

## **Spirituality**

Health outcome research has demonstrated many benefits of religion and spirituality for psychological well being. Research has found that religion and spirituality provide meaning and purpose to one's life. Psychological problems can be expressions of existential crises, and religion and spirituality provide a framework for understanding human experience, as well as provide a rich source of strength from which to move toward healing.

Many ethnic and cultural belief systems have religious and spiritual traditions at their core. Through prayer, people often attempt to direct or receive energy from a natural or supernatural source or transpersonal being. Prayer may serve many different functions for people, such as assisting someone's healing, asking for forgiveness, offering gratitude, providing comfort, peace and hope, releasing one from oppression, or wishing for enlightenment and increase awareness.

One of the principle areas of discussion in the research surrounding spirituality is how to define it. There does not seem to be a general consensus, and a variety of different definitions exist. Perhaps one of the reasons for this is because spirituality is a concept that is yet to be fully and truly understood by scientists and is more personally and individually understood matter. Some would argue that it is challenging to capture the true meaning of spirituality in words, because it is a concept better defined by the heart than the mind. Many researchers have attempted to define spirituality, and have often ended up defining it by showing how it is different than religion. Here are two definitions proposed by researchers:

Spirituality points to our interiors, our subjective life, as contrasted to the objective domain of material events and objects. Our spirituality is reflected in the values and ideals that we hold most dear, our sense of who we are and where we come from, our beliefs about why we are here-the meaning and purpose we see in our lives-and our connectedness to each other and to the world around us. Spirituality also captures those aspects of our experience that are not easy to define or talk about, such as inspiration, creativity, the mysterious, the sacred, and the mystical. Within this very broad perspective, we believe spirituality is a universal impulse and reality (UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute).

Spirituality is an inherent component of being human, and is subjective, intangible, and multidimensional. Spirituality and religion are often used interchangeably, but the two concepts are different. Spirituality involves humans' search for meaning in life, while religion involves an organized entity with rituals and practices about a higher power... Spirituality may be related to religion for certain individuals, but for others such as an atheist, it may not be... Spirituality is a personal search for meaning and purpose in life, which may or may not be related to religion. It entails connection to self-chosen and or religious beliefs, values, and practices that give meaning to life, thereby inspiring and motivating individuals to achieve their optimal being. This connection brings faith, hope, peace, and empowerment. The results are joy, forgiveness of oneself and others, awareness and acceptance of hardship and mortality, a heightened sense of physical and emotional well-being, and the ability to transcend beyond the infirmities of existence (Tanyi, 2002).

UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) has been conducting a comprehensive study of spirituality across American college campuses since July 2003, called "Spirituality in Higher Education: A National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose." Their project will last for several years and aims to study the trends, patterns, and principles of spirituality and religiousness among college students and how the experience of college influences their spiritual development. There have been 3,680 college juniors at 46 colleges and universities in the U.S. who have already surveyed, and several interesting findings have been collected and analyzed. If you are interested, you can check out results at [www.spirituality.ucla.edu](http://www.spirituality.ucla.edu). The short-term goal is to track students' spiritual growth during college and to use the findings to encourage schools to cultivate students' spiritual interests and personal development. Ultimately their goal is to help people become more connected to their inner lives, to increase their knowledge of themselves, and consequently to become more engaged with their communities.

One interesting general finding from the study was the high level of spiritual engagement and commitment among college students, with more than half placing a high value on "integrating spirituality" into their lives. Many college students seem to be seeking congruence between their inner and outer realities. As Mahatma Gandhi said, "Be the change you want to see in the world."

One way of moving toward a more spiritual way of living is through practicing exercise that slow and quiet the mind. Achieving a more relaxed state through meditative practice trains the mind to attend to the present moment. There are numerous ways to reach this mental state; some people choose to meditate, others to pray, and yet others dance and sing. Another common practice is mindfulness, which is a way of paying attention and being present and open to experience in a nonjudgmental way. Recognizing the interconnectedness of human beings on the planet and the shared responsibility for each other, as well as the concept of "giving to give" have also been identified as common elements on the path toward more spiritual ways of being. Thus, being able to create a new vision of ourselves and for others is yet another way that one can become more spiritual. As Marcel Proust wrote, "The voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes."

Reference:

Tanyi, R.A. (2002). Towards clarification of the meaning of spirituality. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*. 39, 500-509.