

The Role of Spirituality in Therapy

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Addressing spiritual issues is a crucial part of therapy. In my professional experience, I have found that what one believes about God is an important part of one's mental health and gives insight into his or her thought processes. This is one of the reasons I am proud to be a part of Lifeline Counseling Center and be considered a faith-based counselor. To not address spirituality is to miss a crucial piece of a person's well-being. A client's faith can impact his or her life in many ways.

In recent years I discovered that when the client seems unable to make progress, I may not have explored their relationship with God. I do not impose my personal spiritual beliefs – I only ask them about their own beliefs and try to encourage them to understand where those beliefs come from and how they impact their self image and view of the world around them.

Having a supportive religious community can be an enormous healing experience when it serves as a model of God's unfailing love and acceptance. Often people have had traumatic and unhealthy experiences with their church, clergy or other significant persons in their lives. Understanding the impact of early religious training and subsequent spiritual history is important to the therapeutic process. This is because sometimes people have had traumatic experiences with the church, clergy or religious "teachings." Without knowing this information a therapist can be overlooking a significant aspect of their lives.

For example, Nancy (name changed) has been in therapy for years. She experiences severe anxiety related to a toxic childhood without healthy loving attachments. She operates under the assumption that if she had enough faith in God or was spiritual enough she wouldn't experience such anxiety. Nancy grew up with an abusive father who quoted the Bible while abusing her. In the process, she began to assume that God as her heavenly "father" would be as judgmental and as controlling as her earthly father. Instead of seeing God as forgiving and full of grace, she views God as having the same human qualities as her father. This in turn interferes with her ability to believe that she is loveable and adequate. These beliefs contribute to her inability to find relief from her anxiety.

In working with clients who suffer from depression, anxiety and past traumas, therapy can reveal anger at God for allowing bad things to happen. When a client can process any and all beliefs about God-both negative and positive, it addresses issues that pave the way for healing. If a person can have a corrective experience and gain a concept of God as loving, accepting and forgiving, then he or she is more likely to find greater peace and contentment in his or her life.

I often hear clients express beliefs that they are not worthy of God's love. This can interfere with prayer life, self-esteem and become the basis for feelings of shame. I try to help clients who struggle with these issues understand that none of us are worthy of His love. It's a gift that He offers us not because we earn it but because like any truly loving parent, He loves us so much that His grace covers our mistakes and imperfections.