

# *Psychological Approaches to Spirituality*

Developments in Clinical Psychology Training and  
Psychological Therapies

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# *Psychological Approaches to Spirituality*

***‘Western theories of counseling and psychotherapy have largely ignored the importance of the spirit, the soul, and the transcendent and altered states of consciousness’. Cortwright (1997)***

# Psychological Approaches to Spirituality

- Provision of Spirituality and Religious Training within Clinical Psychology Training Courses in UK
- Reviews carried out by Jayne Mills, Clinical Psychology Trainee (2009) and David Stayner, Volunteer Psychology Assistant (2011)

# Psychological Approaches to Spirituality; Training

## *Findings:*

1. Inconsistent- courses vary in time allocated to spiritual and religious teaching, ranging from no teaching to two and a half days over a 3 year course; eg Notts/Lincs course cover in Diversity; UCL-1 session on Religion-doesn't cover spirituality
2. Curriculum content varies- inconsistent view of what should be included in teaching programme.

# Psychological Approaches to Spirituality

Implications of Findings? Some options

1. Develop Nationally agreed Programme for Clinical Psychologists and all professions
2. Develop agreed modules/levels of awareness
3. Develop nationally agreed competencies
4. Develop locally/regionally agreed programme and competencies

# Psychological Approaches to Spirituality: Therapy

*Some key Psychological approaches that incorporate spirituality;-*

1. Mindfulness (*Kabat-Zin, Teasdale et al*)
2. Compassionate Mind Training (*Gilbert et al*)
3. Dialectic Behaviour Therapy (*Linehan*)
4. Cognitive Analytic Therapy (CAT) (*McCormick et al*)
5. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)(*Hayes*)
6. Transpersonal Therapy(*Gordon Brown, Rowan et al*)

# Psychological Approaches to Spirituality: Therapy

- ‘It is certainly tempting to identify ‘transpersonal’ therapy through the level of technique, for this is the most visible expression of therapy.....but all techniques could be thrown away and the transpersonal approach would still remain, ready to innovate with new techniques. For all techniques can be transpersonal/spiritual, given a transpersonal framework. The larger perspective of transpersonal psychotherapy, by not being limited to a specific approach, can be adapted to fit a number of technical variations. Transpersonal therapy lies not in what the therapist says or does, but in the **silent frame that operates behind the therapist’s actions, informing and giving meaning to specific interventions.** It is thus a wider container which can hold other therapeutic orientations within it’ (Cortright, 1997).

# Assumptions behind a Spiritual Approach to Therapy

- ***Our essential or true nature is spiritual.*** With this there is an' **inherent wisdom'** and healthy part within a person that knows best , referred to as the '**Self**' in transpersonal approaches. It is this part of a person that needs to be accessed and facilitated within psychological therapy.
- Looking for ***meaning and purpose in distress***; We are looking at what is purposeful in the distress for a person and what meaning this may hold for them. We see the distress as signaling something greater; it is there to move the person towards health and wholeness.
- Seeing ***pain and problems as opportunities for growth***. Most psychological approaches that incorporate a spiritual dimension see a persons distress as signaling something 'greater' that needs attention and as an opportunity for growth and learning.
- Spirituality per se can be a **coping strategy**. Most of the recent research indicates that those people who have a sense of their own spirituality and follow spiritual practices tend to maintain a sense of well being and are less likely to experience mental health problems. Research has shown that spirituality can prevent/ act as a buffer against/ a person experiencing further mental health problems.

# **Skills, and interventions associated with psychological approaches incorporating a spiritual perspective**

## **Doorways to the soul?**

- Reflective questioning
- Meditation, mindfulness
- Developing present moment awareness
- Utilizing 'wise mind' and 'compassionate mind' as means to accessing our 'True Nature'
- Imaging and dreamwork
- Active imagination/imaging
- Guided fantasy
- Visualisation
- Body work, breathwork and voice work
- Working with symptoms/symptoms as symbol
- Developing and focusing on Strengths and Virtues (Seligman et al)

# Tools for the workplace

- The various skillful means below are useful tools to develop personally and to help others develop in order to maintain well being in the workplace.
- **Cultivating Mindfulness**
- **Meditation**
- **Developing compassion**
- **Cultivating spaciousness**
- **Developing present moment awareness**
- **Reflective practice**
- **Skillful means of remembering our 'Inner True Nature/Essence**
- **Focusing on Strengths and Virtues.**

# Self Reflection Exercise;

- Just allow yourself to settle into a space that feels nurturing and restful for a few moments...then hold the following to reflect on and see what images, senses, phrases emerge for you..

**What gives me strength in challenging times/ what do I call on inside myself when the going gets tough?**

- See what arises as you sit with this. What do you feel in your body.. and where do you feel this?..
- When you have a sense of this, get some pencils/crayons and draw whatever comes to mind or has touched you in those moments of reflection. It may be words or an image of some kind, however fleeting. Whatever arises, just put it on paper. It may help to share it with someone you know and trust.

# Conclusions and Future Directions;

- Key psychological approaches are now incorporating a spiritual perspective or are utilizing the skillful means associated with a spiritual practice.
- There is now a considerable evidence base, demonstrating the effectiveness of Mindfulness, DBT, CAT, and ACT in particular, for a variety of symptoms and problems individual's experience.
- Some approaches are NICE recommended treatments of choice for particular problems within the NHS. Further appropriate research/evidence bases need to be developed to validate other approaches such as spiritual emergency work, transpersonal therapies.

# Conclusions and Future Directions

- As Rogers (1980) said, 'Our experience in therapy and groups involve the transcendent, the indescribable, the spiritual. I am compelled to believe that I, like many others have under-estimated the importance of the mystical, spiritual dimension' (Rogers 1980).
- Perhaps we are now beginning to appreciate the importance of both addressing and incorporating our spirituality in psychological interventions and beginning to understand the crucial role it plays in enabling, maintaining and sustaining our health and wellbeing

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