

# *Spirituality and Aging*

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Spirituality is the feeling, belief, trust, confidence, faith and acceptance of a higher power than what is seen or heard. It is an intuitive sense of a power greater than human imagination or human construction. It is the ultimate source of life and all existence. Spirituality is a wonderful phenomenon that provides an elevated meaning to life to so many elderly. Spirituality is considered to be not only life-enhancing but also life-sustaining to many adherents. *'As a sacred realm of human experience, spirituality is very personal and unique to each person;'* in their search for transcendent meaning, purpose and a sense of connectedness to God or the universe. *[Verghese]*

Spirituality is expressed through sacred text, prayer, meditation, sacred objects and icons, spiritual practices and rituals. Spirituality can be an important source of resilience, serving to buffer the aging person against life pressures and worries. Spirituality can be a health-enhancing resource to help a person cope with the physical, psychological, social, financial, and environmental stresses of life.<sup>[7,8]</sup> Making this stage of life more acceptable in spite of missed opportunities, unfinished life work, chronic illness, physical pain, or the loss of loved ones, spiritual beliefs and practices can be utilized to make daily life continue to be meaningful. Spirituality produces in mankind qualities such as love, honesty, patience, tolerance, compassion, a sense of detachment, faith, and hope.<sup>[7]</sup>

Spirituality is often experienced as a journey, a sacred experience, a mystical experience. It is an experience that goes beyond the intellect, beyond the five senses, beyond the self, and surrounds or focuses on a sense of connection to something ethereal and infinitely bigger than ourselves. It is being seated in the presence of God. It is the absence of time or space and being a cosmos singularity, as one with the universe. It is a sense of oneness with all things. It is being everything and everywhere and yet nowhere. There are no attachments to life, to material things, to troubles, or the need to be anywhere or do anything. But just be; just exist as is, without anything and yet with everything. Spirituality is a globally acknowledged concept,<sup>[7]</sup> a uniquely individualized phenomenon.<sup>[9]</sup>

For many, the subjective experience of spirituality is interpreted within the contextual framework of a structured religion. Religion can be supportive of positive health and subjective well-being for the elderly person, in terms of social support, existential significance (the quest for meaning and purpose in life), religious coping, forgiveness, a coherent belief system a clear moral code<sup>[1]</sup> and self-regulation.<sup>[5]</sup> Measuring subjective well-being with indices of life satisfaction, self-esteem, and optimism, research findings suggest that older adults who derive a sense of meaning in life from religion tended to have higher levels of life satisfaction, self-esteem, and optimism.<sup>[3]</sup>

Religion is shaped by social and cultural context in ways that affect its social role.<sup>[1]</sup> Epidemiological studies researching the impact of participation in religious activities on the overall health and well-being of individuals posit faith and religion are good coping mechanisms readily accessible to everyone.<sup>[2]</sup> The various roles of spirituality and religion, in the framework of aging, can be examined in a broad context that allows for consideration of the ways in which culture influences the expression of individual and collective spiritual practices. Religious meaning can be an important factor in guiding the aging person along the road towards the inevitable end-of-life, which we all must ultimately face.

For a large number of people, faith serves as a potential reservoir for understanding and handling life's vicissitudes. Exercising one's faith, in conjunction with attending to personal biological, psychological, and social self-care, can help with cultivating well-being and maintaining health. What better time is there than in the last half of life to seriously develop or intensifying ones relationship with God and thereby enhancing your spiritual journey. Spirituality, faith, and religious tradition can successfully be utilized by the elderly and their caregivers in support of the aging person's quest for holistic health and well-being.

Positive health outcomes are overwhelmingly linked to spirituality and religious participation.<sup>[4]</sup> Implementing religious and spiritual beliefs and practices as supportive tools to cope with stresses in life are beneficial to mental health, buffering the impact of life stresses,<sup>[7]</sup> because they positively moderate relationships with various measures of life satisfaction, psychosocial wellbeing, as well as both physical and mental health.<sup>[4]</sup>

Understanding the elderly person's spiritual perspective becomes increasingly important, given the aging issues associated with loss, physical illness, disability and mortality that are increasingly confronted in old age. Promulgating a bio-psycho-socio-spiritual model in our treatment protocol to health care in general and to aging care in particular, would be the most advantageous and holistic approach to overall elderly well-being.

Debate continues about whether and how practitioners and other professionals should include spirituality within the context of their daily work with clients. The universality of spirituality extends across creed and culture.<sup>[7]</sup> In general, society tries to force people to keep religion, and all aspects of the spiritual self, separate from other aspects of life. But people are whole human beings. Separating and treating them as components, denies the whole-self. Whatever treatments administered can be less effective if only one aspect or particular feature of the person is cared for. Personal spiritual practices are readily available, familiar tools, in the aged person's life, that can be utilized to treat them as a whole person and not just the sum of their many parts.

There needs to be a greater understanding of the phenomenon of spirituality by answering a primary research question, 'What does spirituality mean for the aging person, for the chronically ill, for people with a mental illness, for those experiencing life trauma, for the dying, the grieving, for those experiencing a crisis of faith?' Those clients wanting to discuss their experiences of spirituality should be encouraged to do so. Care providers should be accepting of their beliefs and prepared to discuss patients' spiritual needs in the context of their health concerns.<sup>[9]</sup>

Finally, spirituality is a lifelong developmental task, lasting until death.<sup>[4,6]</sup> Experientially oriented research has aided in bringing a measure of clarity to the mental, physical, and emotional health benefits of spiritual and religious practices. Also of great interest are the growing research findings in the neurobiology of spirituality. Professional and lay caregivers need to take note and examine literature on the efficacy of spiritual interventions in aging adults. Although many elderly consider his or her spirituality to be an important feature of life and in their overall healthcare, it is rarely used in the healing process. Spiritually oriented practices have supported many elderly in achieving a state of gerotranscendence

allowing them to experience serenity and finally, a measure of peace with themselves, the life they have lived, other people and God. The spiritual aspects of the elderly need to be recognized and acknowledged, accepted, attended, and assisted.

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