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Spirituality in Group Process

by John Howard, MA



"Even the term 'psychotherapy' is derived from the Ancient Greek 'psukhe,' meaning life, breath, soul or spirit, and 'therapeia,' meaning to serve, treat and restore."

Although some psychotherapy models have embraced spirituality as part of the growth process (Jungian analysis and Internal Family Systems come to mind among many others), some models and clinicians have been hesitant to incorporate spiritual growth models into psychotherapy. Freud considered religion a delusion, and the early science of psychotherapy defined itself in secular terms to move away from faith-based concepts of mental health. The supposed secular science of psychotherapy, however, appears to have its roots in Ancient Greek traditions of spiritual and mental empowerment, which in turn have their roots in Near and Far Eastern schools of spiritual development. Even the term 'psychotherapy' is derived from the Ancient Greek 'psukhe,' meaning life, breath, soul or spirit, and 'therapeia,' meaning to serve, treat and restore.

Mental health is defined differently by various cultures, and approaches to personal growth vary widely with local practice. When I was in my early 20's, I had the opportunity to hike into remote areas of Mexico, Peru and the American West to study in villages with indigenous medicine men and women. I learned not only systems of physical healing and spiritual growth, but also methods of family therapy, group therapy, and approaches to individual mental health. While there is much value in the secularization of psychology, such as avoiding misguided attempts to help patients based on outdated concepts or superstition, there is also great wisdom lost in the process. Many indigenous healing systems function holistically, with the cultural background of the art integral to the healing process. Divorcing mental health approaches too much from ancient wisdom on achieving human potential causes the field of psychology to risk losing touch with understandings honed over thousands of years

around what it means to have a mind, be human, and restore balance to our whole self.

In today's time, we see a resurgence of interest in combining modern scientific psychological theory with ancient spiritual wisdom. Ironically, this influence of spirituality into psychotherapy is based in large part on new science – in some cases, harder science – from the areas of mindfulness, neuroscience, attachment theory, regulation theory, meditation, trauma studies and early childhood development. Our respect as clinicians for spirituality as part of an overall mental health strategy is an important part of treating our 'whole' patients, especially in light of the new science, and considering the large role spirituality plays in the psyches and family lives of many of our clients.

Spirituality in Group Process

In addition to the object relations interpersonal process therapy groups I lead, I also lead several spiritually focused groups. While I do not consider these to be therapy groups (I refer to them as in-depth, experiential study groups), they nonetheless provide a useful study of how spirituality can be explored and deepened in group process while attempting to avoid some of the pitfalls such a focus can engender.

I make a distinction between denominational and non-denominational spiritual development groups and believe both can be effective. Denominational groups provide advance notice that instruction and practice will be framed by a particular tradition (although I would encourage such groups to still remain open to varying beliefs within the scope of a tradition). Non-denominational groups are offered as a place to explore one's spirituality through many lenses, sampling a variety of types of practice in order to better understand one's own spiritual preferences. I am convinced that the most meaningful spirituality is one that arises naturally from within a person's soul – the aspects of the Divine (or non-Divine, nature, love etc.) that a person is inspired by. I believe secularists, atheists and agnostics can be deeply spiritual. Spirituality seems to be more a desire to engage one's deepest existential thoughts, feelings and sensations, deepening the experience and awareness of our consciousness in life, rather than a label that applies only to those who believe in a higher power or define that higher power in specific ways.

My experience leading spiritual groups over the years has led me to eight aspects of such groups that can help members deepen their spiritual lives while also attempting to offer some benefit to member's overall mental health.

1. A safe place to explore one's spiritual beliefs and process spiritual experiences

When people start to identify spirituality as an important component of their lives, they sometimes lack an open-minded, accepting forum in which to explore and discuss emerging beliefs and experiences. Many churches are no longer focused on or experienced in mystical training, or may feel challenged if a member's spirituality begins to compete with church-held beliefs. Psychotherapists are not always comfortable or well versed in facilitating spiritual exploration. This gap leads some to seek spiritual leadership from poorly trained sources that may not be helpful and sometimes endanger the student seeking guidance. Some spiritual teachers may miss mental health issues than can get in the way of spiritual development and in some cases be exacerbated by spiritual exercises. Spiritual groups led by psychotherapists can offer a safe environment in which to explore spirituality and avoid some of the pitfalls present in other training settings.



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2. A place in which to listen to the spiritual ideas and experiences of peers

It seems helpful for students to listen to peers discuss their thoughts and experiences around the spiritual growth process. Students can learn from the ways that others navigate that process. They can then consider if their own developing beliefs are similar to or different from those of others. A word of warning, however: Phases of life in which people become ‘spiritual’ are often times of great change and self-transformation, and occasionally times of grief, suffering and stress. People can be particularly vulnerable and susceptible to other’s suggestions in these stages of spiritual exploration. Group facilitators should be especially mindful of the need a person may have to latch onto an ideology in order to feel more organized and secure. A good facilitator can also help look out for influences in a vulnerable person’s life outside of group that may not be healthy for them at that time.

3. The opportunity to be gently guided in contemplative/mindful practice

Guided and structured meditations can be very helpful to beginning practitioners who are learning how to access their inner experience, sit in it, deepen it, and integrate it. Spiritual groups can benefit from experienced leadership that can design and lead a variety of contemplative practices to deepen various aspects of practice. It is also helpful for the group facilitator to be aware of the possible negative effects of spiritual practice, which can include dissociation, irrationality, a lack of coherence and grounding, fear and even at times psychosis. Group leaders should conduct a basic check of each member’s state during and after practice, especially if members are driving from the group to their next destination.

4. An emphasis on practice that can promote neural growth and integration over discussion and interpretation of theology or metaphysics

I prefer to have spiritual development groups focus on contemplative practice rather than a discussion of concepts. Practice helps re-wire the brain and gives it enough time in a mindful state to begin attuning to and resonating with the qualities of that state. We know that neural growth is a function of time spent in a new activity and the frequency with which the new activity is engaged. Spiritual practice gives group members an opportunity to dip their minds into an expansive soup of contemplative experience, allowing the brain and nervous system to learn from that state without the distraction of words and intellectual banter. There are many effective practices to draw from if exploring a diversity of methods is desired. Such a focus on practice also keeps the group from theological and philosophical debate that may stimulate the thinking mind, but does not offer as much opportunity for growth to implicit aspects and can negatively affect cohesion.

5. Practice can be non-denominational or denominational, depending on the focus of the group

With a non-denominational group, practice can revolve around different traditions or be based on core mechanics of spiritual growth common to many traditions, a useful study in itself. Denominational groups may benefit from increased focus and coherence of concepts, and can leverage the power of faith when appropriate. In my opinion, denominational groups should operate in a manner that also promotes more general qualities of healthy mental development such as curiosity, mindfulness, awareness, mental flexibility, empathy, humor and integration.

As an aside, the mental health community seems to align itself more with certain schools of spiritual development over others. While this is understandable in terms of cultural access and familiarity, it is nonetheless a possible diversity issue that may deserve more thought and attention. Buddhism, in particular, has had a strong influence on new mental health models. We should consider, however, that cultures around the world tend to have similarly effective spiritual development traditions. The promotion of the awareness of self, a broadening of the playing field of consciousness, greater tolerance for emotional states and sensation, integration and contemplative practice are not the exclusive domain of any one tradition.

Some spiritual groups may have more access to leading researchers and a greater ability to fund studies. Some lend themselves more easily to scientific disciplines that value secularity in mental health treatment. Some traditions are more marginalized by Western normative culture and experience more difficulty earning legitimacy as traditions that support mental health. Due to these and other differences among spiritual schools in terms of their status in Western culture, a ‘spiritual director’ should be mindful to regard spiritual traditions equally and be careful of bias. Some faith traditions and mystical schools face greater challenges to earning the respect and understanding of the clinical community, and we are all under the influence of cultural and professional forces that shape our opinions.

6. A sense of community

A sense of community seems important to people who identify as ‘spiritual.’ Many people report ultimately feeling closer to co-members of their school of spiritual study than to ‘old friends’ or family members due to the intimate nature of existential/spiritual work and a shared belief system. ‘Spiritual’ people sometimes report being the only members of their families of origin with that particular interest, and may feel isolated until they find like-minded peers. Furthermore, the workplace is often not a setting where spirituality is discussed. Groups with a spiritual focus offer participants a sense of community where they can bond with one another and form deep and meaningful connections with like-minded others. Because I do not consider the spiritual development groups I facilitate to be therapy groups, I do allow outside contact, and in fact, occasionally invite group members to various spiritual offerings

in the community hosted by different traditions so as to enhance their experience of the varieties of schools and practice.

7. An opportunity to better understand and define one's own spiritual path

If we use the Golden Age of Yoga as an example of mutual respect for the varieties of spiritual exploration, we can respect that there are many ways to realize the Self. If students are led to choose a school of spiritual study outside of a study group, they may consider a sense of fit, personality considerations and the quality of instruction as important factors in the decision. Some traditions focus on quiet, 'passive' contemplative practice such as sitting meditation while others engage in more active practices such as dancing and chanting. I find that different personalities gravitate toward different approaches, and finding the right fit for one's personality can make spiritual growth more efficient.

By learning about and sampling the varieties of types of practice and belief, group members can better identify the ones they relate to, and can pursue resources outside the group with greater confidence. Although choosing a path to fit one's natural way of working is helpful, in many cases the choice of teacher matters more than the path. Like in many areas of study, an experienced teacher may help you grow more, regardless of the tradition he or she works in, than a less knowledgeable teacher in a tradition that is more congruent with your sense of identity. And depending on one's geographic location, some traditions are more highly developed and established than others.

8. Combining spirituality with psychological understandings of change

Spiritual growth promotes qualities of mind such as openness, acceptance, patience, a broadening of the playing field of experience, increased tolerance for emotion, integration, heart-centeredness, self-and-other compassion and mental flexibility that help develop optimum mental health. Maintaining an awareness of exercises that serve the greater developmental goals of the brain and mind supports group members by deepening their spiritual lives while also building helpful neural and mental capabilities. This congruence of growth objectives, in my opinion, helps protect students from spiritual study that may promote rigidity, judgment, inflexibility, fear, or the replacement of one ideology with another while maintaining the same level of anxiety. Promoting qualities of mind that stimulate resources, options and capabilities helps defend against spiritual escapism: the tendency to use a 'spiritual' narrative or practice to avoid important areas of pain and growth. Group leaders should be trained in the difference between spiritual growth and escapism, as altered states of consciousness in the dissociative/meditative realm can be nuanced and difficult to distinguish from one another.

Conclusion

More recently, the field of mental health has been welcoming understandings of personal growth from ancient schools of spiritual development. Sometimes, however, this integration follows a Western scientific tendency to split things into parts, isolate 'active' ingredients from their holistic context, and distill spiritual mechanics into secular principles. Indigenous traditions, in contrast, often believe in preserving the context out of an awareness that aspects of a tradition work in concert. For example, modern scientific 'mindfulness' was distilled from Buddhist practice. While it is a very helpful quality of mind, it is only a component of a more comprehensive package of spiritual development. Do we need to distill and secularize such mechanics of spiritual development in order to embrace their utility as mental health professionals? Why not embrace their traditions of origin, which may have even more to offer than the ingredients we pull out from them?

There is much that can be attained in the service of mental health by studying and practicing thousand-year-old traditions as they are, with a healthy differentiation of self that maintains our individual freedom of thought and choice. Spiritual study groups that function as tradition-specific groups in order to preserve the wisdom of these complete systems may serve an important function in the development of member's overall mental health. Non-denominational groups that work with common mechanics of growth across traditions are also helpful in offering a safe and open exploration of spiritual change models without requiring adherence to particular beliefs.

Faith can have a positive mental health value, or it can support rigidity, judgment and isolation. It is not religion that competes with psychology, but the tendency of our own minds to use anything to persist in our own defenses and lack of differentiation. The power of faith can cut both ways, and as clinicians we should be aware of its upside and possible downside. Walking the balance between the two is the job of a skilled spiritual director who can encourage positive benefits of faith while exploring relationships to faith that may promote and maintain defensive structures. And as in therapy, care must be taken not to challenge faith or spiritual premises that are supporting defensive structure until the underlying vulnerability is ready to be explored on its own terms. While faith may be among the oldest coping mechanisms for underlying anxiety, especially of the existential variety, faith can also be a strong and positive quality that projects from a mind free of anxiety. A person can choose to believe and observe his/her belief from a curious and differentiated state, open to other possibilities.

Spiritual growth seems to be most about broadening the playing field of consciousness to provide a greater, more stable container from which to experience life and emotional experience (internal and external experience). Psychotherapists can consider the value of both non-denominational and denominational spiritual group study as effective ways to develop important and optimal qualities of mind.

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