

Spirituality and Religion Promoting Mental Health: An Overview

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ABSTRACT

This article highlights the role of Buddhist practices in contemporary society as a way to overcome urban stress. It talks about Nichiren Daishonin's chanting and also highlights the Buddhist Meditative practices to reduce depressive symptoms and to enhance virtues of compassion and wisdom. It further discusses spirituality as related with sound well-being and better mental health. The Health Care Professionals are also providing spiritual assistance strategies along with the psychological and religious intervention strategies to improve mental health. The review of literature on spirituality elucidates that mental health and life satisfaction increases with the help of spiritual practices.

Keywords: Spirituality, Religion, Mental health, SDG's

Spirituality and Religion

Spirituality and religion are two constructs that are so popularly heard in modern society. Very often we see that the two words are used interchangeably. These two terms are related to each other. We can even say that there are similarities and differences between these two terms. They both talk about the meaning in life and the intrinsic values concerned with one's behavior. Both these terms are concerned with a Higher Power. They believe that there is a creative force that unites everyone universally. The dimensions of these terms move beyond everyday life, beyond the community and culture, beyond the ordinary. They both also offer a confirmation of transcendence. In the current times, who is a person who can be called as spiritual? How is he different from a religious person? In simple words if we want to understand this, we may say that people who are spiritual have a broad range of experiences. These people believe in personal growth. They try to find stability in life by developing a stronger self and by building a bond with the Higher Power.

Religion

The term religion is rooted in the Latin word "religio" which means binding together and we can say that it is related to practices and beliefs that bind humans together and also bind them to the divine power. Religion is an integrated system of belief, lifestyle, ritual activities and institutions by which individuals give meaning to their lives by orienting them to what is taken to be sacred, holy or the highest value. In religion there must be some kind of shared dogma and there has to be a cultural social form. The people follow a set of rituals. The idea of institutionalization suggests there is a formal organizational structure in religion and that

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there is a place of worship. For example, Muslims worship in a mosque and Christians worship in churches.

According to Mc Cutcheon (1995) “Religion is used as a way to name a seemingly distinct domain of diverse items of human activity and production.” According to Ellison (1991), religion seemed to improve well-being in at least four ways. The first way was through providing support and a form of social integration. The second was that religion was seen to provide systems of meaning and existential coherence. Third, the provision of religious organization was seen as giving order to one's personal lifestyle. Finally, religion appeared to enhance psychological well-being by establishing a personal relationship with a divine order. Such relationships may help in the formation of a coherent, meaningful universe, thus providing a high degree of existential certainty.

Spirituality

Spirituality is multidimensional in nature and it is a complex phenomenon as many researchers have tried to define it but have not been able to come up with consistency in definitions or meanings. It is something personal to an individual, somewhat independent of religion. It is considered as a capacity that is unique to an individual. It is innate. Sperry (2001) has used the terms like universal, developmental, internal, affective, private and highly personal for spirituality. Spirituality provides a person with the connection to the environment and universe. It provides people with inner hope and peace and acceptance. It is also connected with a person's pursuit to find meaning and happiness in life (Lazaridou and Pentaris, 2016). Spirituality is also related with sound well-being and better mental health. The health care professionals are also providing spiritual assistance strategies along with psychological and religious intervention strategies. God is seen as a system of faith to cope with psychological traumas (Utsch, 2007). Spirituality has received much interest in health care services as research has suggested that improve it can positively influence immune, cardiovascular (heart and blood vessels), hormonal, and nervous systems. Many theorists consider spirituality as subjective but many other have defined it as factual and objective. According to them, spiritual deficiency can cause depression and stress in everyday life. Spirituality is a desirable state as it leads to happiness and maturity.

In the modern society, people have come up with different meanings. “Spiritual but not religious (SBNR)” or “spiritual but not affiliated (SBNA)” are two such terms that are being used by millennial who are associating spirituality with the interior core or life of an individual. They focus on holistic development and a balance of body and mind. According to a study conducted by Pew Research Center (2012), the numbers of Americans who do not associate themselves with any religion are increasing from 15% in 2007 to 20% in 2012. It is also revealed that under the age of 30, individuals are not affiliated to any religious group; however, they do call themselves as spiritual. The reason that can be given is that these people don't want to confine themselves to any religious dogma or institution and they do not want to attend religious services. They have the qualities for deep motivations and want to empower themselves with their personal practice. The youth want personal autonomy and independence. They do not want to tie to instructions and strict practices. Recent researches are also suggestive that spirituality is the sixth dimension of personality based on the structure of five factor model of personality. According to Piedmont (1999), character is a dimension of personality and it is related to Self-transcendence. It suggests how people consistently respond to environment.

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Research Objective:

The purpose of this article is to understand that in a conservative society like India, many trends are changing. People who used to seek solace in temples, masjids and church are now looking for means that are more comfortable and home oriented. Spirituality is the current need and trend. People are seeking it more than worshipping of religious places. This article progresses and talks about the two very powerful modes of spirituality followed by youth and young adults i.e. Meditation and Nichiren Daishonin Buddhism. Currently, Buddhism is considered as a major strategy to overcome mental health issues. By following the Buddhist practices of chanting and meditation, people all over the world are overcoming their strained relationships and mental health issues. These practices are giving them hope and joy. The article will also review the literature and discuss how spirituality leads to a better mental health and well-being.

Concept: Hinayana Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism

Hinayana and Mahayana are the two major streams of Buddhism. After Shakyamuni Buddha, the Buddhist order split into 18 to 20 schools Hinayana is considered as the Lesser vehicle, implying that these teachings could address only a few and could not lead to the ultimate goal of enlightenment. Mahayana Buddhism is the Great vehicle indicating that their teaching was able to transport many people to enlightenment. Both the pathways assert that in order to rid ourselves of disturbing emotions, mindfulness is needed. Mahayana talks about countless lifetimes whereas Hinayana talks about only three to four lifetimes. In the first lifetime, one becomes a stream enterer, in the second, one becomes a once returner and in the third lifetime, one becomes a non-returner and achieves liberation.

Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism: It is a modern day practice that follows Mahayana Buddhism. It is a practice to reduce urban stress. It is based on the traditional teachings of Buddha and is based on the Law of Dharma. People are suffering due to self-centeredness and they need a philosophy to overcome their suffering. This practice believes in releasing the suffering by going out and igniting happiness in the lives of others by chanting with them. It encourages people with guidance's and verbal talks. In this way, people break their smaller self and move to a larger self by elevating their own life condition. It practices the teachings of Lotus Sutra which constitutes the Buddhist Renaissance and states that courage and hope is built in people if they share the teachings of Lotus Sutra. The Lotus Sutra expresses the essential wish to attain unshakeable happiness for oneself and others.

There are four kinds of suffering: birth, ageing, sickness and death. There is also lot of disbelief in the minds and a clear path is needed which awakens a person to their unlimited potential. Nichiren, born in 13th century, was deeply moved to see the suffering of people in Japan and he read all the teachings of Buddha and realized that Buddhism is the only way people can create genuine happiness in their lives. Lotus Sutra can help happiness permeate in the lives of people in the society. Nichiren, in those times of oppression and persecutions, risked his life to revitalize the lives of the people just as Buddha taught. These universal teachings are now bringing a ray of hope in the lives of people across 192 countries. SGI, based on the teachings of Nichiren, have inherited this mission and is spreading humanistic teachings across the world. This practice enables people to reflect on themselves and draw forth hope and a spirit of challenge and courage.

It has three pillars, faith, practice and study. **Faith** means to believe in the writings of Nichiren Daishonin and to have a belief system and to take action based on faith. **Practice** means to chant for yourself and to chant for others. It means to go out in the community to

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encourage another person who is feeling low and sad. The encouragement is given on the basis of teachings of the Lotus Sutra. **Study** consists of reading and understanding the writings of Nichiren Daishonin. This practice also asserts that a person has to do his Human Revolution and live a dignified life by bringing a fundamental change in one's attitude and thinking. The aim is to spread peace and compassion in the society at large. It believes in the simultaneity of cause and effect and the biggest cause we can manifest in our lives is sowing the seeds of this practice in the others and to spread peace and humanitarian principles.

Lotus Sutra teaches that people have courage, compassion, hope and wisdom hidden in the depths of their lives and a person needs to be awakened to these virtues. If we talk about these virtues in the current society, it simply means that we have the capacity to empower ourselves and the others. We can raise our life condition from that of sadness to joy. We can manifest these virtues in our daily activities and move forward in our lives. It explains that begrudging one's life is going to make one fall in the world of suffering; instead a person should focus on transforming his situation and create positive energy by overcoming the challenges and obstacles. This will depend upon the determination and inner resolve of the person. This practice has given many positive benefits. Individuals who have been practicing this philosophy have experienced higher states of wisdom, compassion and have had a better mental health. They have become more humble and have been able to help many other individuals who are suffering emotionally.

Buddhist Practice of Meditation

Another way to bring awareness and mindfulness in individuals is through the practice of meditation. The word meditation comes from the Latin word "meditari" signifying contemplation or reflection. If we look at the history of Meditation, it was introduced to the Western world by the Indian Spiritualist Paramhansa Yogananda in 1920. The original practice gained importance when the Western thinkers understood the benefits gained in emotional and physical health with controlled breathing. In 1977, American Psychological Association gave the statement "meditation may facilitate the psychotherapeutic process".

It is a practice in which we go deeper into our mind and seek peace. This practice talks about being alert and awake in mind from moment to moment. It also preaches that one has to change himself and inculcates the virtues of wisdom and compassion. There are more than 350 million Buddhists and they are believers of non-violence and peace. They follow meditative practices that encourage concentration, clarity and emotional positivity. This practice can increase the mental health and well-being of the individuals.

Shapiro (1982) has defined meditation "as a family of techniques which has in common a conscious attempt to focus attention in a non-analytic way and an attempt not to dwell on discursive rumination thought."

Walsh and Shapiro (2006) defined meditation from a cognitive and psychological perspective, "as a family of self-regulation practices that aim to bring mental processes under voluntary control through focusing attention and awareness".

Another definition of meditation is given by Manocha (2000). According to him, "Meditation is a discrete and well-defined experience of a state of thoughtless awareness or mental silence, in which the activity of mind is minimized without reducing the level of alertness".

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Mindfulness meditation is more concerned with awareness and attention. It can be a connect with the nature or looking at the wide blue sky and feeling connected with the powers of the universe. It is also used as therapeutic technique by Psychotherapists to induce positive thoughts in the minds of individuals. Vipassana and Zen meditations come under this category. In this practice, one is more aware of the stream of thoughts and sensations. However, the mind is non-reactive in nature. **Concentrative Meditation** is more focused on reciting a mantra and assuming a fixed posture. The energy is focused on deep breathing. In this type, the mind is silenced and it reaches a still point. It is also called as transcendental meditation and was developed by Maharishi Yogi in 1958. **Dynamic Meditation** follows the principles of Osho and demands an active stance from the individuals which includes, dancing, filling up your body with energy and releasing the energy with bigger leaps of joy. It is a celebration of the whole in the form of dance. After collecting the fresh energy, which requires a person to follow consistent practice and rules, the person can go on actively feeling fresh and vibrant during the day.

Review of Literature: Studies that support that Spirituality leads to positive outcomes and good mental health and well-being.

Mental health is defines as the absence of mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety. WHO (2005) has defined mental health as “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.” Historically speaking, well-being has two traditions. The first one is Hedonism which is connected with emotional well-being (Keyes, 2007). It is concerned with happiness, satisfaction and interest in life. The second tradition is Eudaimonic well-being and this concept dates back to the times of Aristotle. He believed in the realization of one’s potentials as an element of good life. Ryff and Keyes (1995) considered many theories of Psychology and gave six elements which contribute toward psychological well-being, optimal functioning and self-actualization.

The six elements are:

- 1) Self-acceptance: A positive attitude towards your past and present.
- 2) Purpose in life: Goals and Beliefs that provide a good direction in life.
- 3) Autonomy: Self direction as guided by one’s own socially accepted internal standards.
- 4) Positive relations with the others: It include satisfying relationships with the others.
- 5) Environmental Mastery: It is the ability to master the environment to one’s own advantage.
- 6) Personal Growth: Awareness about your inner strengths.

People are suffering from serious mental illnesses. There are many scientific therapies which are used to treat these illnesses like Gestalt Therapy, Behavior Therapy, Cognitive Behavior Therapy and the traditional Psychoanalytic Therapy. Yet, there are therapists who are incorporating spirituality into the treatment of the mental illnesses and have successfully brought a change in their mindset and have led to a positive well-being. People have started to believe in karma and destiny and have started to understand their problem in religious or spiritual terms. It provides them with a sense of relief that there are reasons beyond psychological and behavioral viewpoints. They are more willing to cope and bear the pain.

Research suggests that people who are facing mental health issues are able to cope better and 80% have been able to recover because of religious practices and spirituality (Lindgren and Coursey, 1995). Therapists are now encouraging people to chant, meditate or hear peaceful

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sounds to feel better. There are changes in moods of the people with these spiritual practices. However, some people do not prefer these practices as they do not want to be affiliated with any religious movements.

Studies state that meditation has become widely popular because it reduces stress and decreases depression and anxiety (Jain et. al., 2007). It also increases cognitive and behavioral functions. There has also been a consistency in the reports of increased and better sleep patterns with meditation. There are also changes in the brain structures and hence it can improve memory, emotional regulation and perspective taking (Lazar, 2011). Lazar has also found that “mindfulness meditation may reduce the density of the amygdala, a part of the brain integral to processing fear, stress, and anxiety. The areas of the brainstem, where a lot of neurotransmitters are related to mood, are released. The changes there may be related to the changes in mood.” In another study supporting the positive benefits of meditation, brain functioning seems to have a better coherence, integration and orderliness (Travis, 2001). In a study conducted by Baetz et al., (2004), it was found that people who were into religious practices and private spirituality had fewer depressive symptoms and they were also able to leave hospitals early and had improved life satisfaction.

In a recent survey, “45% of mental health professionals felt that religion could lead to mental ill health and 39% thought that religion could protect people from mental ill health (Foskett et al., 2004)”. Studies also suggest that religious architecture and buildings also have a calming effect on the individuals and can provide them solace and comfort. Nature, art music, mosques and temples have a positive effect on the people. People come to strengthen their belief systems in such places and try to connect themselves with the Higher Being. They try to make sense of their lives in this chaotic world. In another study, positive associations are reported between some styles of religion/spirituality, wellbeing, marital satisfaction and general psychological functioning (Gartner, 1996).

One study found that for “every 10-point increase in a person’s intrinsic religiosity, there was a 70% increase in recovery from depressive symptoms after physical illness (Koenig, 1998)”. In one study, heart transplant patients who attended church frequently reported less anxiety and had higher self-esteem than those who attended less frequently (Margetic, 2005). Research from America (Swinton, 2001) indicates considerable benefits in terms of mental and physical health and long life from being a member of a faith community. In an Australian survey (D'Souza, 2002) a large majority of patients with psychiatric illness wanted their therapists to be aware of their spiritual beliefs and needs and believed that their spiritual practices helped them to cope better.

A study on the factors in the course and outcome of schizophrenia was conducted in the Department of Psychiatry, Christian Medical College, Vellore. It was a collaborative study among three centers belonging to the cities Vellore, Madras and Lucknow. A two-year and five-year follow up study was conducted and it showed that the patients who spent more time in religious activities had a better prognosis (Verghese et al., 1989,1990).

However, it has also been studied that spiritual dependence can retard mental health and can cause obsessions in the minds. People may pray endlessly to wash their sins or mistakes, may visit religious places more than once and may have compulsive behaviors regarding spirituality. Therefore, spirituality, in certain cases can also increase mental illness.

REVIEW OUTCOME

Spirituality can be central in enabling mental health. It can be suggested that interventions that are given to people should also follow the spiritual model and the issues of hope, values, meaning and purpose should be included in the health care practices. Meaningful existences and the belief in the 'power beyond' bring hope and direction in the lives of many. People believe that they have hope in their lives. After this pandemic, when lives of the people are gravely affected, Buddhism and the various philosophical branches became even more popular and were considered as a significant means to help the people move toward positivity. The repercussions of psychological impact will stay for many years as people have lost their loved ones and businesses. If the community becomes hopeful and positive, people will maintain more active lifestyles which will be beneficial for positivity. Meditation, yoga and chanting are the trends which urban masses understand and are applying in their lives to get through the stress experienced during this pandemic and beyond that. Community interventions should be encouraged so that people can support one another.

Currently, the SDGs are all about maintaining mental health along with physical health. In a health setting, sustainability refers to good health and sound well-being in the population. The Lancet report states that depression and anxiety have hit the hardest in the pandemic period. Therefore, mental health professionals have a huge role to play. They need to build up individual, social and community resilience and prevent mental illness. The stigma associated with the mental health still continues and for sustainable society, mental health has to be incorporated with physical health at all levels. Reducing over-medication, adopting a recovery approach, exploiting the therapeutic value of natural settings and nurturing support networks are examples that can improve patient care while reducing economic and environmental costs. Along with this, if people start practising a more practical approach of devoting some time to spiritual practices, whatever they may be, they can enhance their own health and character strengths and can also enhance a sustainable environment by promoting humanitarian values. Mental health is very explicitly included in universal goals and is prioritized across various countries and professional disciplines. Progress in one sector will impact the other. Hence, it's the need of the hour to empower people toward these humanitarian practices and improve mental health.

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Conflict of Interest

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