

Spirituality in Mental Health: A Practical Understanding

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ABSTRACT

Spirituality has been known to co-exist with human beings since time immemorial. It's a bit difficult to take spirituality out of human life. It is very much intermingled with every facet of our life. Our ancient Indian literature is full of explanations and descriptions about spirituality and its various facets. However, over time, spirituality is known to be confused with another similar concept- that is religion. There exists an understanding among the common masses that 'being religious' essentially means 'being spiritual'. People over time have developed this understanding that spirituality and religion are inter-changeable. Never-the-less spirituality has always been seen as a marker of a self-actualized personality; as a milestone on the path of 'nirbanna'. Over the years, there has been growing interest among the clinicians, motivational speakers, advocates of positive living, about use of spirituality in day-to-day life and clinical practice. For last few decades efforts are being made by psychologists and mental health professionals to incorporate different dimensions of spirituality in treating mental health disorders and to foster positive living. This research article attempts to distinguish between 'religion' and 'spirituality' in simpler terms. Further an attempt has been made to understand spirituality from mental health perspective and to oversee use of spirituality and its dimensions in day-to-day mental health practice.

Keywords: *Spirituality, Religion, Mental Health, Positive living, Self-Actualization*

An estimated about 90% of world's population is involved in some form of religious or spiritual practice (Koenig, 2009) despite all sorts of spectacular advances in science and technology across the globe. A review by Koenig (2009) points out that, out of 238 countries on earth only 8 countries are there where more than 25% people have reported that they are not religious and interestingly these 8 countries are those countries where the government has placed limitations on religious freedom of the citizens. More than 30 countries worldwide reported no Atheists (0%) and in 12 countries out of 238 countries atheists could make up as low as 5% or more of the population. (Koenig, 2009).

What does all this data leads us. What is its significance? In a nut shell, the presented data indicates that the term religion and spirituality exists within us, from ages, in-spite of spectacular advances made by human beings over centuries regarding their understanding of environment, human behaviour and human life processes. Still, we all believe in some power,

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Received: January 31, 2023; March 26, 2023; Accepted: March 30, 2023

we all have our GOD and whatever it is; this is highly beneficial for our positive mental health.

However, the world around us is also filled with people indulging in fanatic behaviour, extreme religious behaviour or mode of living. And on the other hand, there are people who call themselves liberal when it comes to 'faith'. This class of people preferred to be identified as spiritual beings. There lies an argument that is it better to be religious or is it better to be spiritual. Can anyone be religious and spiritual at the same time or not. And why these terms play a role in our mental health, how they are related. This paper tries to present an understanding about the intermingled concepts of religion and spirituality. And it attempts to present the filtered facts from across literature.

The Concept of Spirituality and Religion

Spirituality is as easy a concept that most of us think that we know it, to an extent. But when it comes to explain to other, we may get stuck. Have you ever wondered, why it is so that a term which appears quite familiar to us, becomes a big puzzle for us. Among the existing popular meanings of the term 'Spirituality' on available references sources, we find that 'Google' describes spirituality as "***The quality of being concerned with the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things***". Whereas according to Wikipedia- "***There is no widely agreed definition of spirituality***". Moreover, When you Google the word 'Spiritual'- "***It says relating to or affecting the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things***". Where-as. 'Google' explains the term 'Religion' as – "***The belief in and working of a superhuman controlling power especially personal God/Gods***", where-as the Oxford dictionary explain 'Religion' as - "***The belief in the existence of God.***"

Spirituality

In contrast to the religion, spirituality is more difficult to define. Spirituality is considered more personal, something people define for themselves that is largely free of the rules, regulations and responsibilities associated with religion. There are growing number of people who categorize themselves as spiritual but not religious. Such people deny any connection at all what so ever with any religion and they understand spirituality entirely in individualistic, secular terms (Koenig, 2009). Spirituality is a globally acknowledged concept to attempts to reach a consensus regarding its nature has not met with success. A definition of spirituality includes 'personal views and behaviours that express a sense of relatedness to the transcendental dimension or to something greater than the self'. Spirituality can encompass belief in a higher being, the search for meaning, and a sense of purpose and connectedness.

The origin of the word spiritual lies in the Latin term '*Spiritualis*', which is derived from the greek word '*Pneumatikos*'- a spiritual person was considered someone with whom the spirit of god dwelt, often referring to the clergy (Uwakwe,, 2020). Although the Greek used the words spiritual to distinguish humanity from non-rational creation, spiritual and spirituality has been distinctly throughout most of the western history. The definition of spirituality has been subject to much debate. Some authors have proposed to include certain positive psychological constructs like peacefulness, harmony, meaning, purpose and satisfaction in life in the concept of spirituality. However other thinks that this conceptual expansion of spirituality to include positive psychological constructs is misguided. Nevertheless, spirituality is often related to these constructs, but is not limited to these. It involves the ways in which people fulfil what they hold to be the purpose of their lives, a search for the meaning of life and a sense of connectedness to the universe. The universality of spirituality extends across creed and culture. At the same time, spirituality is very much personal and unique to

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each person. It is a sacred realm of human experience. According to the existing literature, spirituality produces in man qualities such as love, honesty, patience, tolerance, compassion, a sense of detachment faith and hope.

Religion and spirituality are both rooted in trying to understand the meaning of life. While religion and spirituality are similar in foundation, they are very different in practice. Religion is an organised, community-based system of beliefs, while spirituality resides with in the individual and what they personally believe. The idea of religion and spirituality is like a rectangle versus square. With-in the religion there is spirituality, but if you have spirituality, it doesn't necessarily mean you have religion. Both religion and spirituality can have a positive impact on mental health. In some ways, they provide the same impact. The definition of religion and spirituality has been a perennial source of controversy and yet these are not inter-changeable words.

According to Moreira- Almeida et al (2006) religion is an organised system of beliefs, practices, rituals and symbols designed to facilitate closeness to the sacred or transcendent (like God, higher power or ultimate or reality. It is more or less organised and practised with in a community. Conclusively, central to the definition of religion lies an understanding that religion is rooted in an established tradition that arises out of a group of people with common beliefs and practices related with sacred. Where-as spirituality is the personal quest for understanding answers to the ultimate questions about life, about meaning and about relationship with the sacred or transcend, which may (or may not) lead to or arise from the development of religious rituals and the formation of a community.

So this may lead to two questions. Is religion necessary for spirituality and can someone be labelled as spiritual without be called as religious. The most acceptable answer to the first doubt is 'NO'. Religion is not necessarily required for being spiritual. There are growing number of people who categorize themselves as spiritual but not religious. Such people deny any connection at all what so ever with any religion and they understand spirituality entirely in individualistic, secular terms (Koenig, 2009). So, this last statement conveys an observation that religion may not be required for being spiritual.

Spirituality And Religion: Where is the Overlapping

Religion is institutionalised spirituality. Therefore, there are several religions having different set of beliefs, traditions and doctrines. They have different types of community-based worship programs. Spirituality is the common factor in all these religions. It is possible that religion can lose their spirituality when they become institutions of oppression instead of agents of goodwill, peace and harmony. They can become divisive instead of unifying. History will tell us that this had happened from time to time. It has been said that more blood has been shed in the cause of religion than for any other cause (Uwakwe., 2020). The idea of religion and spirituality is like a Rectangle Vs Square, meaning, with-in the paradigms of religion there exists spirituality, but if you have spirituality, it doesn't necessarily mean you have religion. Both religion and spirituality can have a positive impact on mental health but these are essentially not inter-changeable words (Moreira- Almeida et al, 2006).

Thus, we can have an overall understanding-

- 'Religion' and 'Spirituality' are both rooted in trying to understand the meaning of life. Though BOTH are similar in foundation, they are very different in practice.

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- ‘*Religion*’ is an organised, community-based system of beliefs, while ‘*Spirituality*’ resides within the individual and what they personally believe (an element of subjectivity seen in spirituality).

Based on the understanding given by Moreira- Almeida et al (2006) that “Religion” is an organised system of beliefs, practices, rituals and symbols designed to facilitate closeness to the sacred or transcendent, one can say that religion has an element of ‘Mass Sharing’. On the other, ‘Spirituality’ is the personal quest for understanding answers to the ultimate questions about life, about meaning and about relationship with the sacred or transcend, which may (or may not) lead to or arise from the development of religious rituals and the formation of a community. Thus, such understanding makes spirituality a personal concept.

Spirituality and Mental Health

As we all are aware that WHO in its understanding and explanation of mental health has identified spiritual health as one of the pre-requisite for state of sound mental health of an individual. Thus, the spirituality is very much inclusive in the wider concept of mental health. And if we talk about mental health in clinics, then literature suggests that psychotherapy becomes more effective when both therapist and client share common cultural heritage (Hayes et al 2016). There is dominance of spirituality or religiosity in people mind-set, when they become ill (Uwakwe, 2020) and they already take spiritual help before actually taking formal help (Toftegaard et al, 2015). So, the multi-million dollar question arises that, can people be treated for their mental health problems or issues without addressing their Spiritual needs. The answer to this is ‘probably not’. Thus, people have advocated to integrate “Spirituality” in to therapy provided the therapists is competent enough to do so (Uwakwe, 2020). Therefore, the concept of integrating spirituality in to psychotherapy has become a significant area of interest in mental health for past few decades. Further a more specific focus is noticed in integration – that is to integrate spiritual direction (consists of 8 parameters) in to psychotherapy (Benner, 1998). Some argued that client ‘spiritual beliefs’ may be the source of his strength and support. And if addressed may be helpful in achieving treatment goals (Uwakwe, 2020). The sufferings of patients and consequently their recovery however are dependent on their cultural and spiritual beliefs.

Measurement of Spirituality from Mental Health Perspective:

Association of American Medical Colleges and the George Washington Institute for Spirituality and Health has developed guidelines for spiritual care for assessing the patient to distinguishing between form and content includes use of empathy (APA, 2002 & 2003). These are as under-

- Attempt should be made to understand a patient's cultural experiences.
- Know the limitations, and the possibilities, that religious belief imposes upon social and individual change.
- Enquire about a patient's religious beliefs and spiritual convictions, and taking them into account in treatment.
- Assess for spiritual distress (e.g., meaninglessness, hopelessness etc.) as well as for spiritual resources of strength (e.g., hope meaning and purpose, resiliency, spiritual community).
- Use an instrument for measuring spirituality- FICA (Faith and Belief, Importance, Community, Address in care).

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During the assessment process of the clients at mental health clinics in day to day practice, it seems not less than imperative to also focus upon the spiritual history of the client along with clinical and other psycho-social information. The information will certainly help not only to frame a clinical opinion, but, more so it will help in the psychotherapeutic delivery and would aid in healing. The possible goals of the spiritual history could be (Singh et al., 2017):

- Invite the patient to share spiritual and religious beliefs if they chose to do so.
- Learn about the patient's beliefs and values.
- Assess for spiritual distress (e.g., meaninglessness, hopelessness etc) as well as for spiritual resources of strength (e.g., hope, purpose, resiliency, spiritual community).
- Provide an opportunity for compensate care whereby the healthcare professionals connects to the patient in a deep and profound way.
- Empower the patient to find inner resources of healing and acceptance.
- Learn about patient's spiritual and religious beliefs that might affect healthcare decision making. The spiritual history is patient-centred. If the patient does not identify as spiritual or religious, or if the person does not wish to discuss spirituality, then the clinician should not force the question.

Current Status of Spirituality in Mental Health Practice

Any understanding regarding current status of spirituality in to the psychiatry, involves a look in to various spiritual and religious practices that are prevalent across different cultures. Some of them include:

- **Shamanic practice:** In traditional shamanic practice, the ‘shamans’ travel to the state of 'ecstasy' by virtue of hallucinogen-intake or by experiencing extreme stress and pain to the body and mind to achieve ecstasy. In today's culture, traditional shamanic practitioners prefer rhythmic noise of 'biting drum' instead of hallucinogens or extreme physical stress. Such recent trends are popularly known as neo-shamanism. The possible reasons for such transition could be the legal obstruction for procuring and using hallucinogens, the adverse effects of using hallucinogens, and the relative ease for practicing neo-shamanism. Some claim that neo-shamanism has a beneficiary role in modern psychiatric practice with regard to psychological and emotional healing. For example, 'Psycho pomp' (“guiding the spirits of the dead to their resting places in the other worlds”) is a way for psychological healing (Barry & Conolly, 1982)
- **Zen Buddhism:** Another cross culture spiritual or religious practice that is prevalent, involves, an interactive dynamism of 'Zen' Buddhist teachings of 'Hui-neng' and the 'Psychoanalytic writing' of Wilfred Bion. This interactive dynamism involves concretization of experiential states that is engendered through meditation and the psychoanalytic encounter. A close looks in to the Zen- Buddhism discipline, especially with regard to 'the experiencing subjects momentary state of consciousness's, suggests that it could applied in psychiatry to create core themes using principles from both 'Zen' and 'Psychoanalysis'. (Propst, 1996)
- **Hinduism and Meditation:** Hinduism is largely practiced in the Eastern World. Hindu philosophy has highlighted the ways of praying to the Gods and that meditation (e.g., yoga) is a way of prayer. Today, themes of meditation have been modified from mere prayer to also increasing the power of concentration and achieving mental tranquillity. Meditation is especially useful and practiced throughout the world to stop possible resulting mental agonies. This can possibly help to prevent the emergence of psychiatric illness in the hypersensitive individuals.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that religion and spirituality co-exist with human existence. However, both are not same and essentially are not interchangeable. Religion often has an element of ‘mass sharing’ and usually identified by well-established rituals and practices. Where-as ‘Spirituality’ on other, is essentially a personal matter and does not have well defined and water tight boundaries. Over the years spiritual concepts or dimensions have been used more openly as therapeutic measures in day-to-day clinical practices of mental health and spiritual concepts have come up from ashrams to mental health settings. However, the challenge will always be there to understand and present various spiritual parameters from objective frame. Still there is a long way to go.

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Acknowledgement

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Rathore, L. N, & Singh, S. (2023). Spirituality in Mental Health: A Practical Understanding. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 11(1), 1741-1746. DIP:18.01.176.20231101, DOI:10.25215/1101.176