depressed mothers and their offspring and reported that maternal religiosity and mother-child concordance in religiosity were protective against depression in the offspring. They also reported that low level of religiosity was associated with substance abuse in the offspring [16-17].
- In study conducted after 9/11 U.S. terrorist attack found that 90 percent of Americans turned to their spiritual-

beliefs to cope with the stress of September 11<sup>th</sup> attack [18].

- A collaborative study conducted at three centers in India - Vellore, Madras and Lucknow on the factors in the course and outcome of schizophrenia showed that those patients who spent more time in religious activities be likely to have a better prognosis [19-20].
- Researchers have stated that people get strength, comfort and confidence from their personal relationship with God and tend to feel less loneliness, stress and depression in their lives [21].
- Many researches expressed that such closeness to God has many benefits including higher self-esteem, greater maturity in relationships and a better psychological competence [22-24].
- Thoresen reported the presence of spiritual gap between those having ill health/patients and health professionals. Others reported that the majority of patients find spirituality important, and that they desire their therapists should understand and address their spiritual needs [25-26].
- Authors have stated that clinicians should be effectively trained to carefully explore their patient's spirituality and to integrate these spiritual aspects into their treatment and management approach [27].
- In one of the study in India about spiritual beliefs in health care professionals, results revealed that out of 150 health personnel, 72.4% believe strongly to very strongly in existence of spiritual dimension, 24% of doctors and 16% of paramedical staff believed that spiritual dimension is the first priority in maintenance of health. Almost about 73% doctors and 50% paramedics expressed that spiritually healthy person can cope better with their illness [28].

#### NEGATIVE IMPLICATIONS OF SPIRITUALITY

Although majority of research supports the beneficial effects of spirituality, some researchers indicate a negative relationship between spirituality and health. Seybold and Hill state that some harmful emotions such as discontentment or anger with God or a congregation have proven to be correlated with impaired mental health [29]. Confusion rises when we try to fit supernatural concepts into understanding and etiology of mental illness. Beliefs in a religion result in worse mental health and neurotic behavior when used in an unhealthy manner or manipulated to harm others [9]. Gartner's findings demonstrated mixed result in regard to anxiety. Some research showed greater anxiety with religiosity, while other research showed less anxiety [30].

Some kind of religious beliefs are not always helpful to people with mental illness and can also lead to the rejection and fear of people with mental illness. As per some religion, people with mental illness are believed to be possessed by demons or evil spirits while some people blame mental illness due to past sins they have committed. Certain individuals or section of religion often advises to mentally ill, not to accept professional help and gives religious and harsh treatments, superstitious attitude and leads to increase stigma. These are not positive attitudes or actions towards mental illness and certainly lead to harmful consequences for the mentally ill individuals.

#### FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The main reason for confusion in findings related to research on spirituality is because many researchers have tried to analyze different religions simultaneously and using the same measures. Thus, researchers need to understand

the extent of the differences in beliefs and practices in the various religions in the world and different religions cannot be measured and evaluated using the same measurement scales.

Similarly we being Indian must understand that India is a seat of spiritual thought, literature and practice. Thus, proactive approach should be given to initiate spiritual health in the Indian Public Health System. At present, spiritual health is mainly in the hands of religious leaders in India. This is the high time that spiritual health should be urgently attended by health professionals.

Following are the few directions and suggestions noted by various researchers to be considered for the better understanding of spiritual health as well as implementation of its principles for better mental health.

- Formation of strategies for introducing spiritual health in Indian health system and community across India.
- Methods to integrate spiritual health with general health and medical practice.
- Orienting all the health professionals including medical, paramedical staff and key persons in spiritual health training.
- Mental health professionals should involve issues of spirituality in their routine evaluation of mentally ill persons. Psychiatric history should include patients' spiritual orientation, religious practices and should also gather information about patient's religious background, past experiences and role of religion for coping with life stressors.
- Mental health professionals should respect and support patients' religious beliefs if they are helping them to cope better or at least not harming their mental health.
- All the mental health professionals should not have prejudiced attitude towards religiosity or spirituality. They should consider spiritual dimension of mental illness along with routine biological approach.
- Directions for treatment of mental illness –
  - Inclusion of religious concepts in psychotherapy. For example use of Gita, Bible, Buddhist and Quran passages to help the patient to cope with life problems or agony. Best example of this concept is seen in the treatment program of Alcoholic Anonymous (AA) where seven out of the 12 steps are related to spiritual concepts.
  - Training programs for priests and local spiritual leaders about ways to explore the mental illness, enhancing counseling skills and psychotherapy in the community by giving scientific knowledge about mental health conditions.
  - Training of caregivers of mentally ill patients about use of spiritual support for patients as well as caregivers themselves.
  - Training of primary health care staff on spiritual aspect of mental health and use of spiritual concepts for therapy of psychiatric patients with a religious background.
  - Starting therapeutic counseling activities in temples, mosque, churches or any of the religious centers in collaboration with mental health professionals or NGO working for the mental health issues.
  - Including practices of Yoga and Meditation for all to tackle or cope with stress, crises in life and increase self-confidence of individuals.
- Research - Though there is enormous literature available pertaining to mental health and spirituality; there is a need to develop theoretical models to understand

their outcomes and implementation of these outcomes in practice. High-quality research which should be evidence-based is required for more effective clinical application. Thus, horizon is open and lot of opportunities are available for research in this area.

**Figure 1 – Spirituality and Mental Health**



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