



Spirituality: A Powerful Force in Women's Recovery

*"I feel like my heart is full of holes and I am bleeding and all the life is coming out of me and all I can think to do is get high."*¹

The above quote, taken from a participant in a qualitative study of substance abuse relapse and prevention, is characteristic of how women describe their struggle with addiction. Empty, disconnected, isolated, numb—these are all feelings that women seek to remedy by using drugs and alcohol. More often than not, they are trauma survivors, and using drugs and alcohol is a journey they embark on in quest of numbing the pain and filling the void created by years of abuse. The path these women set out on, while promising a reprieve, turns increasingly barren and obscure as the journey progresses. The very feelings the women try to avoid come to dominate their lives as they struggle with addiction.

Recovery from this path becomes a journey through which women learn to find

meaning in life, replacing drugs and alcohol with something that helps them feel whole and restored. The "something" that many women find in their path to recovery is spirituality.* During her keynote address at a national symposium sponsored by the National Abandoned Infants Assistance Resource Center (NAIARC), Stephanie Covington described addiction as a downward spiral for women, one where their worlds become increasingly isolated and constricted as their addiction progresses.² Recovery, conversely, is an upward spiral, a process where addicts' worlds expand as they become connected to themselves and others. Spirituality is at the core of women's upward spiral to recovery.

For addiction professionals, spirituality can be a powerful force in helping women through the recovery process. Understanding and utilizing it as a tool, however, can be challenging because the matter is broad, abstract, and individualized. To aid in making "spirituality" tangible for professionals, this issue brief seeks to give a short summary of spirituality and its role in recovery, as well as

*To address this issue, the National Abandoned Infant Assistance Resource Center hosted a national conference, *Spirituality: A Powerful Force in Women's Recovery*, in September 2003. The focus of this conference was the role that spirituality plays in the recovery process for women, and the integration of these practices into services for this population. To learn more about this conference, visit the National AIA Resource Center's conference archive: http://aia.berkeley.edu/training/2003_conference/2003_conference.html.



National Abandoned Infants Assistance Resource Center

University of California, Berkeley

A Service of the Children's Bureau

PHONE: 510-643-8390 WEB: <http://aia.berkeley.edu>

some examples of its application. To this end, the following questions will be addressed:

- What is spirituality and how does it aid in recovery from addiction?
- How does spirituality differ from religion?
- What does spirituality have to do with culture?
- How do traditional recovery programs with a spiritual component serve women?
- What specific techniques are professionals using to incorporate spirituality into recovery programs?
- How do staff's views and attitudes about spirituality, and their skills, affect this work with clients?
- What future direction should the addiction and recovery field consider taking?

WHAT IS SPIRITUALITY AND HOW DOES IT AID IN RECOVERY FROM ADDICTION?

The addiction, therapeutic and medical fields have all struggled to define spirituality, even as its popularity as an adjunct method of treatment grows. Scales have been developed to measure a person's "spiritual transcendence," and researchers have attempted to derive a definition of the concept.³ For example, one researcher reviewed 265 published papers and books that address spirituality and addiction, finding 13 themes, the most common of which were: "relatedness," "transcendence," "meaning/purpose," and "self-knowledge."⁴ These themes are echoed throughout the literature in the addiction field, with spirituality described as: "a source of personal strength," "finding the divine within," "purpose/meaning in life," "acceptance of a higher power," "self-awareness," "expression of key values," "transcendent," "individual," and "connectedness."

Despite the difficulty in defining spirituality,

however, studies have demonstrated its effectiveness in helping addicts recover. For example, one study shows a correlation between decreased depression and anxiety and the acceptance of spirituality among recovering addicts. Another study's participants reported a "spiritual awakening" or transformation during the recovery process.⁵ And yet another study demonstrated that spiritual support had a strong correlation with abstinence from drugs for participants of a methadone maintenance program who were living with HIV.⁶

For women, spirituality is often a process of learning to love and trust again. A majority of women who abuse substances have been physically and/or sexually abused. As noted by Stephanie Covington, and by field researchers, women are particularly vulnerable to being abused physically and sexually by someone they know.^{7,8,9} As a result, many traumatized women have little faith in personal relationships. They turn to drugs and alcohol, rather than relationships, to fulfill their need for connection and love. What begins as self-nurturance, however, turns into self-destruction as their substance abuse turns into a path whereby they become increasingly disconnected and empty.¹⁰ For many women, spirituality is the conduit by which they learn to trust again.

HOW DOES SPIRITUALITY DIFFER FROM RELIGION?

The difference between spirituality and religion is significant. Spirituality is often said to be "personal" while religion is "collective." Religion has also been defined as a certain set of beliefs as practiced by a collective group of people.¹¹ Many religions also have rich histories of tradition and practice that are culturally mired, rendering the practice of religion less palatable to diverse populations than spirituality.

Some professionals in the field suggest, however, that spirituality and religion do not have to be mutually exclusive concepts. As one participant in a qualitative study offered,

"For me, one of the ways that I get in touch with spirituality sometimes is through practice in a religious organization, or the choir that I sing in. It'll allow the spirit to fill me, and so I feel my spirituality on a deeper level. I don't confuse spirituality with religiosity, though religious practices are important for me. Spirituality's . . . critical. That's the difference."¹²

Another speaker at the NAIARC's national symposium, Geneva Berns, suggested an exercise to distinguish between spirituality and religion in recovery groups. The moderator directs participants to place the name of a religion in a basket on hand. The basket is then put away for awhile, and the group is asked to focus on the topic of spirituality. The group later retrieves the basket and considers the religions that have been named, identifying aspects of each religion that are life-giving and congruent with spiritual concepts.¹³

WHAT DOES SPIRITUALITY HAVE TO DO WITH CULTURE?

Culture and ethnicity inform and influence an individual's unique understanding, acceptance, and expression of spirituality. For some cultures, such as those associated with African-Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans, spirituality is deeply important—an inextricable part of daily life and a moving force in shaping culture. For many people from these backgrounds, the spiritual and material worlds are inseparable.

As an example, Santeria and Espiritismo are two important spiritual belief systems woven into the fabric of the Latino culture. Santeria comes from the West African religion Ifa. Slaves from Africa were brought to the Caribbean where they incorporated some Catholic beliefs and practices into Ifa; the result of this blend was known as Santeria. Conversely, some elements of Ifa/Santeria were adopted by Catholics living in the Caribbean. This convergence of Santeria/

Catholicism spread, and, as a result, many Latinos hold beliefs or practices influenced by Santeria, despite their identification as Catholics or Christians. Espiritismo is a spiritual system that involves a belief in spirits and their respective influence on people's lives. Latinos vary in the degree to which their concept of spirituality has been influenced by Santeria or Espiritismo. Nevertheless, the influence of both is evident, especially in broadly held beliefs, such as attributing life's problems to both material and spiritual causes.¹⁴

Native Americans also have a rich tradition of spirituality and religion. Though the term "Native American" encompasses numerous distinct tribes, some researchers have attempted to find similarities in spiritual expression among them. For example, researchers have discussed how Native American spirituality, in its aggregate among the various tribal nations, incorporates four important elements: Medicine (everything is alive), Harmony (everything has purpose), Relation (all things are connected), and Vision (embrace the medicine of every living being and your vision). These beliefs are fundamental to most Native Americans' concept of spirituality, and subsequently to their way of approaching life.¹⁵

In the same vein, the African-American culture is one steeped in spirituality. As described by Carlyle Fielding Stewart III, an African-American pastor and researcher, the center of spirituality and life for African-Americans is the "divine soul center." This soul center drives African Americans' to create and adapt to life.¹⁶ The church also plays a central role in African-American life, providing people with a place of community, support and an outlet for creative expression.¹⁷ For African-Americans, a belief in God is often intertwined with spirituality, and due to the central role of the church in the community, many African-Americans associate spirituality with church.¹⁸

Should practitioners assume that clients from these cultural backgrounds will be more predisposed to or benefit more from spiritual interventions? No! Spirituality may have a

different meaning and importance for every individual, regardless of their cultural or ethnic background. Thus, when working one-on-one with clients, or in small groups, it may be appropriate to suggest the use of "Spiritual Eco-Maps," where each individual identifies all aspects of spirituality in her life, and then maps her relationship with those elements. This can be helpful in identifying spiritual supports and deficits. It can also be helpful in assisting clients to determine which relationships in their lives enhance their sense of spirituality, and which do not.¹⁹ An alternative means of assessing the presence and significance of spirituality in clients' lives is utilization of the Spiritual Health Inventory. This tool includes 30 items that fall into three categories: spiritual experience (the presence of spirituality or spirituality throughout life); spiritual locus of control (the experience of helplessness or control over coping with life events or developing spirituality); and spiritual well-being (a sense of harmony and peace with the world).²⁰ Use of these tools may very well give the practitioner a better sense of how appropriate and effective this treatment approach may be for particular clients.

HOW DO TRADITIONAL RECOVERY PROGRAMS WITH A SPIRITUAL COMPONENT SERVE WOMEN?

There is some question as to whether traditional spiritual programs, such as *Alcoholics Anonymous*, are universally applicable.²¹ Many studies have found it to be a useful program for aiding recovery.^{22, 23, 24} Others feel that the traditional model does not address the unique issues women face. In this vein, Finfgeld has attempted to adapt the twelve steps for women by formulating a feminist approach, changing steps such as admitting "powerlessness" over addiction to "I recognized I had a drinking problem and needed to work to overcome it." In short, she adapts the twelve steps to emphasize women's control over their alcoholism, and subsequently, control over their recovery. Women are encouraged to use the "Divine

Within" as a source of power, rather than giving up their problems to a Higher Power. The philosophy behind this view is that women, who are already socialized to be dependent and helpless, may become addicts, in part, because of their dependent position in society. Women are not helped, therefore, by a philosophy that emphasizes their helplessness, and rather, should be "empowered" to overcome their addiction.²⁵

WHAT SPECIFIC TECHNIQUES ARE PROFESSIONALS USING TO INCORPORATE SPIRITUALITY INTO RECOVERY PROGRAMS?

Though the understanding and importance of spirituality will differ among clients, several themes have emerged that represent a broad understanding of spirituality; these are "creativity," transcendence," and "connectedness." Spirituality can result from the expression of one's self, one's connection with a higher power, and/or one's connection or place within a cultural or familial system of values. Consequently, several mediums exist as methods of expression. These can include art, visualization, and movement.

The nonprofit organization *Bienvenidos Children's Center, Inc.* in East Los Angeles, California works with families affected by substance abuse and HIV. Staff guide their clients through an exercise in which participants use art supplies to make personal masks that represent hidden emotions and pain. Each participant then shares their mask with the group. The process is spiritual in that each participant is accessing the part of themselves that is unique, becoming connected to their "self" through identifying their personal pain, and connecting with group members through sharing their pain.

Another technique is visualization. During her presentation at the NAIARC's national symposium, Dusty Miller discussed the six spirituality-based steps she developed for recovery: willingness, commitment, letting go, lightening up, creating a sense of love and

compassion, and community/connection.²⁶ For certain steps she created visualization exercises to help participants apply them. For example, Step Four, "lightening up," had participants drawing a cartoon of their most powerfully debilitating emotion. Subsequently, when the participant experienced that emotion, she was supposed to "send it on vacation" by imagining the cartoon vacationing in a favorite spot. The goal was for the participant to learn to step away from the emotion by visualizing a way out of it.

Movement is also cited as a method of spiritual and emotional expression. Dance/Movement Therapy (D/MT) is defined by the American Dance Therapy Association as the "psychotherapeutic use of movement as a process which furthers the emotional, social, cognitive, and physical integration of the individual."²⁷ It can effect changes in, feelings, thought processes, physical functioning, and behavior. Body movement simultaneously provides the means of assessment and the mode of intervention. D/MT is a form of psychotherapy based on the importance of the integration of mind, body, and emotion. With attention to movement, gestures, rhythm, breath, verbal and non-verbal communication, the therapist integrates the traditional therapeutic flow of words with the immediate, less defended, expressions of the body. According to Tracie Robinson (personal communication, February 23, 2004), dance movement therapist, addicts experience changes in their bodies. Body movements become restricted; the upper body becomes bound due to constricted breathing; the body becomes narrow, and limbs are held close. A lack of eye contact, sense of discomfort in social situations, loss of torso involvement, limpness and flaccidity, and changes in body weight are also evident. D/MT facilitates a renewal of feelings of wholeness through movement, symbolism, and rhythm. Treatment typically entails: facilitating the expression of repressed feelings (misplaced anger, depression, guilt, shame); structured movement interventions (meditation, breathing/relaxation techniques, movement, exercise, Reiki); exploring alternative methods of resolving

internal and interpersonal conflicts (role playing, games, verbal processing); and supporting psychological growth in areas of self-esteem and self-empowerment. This form of therapy allows the expression of emotional concerns via a modality that incorporates the relationship between what is spoken and what is expressed through body language.

Claire Cassell, a chaplain at Hazelden substance abuse treatment center located in Minnesota, employs D/MT in her work. She has a private practice called "Spirit in Motion," where she offers Qigong, Tai Chi, body prayer, and dance as methods for accessing, understanding, and expressing spirituality. Spirit in Motion also offers retreats such as the "Soul Food for Women," which enable participants to nurture their personal spirituality while sharing in community with others.²⁸

It is important to note that ubiquitous to many of these techniques is sharing or "storytelling." Be it through art, movement, or community, all participants go through the process of understanding themselves and sharing their "self" with others. This process has long been recognized in various cultures and religions. For example, many African-American churches espouse "witnessing," a practice where members share a spiritual experience with members of the church.²⁹ Storytelling and witnessing are processes that involve the spiritual concepts of connecting with self and others.

Storytelling is a method that some feel is particularly useful for women. Stories can be told in the form of daily journaling, by re-creating one's life story, or sharing the story of a particular event or phenomenon (e.g., a trauma). Dusty Miller suggests that stories are meant to lift the spirit, and are a method for healing. She notes that stories can be told verbally, in writing, or through alternative forms of expression such as art, movement, visualization, touch, and sound.³⁰ Stories can also be told or written to reflect what the creator would *like* to see happen.



HOW DO STAFF'S VIEWS AND ATTITUDES ABOUT SPIRITUALITY, AND THEIR SKILLS, AFFECT THIS WORK WITH CLIENTS?

No spiritual healing interventions will be effective if the staff managing the program fail to believe in its potential. Staff members should be encouraged to explore their own beliefs, values, and biases regarding spirituality. In the words of Dusty Miller, each organization interested in incorporating spiritual interventions has to, "Take a look at the staff and look at their needs — how can you pass *it* on, if you don't have it?"³¹ Staff members must also remember that they are the purveyors of hope. In her keynote speech, Dr. Covington stated that professionals are the carriers of hope for clients, and without hope, transformation does not take place. For many clients, this hope is embodied in spiritual beliefs. It is vital, therefore, that professionals impart this sense of hope.³²

The concept of "spirituality" is fluid enough to accommodate a variety of views that professionals may hold. Nevertheless, orienting staff to spiritual concepts, and its significance for women in recovery, may still be necessary. Myers & Williard outline several suggestions for doing this. They suggest giving professionals the opportunity to explore their own spirituality and including spiritual diversity courses as part of training and educational programs.³³

Thus, training on spiritual concepts and intervention techniques may be offered to treatment professionals in agencies. Enthusiastic participants can be recruited to lead the discussion or develop the therapeutic program. A survey of staff skills and/or interest in relevant media (e.g., art, music, storytelling, writing) can be conducted, and programs can be developed around these skill sets. For organizations with bigger budgets and ambitions, but a lack of qualified staff, outside experts and trainers can be hired to lead these programs with clients.

WHAT FUTURE DIRECTION SHOULD THE ADDICTION AND RECOVERY FIELD CONSIDER TAKING?

The information presented in this issue brief represents a glimpse of the realm of spirituality and chemical addiction, an area which is broad, rich and expanding. In the addiction field, professionals are beginning to view spirituality as an ally to conventional treatment methods. Be that as it may, spirituality as a tool is still in its nascent stages. The following questions are offered as prime areas for future research, discussion, and exploration:

- How can spirituality best be adapted for a diverse population of women?
- Where do atheists and agnostics fit into the picture?
- Should government funding be used to pay for programs that are spiritually-based?
- What are the helping professions' obligations towards addressing their clients' spirituality? Should professionals or clients initiate the discussion?
- How can spirituality be integrated into substance abuse prevention?
- Are we adequately evaluating the effectiveness of this method of treatment?

These are just some of the questions that pertain to the field. There are likely be many more. As research and experience adds to our body of knowledge, we will continue to learn how spirituality helps women recover from addiction. As Stephanie Covington puts it, women change the story of their lives when they recover from substance addiction.³⁴ The role spirituality plays in that story is one that is still being written.

ENDNOTES

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