

# Introduction

## Chapter Objectives

1. What are three questions that need to be addressed before a counselor incorporates the spiritual dimension in counseling?
2. What is a working definition of spirituality?
3. What are some of the elements of creating a sacred place in counseling?
4. What can a counselor do to encourage a spiritual practice?

# 1

## Chapter

## Spirituality in the Context of Counseling

It is legitimate for you to ask a question such as, “Why is it important or even necessary to include the spiritual or religious dimension in counseling?” In this chapter overview, some specific areas are explored in answer to this “why” question: the widespread interest in this area nationally and internationally, the impact of this dimension on the health of our clients, and the focus on this arena by professional organizations.

American culture has become increasingly interested in spirituality and religion. Baker (1997) found that 95% of Americans believe in God and 85% believe in personal prayer having healing powers (Wallis, 1996). Also, the majority of Americans belong to religious organizations (62%), believe religion is “very important” as a part of their lives (60%), and a large percentage worship weekly or close to weekly (*The Harvard Mental Health Letter*, 2001). These statistics indicate that Americans tend to think about the spiritual and religious aspects of their lives. Although this book primarily discusses spirituality and religion within the context of American culture, it is important to note here that the concern about spiritual and religious beliefs is not limited to America. Organizations such as Amnesty International Interfaith Network for Human Rights indicate that concerns about spiritual and religious beliefs are international.

Given this widespread interest in the spiritual and religious realm, counselors need to prepare for clients who come for counseling who have spiritual or religious concerns that impact the mental health struggle that

## 2 Chapter 1 Introduction

### **AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL INTERFAITH NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS**

Amnesty International United States' (AIUSA) Interfaith Network for Human Rights assists people internationally in the protection of human rights. They have three main purposes:

1. To stop human rights abuses by involving communities of faith.
2. To assist people of faith in their attempts to stop the abuses of human rights.
3. To facilitate awareness of violations of human rights focused on religious beliefs.

The group can be contacted by:

AIUSA Interfaith Network for Human Rights  
53 West Jackson Boulevard, Suite 731  
Chicago, IL 60604  
(312) 427-2060  
interfaith@aiusa.org (e-mail)  
[www.amnestyusa.org/interfaith](http://www.amnestyusa.org/interfaith) (Web)

has brought them to counseling. Also, counselors need to be prepared to assist clients in applying comforting spiritual or religious perspectives as a healing resource in their lives.

The importance of examining spiritual issues in counseling is supported by Propst (1980) who reported that ignoring clients' religious beliefs can reduce counseling efficacy and increase premature termination. Recent research underscores the importance of an examination of the impact of spirituality on client health. While there are various definitions of health, W. R. Miller and Thoresen (1999) define health as consisting of suffering, functional ability, and coherence (inner peace, a sense of predictability, and optimism) which operate on a continuum. The National Institute for Health Care Research conducted an examination of research involving spirituality and religion (Larson, Swyers, & McCullough, 1997). Three of the expert panels that looked at spirituality and health (physical, mental, alcohol, and drug) found a positive relationship between spirituality and religion with health and a negative relationship between spirituality and religion with disorders. One example of research that supports the positive relationship is Simmons' (2001) summary of a two-year study by Pargament and Koenig of hospitalized elderly patients. The researchers found that patients who reported spiritual struggles, such as not feeling connected with God, showed a higher risk of dying (up to 28%). There are two thorough reviews of the

literature on the relationship between spirituality and religion and health: Gartner's (1996) review on the relationship between religious commitment, mental health, and prosocial behavior, and Richards and Bergin's (1997) review of the influence of spiritual and religious factors on mental and physical health.

W. R. Miller and Thoresen (1999) state that clients are frequently involved in the spiritual and religious realms in a manner that is important to the clients and related to their health. They argue that understanding clients' spiritual and religious views may assist the counselor in understanding the client's problem(s) and positively impact treatment. Therefore, to positively impact the mental and physical health of clients, counselors need to be prepared to address these spiritual and religious concerns in counseling.

Professional organizations such as the American Psychological Association (APA) and the American Counseling Association (ACA) have increasingly focused on the importance of the spiritual dimension in counseling. Both organizations feature professional divisions related to spirituality and religion. According to their 2000 membership directory, the APA's Division 36, the Psychology of Religion, has approximately 1,197 members, and as of December 2000, the ACA's Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC), has approximately 2,705 members. The ACA's educational training body also has specific training requirements in spirituality. In 2001, the ACA expanded its multicultural training requirements to include spirituality in the revised Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) standards. Programs that have CACREP accreditation or are seeking accreditation need to have this component included in their curriculum. This spirituality requirement speaks to both the importance of the spiritual dimension in counseling and the commitment professional counseling organizations are making to its inclusion in the curriculum. Mental health counselors need to learn to work effectively with this dimension of clients' lives and professional organizations are beginning to encourage such involvement.

The widespread interest in spirituality, the impact of this arena on clients' health, and the increasing professional focus on this area highlight the need for the inclusion of the spiritual and religious dimension in counseling. This book is biased toward the benefits of the inclusion of this dimension in counseling. If counseling is meant to assist clients in healing from their difficult life experiences, then *all* possible healing resources need to be explored, including the spiritual and religious dimension. Possible pathology related to spiritual or religious beliefs is explored in Chapters 5 and 6.

Although the inclusion of spirituality in counseling is important, there is a history of conflict between the spiritual and the counseling realms that inhibits such an inclusion. Although this history is explored more in depth

#### 4 Chapter 1 Introduction

in Chapter 2, a brief overview places the development of this integration into context. Historically, the discipline of psychology broke away from the spiritual dimension to establish itself as a field separate from philosophy. Likewise, the mental health counseling field in America has supported a more secular approach to people's problems until treatment programs for wellness and for problems such as addiction began to include the spiritual dimension as a component of counseling.

Even with a shift toward the inclusion of the spiritual dimension in counseling, spirituality and religion are not always included in counselor training. Kelly (1995) surveyed 341 counselor education programs and found that only 25% had the spiritual/religious dimension as a course component. In another survey (Pate & High, 1995), 60% of the 60 CACREP accredited programs considered the impact of client's religious beliefs and practices on counseling. Now that CACREP requires accredited programs to include the spiritual dimension in training, counselor education programs are in need of textbooks that encourage the inclusion of spirituality within their curriculum. Educators need to work at creating places to discuss the spiritual dimension within their training programs. These places need to be ones in which: (a) both educators and students feel comfortable exploring their spiritual views without judgment, (b) spirituality is included as a part of culturally diverse discussions, and (c) counselor bias about spiritual beliefs and their relationship to mental health is discussed (G. Miller, Fleming,

#### **ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS**

The self-help recovery group of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) began on June 10, 1935. In the following four years, it grew to 100 members and received its name in 1939 based on the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1976). The AA program has been viewed by some as based in Christianity because it has roots in the Oxford Group that consisted of nondenominational Christians (Judge, 1994). The spiritual dimension of recovery is evident in the wording of some of its 12 steps ("a Power greater than ourselves" "God as we understood Him"). This 12-step, self-help group philosophy has been used in addiction treatment (Le, Ingvarson, & Page, 1995). Counselors have used it to help clients receive support (Flores, 1988), feel less isolated (Talbott, 1990), and improve self-regulation (Khantzian & Mack, 1994). Others have found that it can augment the support of therapy for recovering clients (Bristow-Braitman, 1995; P. N. Johnson & Phelps, 1991; Riordan & Walsh, 1994).

et al., 1998). Educators entering into this arena need to dialogue with other educators regarding their difficulties and successes in incorporating this perspective into the classroom, as well as share resources and classroom exercises with one another (G. Miller, Arena, et al., 1999). Educators who choose to incorporate this dimension in their training need to be aware that they run the risk of being stereotyped or ostracized for their spiritual perspective by students, colleagues, or both. To work effectively with spiritual issues, counselors need knowledge of all aspects of spirituality. In addition, they need guidelines and suggestions on how to include this dimension in their counseling practice in an ethical and skilled manner. G. Miller (1999a) identified three questions that need to be addressed as a counselor moves toward the incorporation of this dimension in counseling:

1. How do we help people develop a spiritual identity?
2. Do we have a right and/or an obligation to help people develop a spiritual identity?
3. How does context impact application? (p. 501)

G. Miller (1999a) introduced some answers to these questions. Although Chapter 8 provides techniques counselors can use to incorporate spirituality in counseling, these techniques need to be shaped to the client's needs. In addition, the mental health field needs to continue to work to develop techniques that can effectively assist clients in developing a spiritual identity. When determining when to incorporate a spiritual dimension in counseling, counselors need to examine their own motivation and possible bias to avoid attempting to convert their clients to their own spiritual views or ignoring a client's spirituality altogether. With regard to context, counselors need to look at the setting in which they work as well as their own spiritual development and views because both can influence the inclusion of spirituality in counseling.

Finally, counselors need to be sensitive to how spiritual and religious beliefs are imbedded within a cultural context. While this area is explored in depth in Chapter 5, a few notations need to be made here. Even when a client self-identifies as being of a particular spiritual or religious group, the counselor needs to explore that identification for that particular client. Where a client lives in a country, in combination with his or her religious community's culture, can have a great impact on that client's beliefs, values, and the application of those beliefs and values. The counselor needs to be very careful about making assumptions regarding the spiritual or religious dimension of a client's life. Understanding the many facets of a client's culture (gender, age, ethnicity, locale, and so on) can assist the counselor in understanding this dimension of a client's life and thereby increase the chances for effective counseling.

## 6 Chapter 1 Introduction

### Definition

West (2000) stated that spirituality is an important concept that is difficult to define. Cornett (1998) said that it is difficult to define spirituality in part, due to its being equated with religion. Kelly (1995) pointed out that although spirituality and religion can be difficult to define, both share a sense of transcendence, of *other*. They differ in that spirituality is a personal connection with the universe and religion involves a creed, institution, and rituals connected with a world religion. Richards and Bergin considered religion to be a “subset of the spiritual” (1997, p. 13), yet, it is possible to be one without the other. W. R. Miller and Thoresen (1999) define spirituality as an attribute that does not necessarily incorporate religion. It consists of three areas: practice (prayer, meditation, etc.), belief (morals, values, deity, transcendence), and experience (of the individual). They define religion as organized and societal in nature. The word *spirituality* comes from the Latin word *spiritus* that means *breath of life*. The definition of spirituality used in this text is one that evolved from the 1996 Summit on Spirituality sponsored by ASERVIC:

*Spirit may be defined as the animating life force, represented by such images as breath, wind, vigor, and courage. Spirituality is the drawing out and infusion of spirit in one's life. It is experienced as an active and passive process. Spirituality is also defined as a capacity and tendency that is innate and unique to all persons. This spiritual tendency moves the individual toward knowledge, love, meaning, peace, hope, transcendence, connectedness, compassion, wellness, and wholeness. Spirituality includes one's capacity for creativity, growth, and the development of a value system. Spirituality encompasses a variety of phenomena, including experiences, beliefs, and practices. Spirituality is approached from a variety of perspectives, including psychospiritual, religious, and transpersonal. While spirituality is usually expressed through culture, it both precedes and transcends culture. (Position Paper, n.d., para. 3)*

Although this definition is not absolute, it can be used as a common thread in counselor and client dialogue when examining spiritual views that may involve religious views for either the counselor or the client. The remainder of this chapter examines how the counselor can assist clients in developing the spiritual dimension of their lives.

---

### Creation of a Sacred Place

*When one listens to a barking dog, one might imagine emotion, pain, reaction, anxiety, and self-identification, but actually there is nothing there—just sound from a long and deep corridor, channeled out of nothingness and fading into nothingness*

*again. Like that dog, we may all strive, but there is truly nothing to be done. If we look deeply into our lives, there is only a thin veneer of self-generated meaning over an immense ocean of nothingness. What we do only has meaning in the here and now. It will not remain in the next instant. Just do what you can for the present, and leave everything else to happen naturally. Work. Wash. Meditate. Eat. Study. Urinate. Sleep. Exercise. Talk. Listen. Touch. Die each night. Be born again each morning. (Ming-Dao, 1992, p. 151)*

This quote captures the issues that many clients bring with them to counseling when the thin veneer of meaning has been stripped from their lives. The resulting anxiety, fear, anger, and other intense, uncomfortable emotions in combination with negative, self-defeating thoughts cause them to seek therapy. When a client's life perspective, the illusions about who he or she is, who others are, and how the world operates, is pierced or shattered, this sense of meaninglessness can be overwhelming and, to varying degrees, devastating.

The problem a client brings to a therapist is a metaphor for the issues related to experiencing *nothing* or *meaninglessness*. The therapist needs to create a sacred space so that the metaphor can emerge and be explored in layers. In sacred places, there is often space that allows the individual to simply *be*. Physical space such as gardens and parks, and emotional and cognitive space such as massage and wordless music, are examples of sacred places where we have the opportunity to catch our breath, to experience silence, and thereby experience ourselves. The therapist creates a sacred place, a space where nothingness can exist, by setting up a time and space for clients to discuss the metaphor or the life story. This commitment to sacredness is evident in the typical therapy stance of no interruptions or contact with the outside world during the therapy session. This creation of space allows for a focus on the metaphorical struggle of the client and stresses the necessity of honoring the client's story by making the therapy a sacred space, a place of refuge. As an experienced clinician once stated, "If we create the space, the stories will come."

## Safety

Involving the spiritual dimension in counseling requires a deep trust and respect between counselor and client. Spiritual beliefs are very personal and clients may pick up cues from their counselors that discourage them from sharing their views or concerns in session (West, 2000). Counselors need to be aware of sending verbal and nonverbal messages that communicate openness to hearing about such issues or beliefs in the session.

Asking questions about spirituality as a normal part of the counseling process communicates an openness to this realm. These questions may focus on spiritual views, experiences, or resources. The counselor's



## 8 Chapter 1 Introduction

responses to the client's answers to these questions send a deeper message about openness to discussing this realm in session. Also, *how* the client answers such questions directs the counselor if and how to pursue an exploration of this area. By monitoring a client's nonverbal and verbal responses to questions, a counselor can be assured of exploring this dimension with a client rather than forcing a client into a discussion. A respectful dialogue between counselor and client sets the stage for the inclusion of the spiritual dimension of the client's life in counseling. Even if the counselor does not ask specific questions about spirituality, the client may *test the waters* by presenting some relatively low-level risk-taking disclosure with the counselor or the client may boldly state his or her views or experiences to the counselor. The counselor's ability to *pass the test* depends on the genuineness and honesty of the counselor as well as the match between the counselor's and client's perspectives in terms of mutual respect. The client may carefully listen to the counselor's comments made during the dialogue regarding the client's spiritual views. If the client experiences a nonjudgmental acceptance of and genuine interest in his or her views, a trusting atmosphere has begun. If the counselor can set up a trusting atmosphere where the client feels safe in session to discuss this area of his or her life, the spiritual dimension can readily be introduced as a part of the counseling agenda.

Counselors also need to be sensitive to nonverbal messages sent to the client that may impact a trusting atmosphere. For example, what types of religious or spiritual symbols or pictures are displayed in the counselor's office or as a part of his or her attire? Is there a symbol such as a cross or a statue or picture of a religious figure? In some settings, a counselor will be limited as to how publicly such items can be displayed, but in settings without such restrictions, a counselor needs to examine such nonverbal statements to determine if this is the type of message he or she wants to send to clients. A thoughtful awareness and choice of such nonverbal statements by the counselor can again determine the comfort level and trust of the client in involving the spiritual dimension as an aspect of counseling.

### Honoring the Client's Story

In the beginning of counseling, the counselor primarily focuses on listening to the client and his or her story without trying to effect change. This listening process shows respect and concern but also allows the client to tell his or her metaphorical stories of suffering and struggle in the session. The counselor hears the client's metaphor or story as it unfolds and may ask clarifying questions to better understand the story. While listening, the therapist listens for the client's suffering or anguish because it is in the causes of pain that the relief of the suffering lies.



In the midst of their suffering, the client tends to view reality as fixed, rather than fluctuating, resulting in a tendency to grasp at the desired objects. Thus, client mental suffering is based on his or her misperception of essential reality. Honoring the client's story requires the counselor to listen without judgment, listen with an awareness that the story is a metaphor for the client's struggle, and listen for the points in the story where the client holds fast to a fixed reality that does not exist. For example, a counselor may listen to a stepmother describe her struggles with her stepdaughter who is an adolescent. Rather than focus on the *truth* of the story, the counselor listens to the stepmother's struggle allowing her to express her thoughts and feelings freely which she may not be able to do in any other area of her life without substantial consequence. In hearing the story, the counselor can look for spiritual themes related to the struggle, such as not being allowed to nurture a child because of the child's view of the role of a stepmother. The counselor can help the stepmother make choices about when this reality does not exist and ways she can respond differently to the ongoing, hurtful behavior of her stepdaughter to her. This case indicates how simply the honoring of a client's story can assist in the healing process.

---

### Encouragement of Self-Care

---

The counselor needs to work with clients on finding ways to anchor themselves in the process of self-exploration because of the discomfort and fear experienced in facing the lack of a fixed reality. As stated previously, the lack of this fixed reality is what the client confronts when the meaning, the structure of his or her life, is stripped away. The client may be afraid, overwhelmed, confused, or angry—basically suffering because what was *known* and trusted about the world is gone, leaving the client to face and experience a void. For example, a married client may believe that his spouse is faithful sexually to him and operates out of that worldview. The client then finds out that his partner has been unfaithful thereby altering his perception of the reality of his marriage. This change in perception may cause intense affect because his trust of fidelity has been shattered. The client's uncertainty about his partner and his marriage may cause further suffering because he may wonder about what he knows about others and the world. He comes to therapy, then, with a desire to find a new meaning that can assist him in understanding and coping in the world. To assist in this self-exploration, the counselor needs to help the client find ways to reassure himself so during unsettling moments in and out of the therapy sessions, the client can learn how to ground or comfort himself as his or her perception of the world is altered in the counseling process.

## 10 Chapter 1 Introduction

### Using Self-Care for Reassurance

Initially asking clients how they care for themselves can provide the counselor with important information about self-care options available to them when feeling overwhelmed and vulnerable. Sometimes this can be framed as “How do you reassure yourself when you awake from a nightmare?” This question can also indicate the need for clients to learn some healthy self-care behaviors. In the face of nothingness, the uncontrollable mystery of life, some possibilities for clients to anchor themselves include practicing spiritual beliefs and rituals, meditation, exercise, readings/videos, and massage. These options can provide clients with a sense of calm and comfort without the risk of denial or repression of the anguish. To avoid or minimize acting on countertransference issues, the counselor also needs to examine his or her own comfort level with the lack of a fixed reality and find ways to anchor himself or herself while facing it. A counselor who experiences difficulty living with his or her own uncertainties about the world may rush to rescue a client who is unsure or unsettled with regard to action to take about a problem. The well-intentioned counselor who is uncomfortable with the client being unsure, may offer advice or suggestions that may essentially prevent the client from experiencing the underlying struggle of his or her problem and instead provide only momentary symptom relief. Each counselor must find and use ways to ground and comfort self both within and outside of sessions to allow the client to experience the nothingness, the void of his or her life as a part of the counseling process.

### Using Self-Care for Healing

Once the counselor obtains a greater understanding of the client’s anguish inherent in his or her metaphorical story, the counselor listens for teachable moments. These are moments in story telling and processing where the client’s anguish can be emphasized and understood, and where the suffering can be honored, respected, and explored in terms of how it can be diminished or eliminated. The counselor operates both as a witness to the anguish and as a mirror of the suffering.

Although witnessing and mirroring facilitate the expression of the story and client trust, the counselor can also help clarify other options or perspectives for the client. For example, the counselor may simply ask the question, “If we have a problem in our lives, we need to look at what we are doing to feed that problem.” This encourages the client to look at any thoughts, feelings, or behaviors he or she has that encourages the existence of the problem.

To facilitate healing, the therapist must avoid becoming caught in the client’s dichotomies and assist the client in seeing all things as interdependent. Questions and comments that encourage an exploration of the

client's fixed reality can assist the client in becoming free of the suffering: "What would it be like if you did not have this suffering?" "Being (depressed) is important because . . ." "Feeling as though you have accomplished something is important because . . ." These questions and comments in turn encourage mindfulness. For example, in Tibetan Buddhism, the mind is defined as individual moments of knowing (Rinbochay, 1986). Therapy, then, is based in assisting the client in becoming more mindful. It is important to know the mind, shape the mind, and free the mind (Nyanaponika, 1996). The counselor can work with the client's story with the intent of knowing, shaping, and freeing the mind. Clients can use this increased mindfulness of self, life, and others to become free of their suffering (Sopa, 1985; Wilson, 1980). Through enhanced awareness, clients can learn from life experiences and be more comfortable with the lack of a fixed reality. For example, one writer in describing a man's grief reaction to his father's death writes: "After his father died, he carried his life more gently & left an empty space for the birds & other creatures" (Andreas, 1999, p. 1).

Spirituality is one option for addressing these issues of anguish. Lucia Rijker, a female boxer, states, "I practice spirituality so I can be alone without being lonely" (Wright, 1999, p. 103). The spiritual views and practices of clients can provide them with rituals and safe places where they can both anchor and restore themselves as they process their issues. In addition, the spiritual views of the counselor can clarify the therapeutic approach and technique used with the client.

---

### Encouragement of Spiritual Practice

---

Richards and Bergin (1997) considered human personality as having a spiritual core; therefore, they believed that people live better lives when they live according to universal principles that encourage their spiritual growth and development. The spiritual realm may also assist people in coping with life stress that brings them to counseling; a desire to find significance in stressful times (Pargament, 1996). Pargament described *coping* as an attempt to find significance in stressful times. He identified two types of coping mechanisms that are separate yet complementary: conservational and transformational. Conservational coping occurs when a client tries to protect what he or she values and transformational coping occurs when a client cannot protect what he or she values, but instead needs to replace what is lost or incomplete. Counseling may assist people in both types of coping by helping them find a type of coping that is most functional for them in their circumstances. Assisting a client in finding a functional coping style may require the exploration of the spiritual dimension of the client during the counseling process. It seems very appropriate then for counselors to address spiritual issues in counseling.

## 12 Chapter 1 Introduction

### Refuge

West (2000) defined *psychotherapist* by examining its Greek origin (*psyche* meaning soul or breath of life, and *therapeia* denoting attendant or servant," p. 23) resulting in Tick's (1992) definition of a therapist as a tender of the soul. West stated that counselors need to raise the topic of spirituality to encourage the client to speak about it in session, thereby avoiding the danger that the topic is not brought up at all. By asking about spirituality in a session, the client and counselor can examine this area together to determine if it is a source of refuge for the client as he or she sorts out personal struggles and issues in session. If the spiritual realm is a refuge or a potential refuge for a client, this arena can assist the client as he or she sorts through the personal issues needing to be addressed in counseling.

A counselor can assist clients by examining the sources of support in their lives that provide a spiritual refuge. A spiritual refuge is a place that gives individuals hope and meaning for their lives. These are places that can "heal the great chasms that seem to have developed between self and other; being and doing; body, mind, and spirit; people, animals, and earth" (Ross, 1990, p. 25). A counselor needs to examine with the client where these places of refuge for spirit occur for the individual. The following are some suggestions for a counselor to use in a session with a client:

1. Where do you go to "catch your breath" in the stress of living?
2. Do you consider these places spiritual? If so, what about them makes them that way?
3. What prevents you from experiencing these places as much as you would like to?

The counselor needs to be aware that the client may not be able to readily answer these questions or may have "pat answers" that do not really examine if and why such a place is a refuge. The counselor needs to assist clients in slowly examining their lives for the sources of refuge that exist for them. Question number 3 assists clients in predicting the barriers in their lives that inhibit the opportunity for refuge. The capacity to anticipate such barriers can reduce the likelihood that they will prevent the client from seeking refuge.

In some cases, a client may not have any sources of refuge. In this situation, the counselor needs to help the client examine how to create places of refuge. To determine these sources, the counselor may need to step back with the client to examine what he or she values and enjoys in order to determine places in life that encourage growth and development. For those clients who may not be aware of their values or sources of enjoyment, the counselor may need to start simply and experientially by suggesting that they try new arenas and experience their responses. For example, a client

may want to join a Bible study group or a yoga class. The counselor can encourage such interests and then offer the client the opportunity to process his or her reactions to the possible source of refuge in counseling. Such processing affords the client the opportunity to learn about his or her values while determining what provides a sense of refuge for the client.

## Ritual

One way spiritual life can be life-enhancing is in terms of rituals. Rituals can be healing both psychologically and physically (Richards & Bergin, 1997). They can comfort during a stressful time by providing a soothing or familiar activity, a distraction from the stress of the current life situation. Those rituals that are growth and development enhancing need also to be explored with the client. Questions that can be asked of the client in this area are:

1. What activities revive you with hope and a desire to live?
2. What activities cause you to become excited about being alive when you wake up in the morning and realize you will have the opportunity to do them that day?
3. How do these activities help you spiritually?
4. What keeps you from doing these activities?

The first three questions are meant to help the client determine activities and rituals that are already occurring possibly without recognition for their life-sustaining abilities. As Morgan stated: "what passion, irony, and wit, what love, what courage are disguised in all her daily movements" (1991, p. 195)? The recognition of their spiritual enhancement can encourage the client to perform them more frequently. This recognition in combination with barriers to their access in question 4 can help the client perform these activities with an important intentionality. Counselors need to be aware that some clients may perform some rituals (e.g., getting drunk) that are a manifestation of the problems that need to be addressed. Thus, counselors should encourage clients to perform rituals that are life enhancing. Also, the counselor needs to be aware that a client may be performing a ritual because at one time it was fulfilling, but no longer is. Questions 1 and 2 can also assist the counselor and client in determining those activities that are spiritually encouraging.

As stated in the section on refuge, the client may not have any soothing rituals. As one traumatized client said to me, "I have no idea how to comfort myself." This individual had coped with his childhood trauma by "freezing up" his emotions and needs to the point that they were unrecognizable. In counseling this individual, I used the metaphor

## 14 Chapter 1 Introduction

of thawing out emotionally. Like body parts that are frozen, his emotional parts needed to be carefully wrapped to protect them in the thawing out process. The way we “wrapped” his emotional parts was by introducing rituals of comfort. Because he had no idea how to comfort himself, we began to look at any activities that he could introduce through his senses to bring him comfort. What did he see, hear, feel, smell, or taste that reassured him? With that question as a rudder, we began to introduce ritual into his life that rejuvenated his spirit.

Spiritual rituals are related to self-care. As G. Miller (1999a) discussed, leisure activities where you participate in a sense of play and suspension of time are critical. Such activities encourage us to forget about our worries and allow for the creative expression of self in some activity where there may be a source of pride or accomplishment or at the very least a chance to be in the present without concern for the future. These activities do not need to take a long period of time. They may be a brief break that offers a shift in perspective allowing our spirits to rejuvenate.

A client's religion may contain specific rituals that provide meaning and healing especially during difficult transitions (Richards & Bergin, 1997). Some of these rituals may relate to purification, which can assist people in recovering from life mistakes. For example, reconciliation and confession are two examples of purification rituals that clients may find beneficial. Also, rituals related to rites of passage such as funerals help clients confront the reality of their situation and provide them with support for coping with it (Shafranske, 1996). Sensitive questioning about both the individual and his or her situation within the context of religious beliefs can help the counselor guide the client toward religious rituals that may be personally beneficial.

### Safe Places

Safety is an important concept with regard to counseling and spirituality. Although it has been implied in the two previous sections about refuge and ritual, counselors need to be aware of how their own countertransference can operate in helping clients find beneficial resources. Counselors, depending on their own spiritual views and personal needs, may project what they would anticipate needing if they were in the client's situation. This projection can distort their effectiveness in assisting their clients. A refuge for the counselor, for example, might be a church, while for the client the local church may represent a source of harm done to him or her. The well-intentioned counselor may encourage church attendance, though the client may not even view it as an option given his or her experiences. The same is true of rituals. A counselor may find confession to be healing while for a client it is a meaningless activity. Who is involved in these refuges and rituals is also important for the client. The counselor

may have individuals with whom he or she feels safe connected to these refuges and rituals and may mistakenly assume that the same situation is true for the client.

A guiding principle in this process of determining spiritual refuges and rituals that are helpful for the client is one of *safety*. A friend said to me once, "Be in touch with your heart, but don't expose it to the entire world." This underscores the importance of our clients having people and places in their lives where they can take their hurts and mistakes and not have them used against them. The counselor can assist the client in clarifying who those people are and where those places are. To guard against countertransference in this process, it may be beneficial for the counselor to ask the client specific questions regarding safety, such as:

1. Where do you feel most safe spiritually?
2. What rituals help you feel safe in the world?
3. Who are people with whom you feel most comfortable discussing your spiritual beliefs?
4. Who are people from whom you feel the most acceptance of all parts of you?
5. Who do you tell about your most shameful mistakes?
6. How have you experienced forgiveness from yourself and others?

## Sense of Community

Having an oasis of support outside of the counseling session is important for clients. Simply in terms of practical reality, a counselor is unable to meet the needs of his or her clients 24 hours a day. Therefore, it is important that clients have a community of support to whom they can turn outside of therapy. Even when they do not need a support community to sustain them through a crisis, research evidence supports the finding that close relationships help people have good health, and that a lack of meaningful relationships can be harmful to the individual (D. G. Myers, 2000).

In terms of spiritual well-being, people who have religious faith appear to handle crisis better (D. G. Myers, 2000). This may be in part because their religion provides them with a framework that allows them to look at their lives as making a difference, gives them hope as they face existential questions of death and suffering, and provides them with social support (Myers, 2000).

Having a supportive spiritual community, then, can provide clients with an oasis that reminds them of their values and encourages them to continue with their lives. A supportive spiritual community may be formal or informal.



## 16 Chapter 1 Introduction

Some spiritual communities are religious ones. In this context, clients may derive support from the clergy, other members, or activities connected with the community (Shafranske, 1996). The formal community may provide clients with a chance to interact with others in a healthy manner and with an altruistic intent. The formal community may also be beneficial to clients who are isolated from others or who struggle with the meaning of their existence. Counselors can assist clients by exploring the following questions:

1. Do you belong to a formal spiritual community?
2. What aspects of that community are uplifting to you?
3. Who are people in that community that are accepting and supportive of you?
4. What activities have you been involved with in that group that have caused you to feel as though you make a difference in the world?
5. Do you want to be more involved in your spiritual community at this time in your life?

Some clients may be involved in a spiritual community that is more informal and focused around a network of friends or has a nonreligious value focus. For example, a client may be involved in a group with an environmental focus, and the client derives meaning and hope from service work connected with that group. Questions 2, 3, and 4 may be useful in assisting a client in determining the healing nature of this community. Questions 1 and 5 may also be helpful to assist clients in determining if they should formalize and expand their spiritual community. Such an assessment requires counselors to be sensitive to the needs and values of their clients as well as being aware of community resources available to them. The counselor may need to view such a formalization and expansion as a process in which clients “search out” a spiritual community and use the counseling sessions in part as a safe place to assess the value of such a community.

For clients who have or who have had a spiritual community, it may be helpful to assist them during counseling in determining how well that community currently serves them as a support or the specific aspects of that community that they find helpful. If clients have had a spiritual community that meant a lot to them, a series of thoughtful questions by the counselor may help the client determine the aspects of the community that they would like to include in their current life and how they may be able to create such a community even though their past one no longer exists.

The creation of a sacred place and the encouragement of self-care and a spiritual practice by a counselor can assist a client immeasurably in the counseling process. A sacred place of counseling provides the client

with the space to safely discuss concerns in an arena where the client can count on being heard and respected. The encouragement of self-care can assist the client in learning or practicing skills for living that facilitate a more balanced and aware life, thereby, increasing a sense of control. The encouragement of a spiritual practice can help the client find and use avenues of support as he or she addresses concerns in counseling that can be used in the future by the client. These related aspects of counseling can provide a client with the strength to examine and address profound issues of anguish both within and outside of the counseling session as well as teaching living skills to the client. This approach to counseling involves the integration of the spiritual dimension in counseling that can facilitate the healing process of the client.

## Case Studies

### CASE STUDY 1

Imagine yourself in a counseling setting. You are the counselor. Your client is a 55-year-old woman who enters the session and tells you that her religion is very important to her, but before she talks with you about her concerns, she wants to know if you are a Christian as she is. She asks you to tell her your religious views and how they impact your life and your work as a counselor. She says she does not believe that she can work with someone on her personal issues if that person does not share the same values as she—and those values are anchored for her in her spiritual views. Ask yourself the following questions:

1. What aspects of her comments might throw you off balance?
2. Assuming that her statements throw you off balance mentally and emotionally, how would you regain your balance before you responded to her request?
3. In general, what kinds of introductory comments would you give her with regard to your professional orientation as a counselor?
4. Specifically, which parts of your spiritual views and how much of these views would you share with her?
5. What are the pros and cons of your approach in question 4?

### CASE STUDY 2

A local religious leader contacts you with a referral for counseling because he has heard of your good reputation as a counselor. He has been working with a couple on their marital issues for the past year, but believes that more counseling expertise is needed in addition to the exploration of the spiritual and religious concerns. He wants you to work

## 18 Chapter 1 Introduction

with them on their marriage while he continues working with them on their spiritual and religious concerns. Ask yourself the following questions:

1. Would you be willing to work with this religious leader's request?
2. What additional information would you need about him, the couple, the work they have done together, the issues that have been addressed, before you could determine if you were willing or able to do the work?
3. What boundaries and agreements would you need to set to work with this religious leader and the couple in terms of contact with the religious leader and counseling focus?

### Exercises

---

#### Exercise 1

1. Write down your own definition of spirituality.
2. Note the sources of origin of this definition. For example, which aspects come from your family, your religious experiences, your life experiences, your ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation?
3. How does this view of spirituality influence your work as a counselor?
4. Note the pros and cons that you believe may exist when you attempt to integrate spirituality into counseling.

#### Exercise 2

For at least 20 minutes, share your responses to items 1 through 4 in the self-awareness exercise with someone else who is in training to be a counselor or who is a counselor. Ask clarifying questions of the other person and assist that person in clarifying the presentation of his or her views, especially with regard to the pros and cons of the inclusion of spirituality in counseling.

#### Exercise 3

Interview a counselor whose work you respect. Ask this counselor how he or she incorporates the spiritual and religious realm in counseling clients. The following questions may be helpful:

1. Are there any guidelines you have developed in your work with clients around spiritual or religious issues?

2. Do the guidelines you use vary in terms of the presenting issues of clients?
3. Are there any specific issues you struggle with as a counselor when helping clients address their unique spiritual or religious issues or address these issues as a part of their presenting problems?
4. What are your overall views of both encouragement and caution as a counselor enters into this realm with a client?

#### Exercise 4

Now interview a religious leader in your community whose religious views you respect. Ask this person about his or her views on a counselor incorporating the spiritual or religious realm in counseling clients. Again, some suggested questions are:

1. As you have worked in our community, how have you seen counselors be helpful to clients with regard to spiritual or religious concerns? Can you provide any specific examples?
2. How have you seen counselors be hurtful to clients with regard to spiritual or religious concerns? Can you provide any specific examples?
3. What encouragement and caution would you give a counselor who wants to work with clients in the spiritual or religious realm?

---

#### Suggested Readings

- Kelly, E. W. (1995). *Spirituality and religion in counseling and psychotherapy*. Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.
- Richards, P. S., & Bergin, A. E. (1997). *A spiritual strategy for counseling and psychotherapy*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Shafranske, E. P. (Ed.). (1996). *Religion and the clinical practice of psychology*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- West, W. (2000). *Psychotherapy & spirituality*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

