

RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY, AND TRAUMA

Spirituality is likely to be important to many of the women you work with. Some people talk about the importance of spirituality in their recovery, while for others, religion is a source of turmoil. Some are confused about the distinction between spiritual experiences and what some clinicians call “symptoms of religiosity.” Some don’t embrace a formal religion or consider themselves to be particularly “spiritual,” but wonder what it has to offer. Others might describe themselves as spiritual but not religious, and find spiritual connection through art or nature. Still others find that spirituality or religion plays no role in their lives or beliefs.

In this chapter, “religion” refers to an organized faith tradition with accepted theology, practices, and structure, while “spirituality” refers to an individual’s sense of connection with the wholeness of the universe. While there is some overlap between the two, there are also differences. Many people are not sure how to talk about religious issues, or are concerned that it might be a violation of the separation of church and state to bring the subject up in a public setting. Discussing religion requires considerable sensitivity, especially

for people who have experienced religious abuse or for whom religion is a defining aspect in how they understand their experiences. This chapter will provide information, tools, and resources to help you address issues of religion and spirituality in peer support contexts.

Why is this Subject Important?

Chances are good that many of the women you work with have an active religious or spiritual life. According to the Pew Foundation, 87% of people in the United States define themselves as “religious” and 57% regularly attend a worship service.¹ While most are Christian, roughly 44% have changed affiliation at least once. People who describe themselves as “spiritual, but unaffiliated” are the fastest growing group, especially among youth. For many people, religion or their own inner spiritual beliefs guide every aspect of their life.

¹ *Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. U.S. Religious Landscape Survey: Summary of Key Findings.* <http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/report-religious-landscape-study-key-findings.pdf>

SPIRITUALITY AND TRAUMA HEALING

As a very young child, I was quite ill and suffered from what I now know was medical trauma. I also grew up in a home with a parent who had a severe mental illness. These experiences were at the core of many traumatic events that continued to occur over time. When I reflect back on my life there were many things that contributed and detracted from my healing process. In my early adolescence, I was asking hard questions of my religious community. I wanted to know why things were so hard for me, why God could let me live in so much pain. I prayed for faith, for peace, for healing. I had conversion experiences and still the pain didn’t go away. I would have profound moments of connection with God and no way to sustain them, no matter how hard I prayed or how “good” I was. I searched in all types of spiritual communities. I began to experience peace only when I finally understood that it wasn’t religion that would save me but the spiritual quest of knowing and loving myself. I wanted the church to have answers, but I found that the answers were inside. Spiritual teachings were a way for me to get to know myself and to become comfortable in the universe. Through connections with other people and nature I found the connection to myself. As I began daily prayer and meditation, I began to make meaning of the things that had happened to me. Having a connection to my spiritual self has helped me bring all the parts of my life together; my willingness to learn to love myself has been the glue that holds it all together. Spirituality has helped me reframe my life from living through the lens of grief and loss to one of wonder and awe at the power of the human spirit, including mine.

– Cheryl Sharp



There is a long tradition of using religious and spiritual practices in recovery. In a recent survey of alternative recovery practices, the four most frequently reported practices were meditation (73%), massage (48%), yoga (33%), and prayer (28%).² Many of these practices were originally associated with religious traditions. For example, many meditation techniques were developed by Buddhist monks, and yoga is an ancient Hindu practice. In recent years, these practices have been separated from their religious origins, and have been renamed “alternative coping strategies” or “relaxation exercises.” While they do affect the physical body, their original intention was to help people connect with the divine. People who are interested in these techniques should have the choice of pursuing them as independent coping strategies or studying them in the context of their associated traditions.

Religious communities can be a major source of community support. There are over 300,000 religious congregations in the United States, making them the most widespread of all social institutions. In fact, Americans are far more likely to turn to religious leaders than to behavioral health professionals for help in times of trouble.³ Because they are embedded in mainstream society, faith communities can play a significant role in helping women transition out of institutions. For example, they are often very effective in helping women reintegrate into the community after being incarcerated in jail or prison.⁴

On the other hand, many people have been traumatized by religion, and religious communities have sometimes been damaging to people in recovery. There are often mixed messages about acceptance. For example, some religious communities proclaim that everyone is welcome, but shun those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered unless they change their identity and their behavior. Some churches have judged those perceived to have “mental illness” as being possessed by evil. Misunderstanding and discrimination against people who are different persists in many religious traditions.

² Russinova, Z. & Cash, D. (2007). *Personal perspectives about the meaning of religion and spirituality among persons with serious mental illnesses*. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal*, 20(4), 271-284.

³ Blanch, A. (2007). *Integrating religion and spirituality in mental health: The promise and the challenge*. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal*, 30(4), 251-260.

⁴ Holmes, D.R. (2009). *The role of religious services in the Oregon accountability mode*. *Corrections Today*, April 2009.

EXPLORING YOUR RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

Do you consider yourself religious or spiritual?

Do you have beliefs or practices that help you cope?

Do you remember your religious upbringing as primarily positive or negative? How has that experience affected you as an adult?

Has your religious or spiritual identity changed during the course of your lifetime?

Do you have strong religious beliefs that might make it difficult for you to accept the religious or spiritual experience of others?

Do you have strong religious beliefs that might make it difficult for you to accept the identities of others, such as atheists or LGBTQI2S individuals?

People with psychiatric histories have written extensively about the beneficial impact of religious practices, and some see healing as a spiritual journey rather than a psychological or medical process. As we will discuss in Chapter 9, “making meaning” of what happened is a key aspect of recovery for many people. This process is often experienced as a spiritual journey or as a struggle to resolve deep philosophical questions. Several inspirational essays and articles written by people with psychiatric histories are listed in the resources section at the end of the chapter and can serve as an introduction to the topic.

Religion and spirituality can also be important in creating a culturally sensitive environment that respects all religious traditions of the members, as well as creating space for people who do not want to associate with any religion. While strong religious beliefs are not limited to particular racial or ethnic groups, there are major differences between groups in the form and meaning of religious expression. For example, in some African American communities, the church plays an extremely significant social role, dating back to slavery and the civil rights movement. It is very common for religious practices to interact with local cultural traditions, creating unique forms of religious observance tied to cultural identity.

As a peer supporter, it is critical to be aware of the differences that exist within religious traditions. For example, a growing number of Hispanics practice a unique form of charismatic Catholicism which differs in many ways from Roman Catholicism.⁵ In Islam, as in Christianity, there are many different schools or traditions (including Sunni, Shi'a, Sufism, and others) and the form of Islam practiced in many parts of Africa incorporates beliefs and practices of indigenous African traditions. Newcomers to the United States may be accustomed to societies where church and state are not at all separate, and they may want to bring religion into peer support relationships in ways that are unfamiliar to most of us. As peer supporters, you need to be curious about the women you encounter and partner with them to understand the role spirituality or religion has in their life. Learning about the religious and spiritual beliefs and concerns of the women you work with is an essential part of becoming culturally sensitive.

Raising the Issue

Many people find it healing to talk about their religious or spiritual beliefs and experiences and, by creating a safe environment for people to discuss these issues, you can serve as a resource to help women explore and heal from past trauma. Some people are concerned about violating the principle of separation of church and state, but as long as you do not promote one religion over another or allow your personal beliefs to cloud your ability to offer peer support, you will not be in violation of the “separation clause” of the Constitution.⁶ In fact, the Joint Commission on the Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations mandates that the spiritual component of a person’s life be considered in health care. People who have experienced trauma deserve to have every potential resource for healing made available to them. It’s like any other issue—all you have to do is ask.

Even so, many people are uncomfortable with this topic. Very few people other than religious leaders receive training in how to talk about religion. Many people using behavioral health services have learned to avoid the subject altogether, since professionals are sometimes uncomfortable with discussions of these topics. Some fear that mentioning the topic could

⁵ Pew Hispanic Center and Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. *Changing Faiths: Latinos and the Transformation of American Religion*.

⁶ The “Establishment Clause” of the First Amendment states that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion.” This is usually interpreted to mean that the government (construed broadly) is prohibited from establishing a national religion or aiding one religion over another.

“destabilize” an individual.⁷ In a peer support context, however, it is important to see people’s experience not as sick or symptomatic, but as part of being human. From this perspective, it really doesn’t matter if a particular belief is “rational” or “true”—if it has meaning to the individual, it is worth exploring.

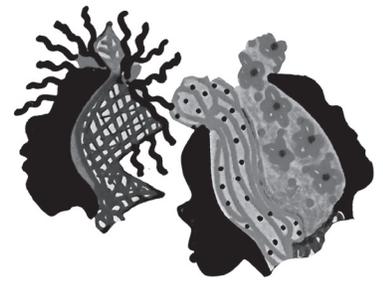
People have a wide range of emotional responses to religious and spiritual concerns. For some people, their higher power (whether they call it God or something else) is a benevolent, forgiving, and healing force. Others may focus on the harsh, critical, or punishing aspects of God. People who have experienced violence and trauma may come to question their faith, or their faith may be strengthened. As a peer supporter, your role is to accept the person’s belief system as valid for them, to be open to the different ways in which people explain their own suffering, and to help them find within themselves the beliefs and practices that are most healing.

Western psychotherapy has hardly paid any attention to the experience and interpretation of disturbed physical sensations and action patterns. Yoga is one of the Asian traditions that clearly help reintegrate body and mind. . . . What is beautiful about yoga is that it teaches us — and this is a critical point for those who feel trapped in their memory sensations — that things come to an end.

— From an interview with
Bessel van de Kolk, MD

In order to help others, you need to be clear about your own implicit beliefs. Before you engage in religious or spiritual discussion or group activities with your peers, you should explore your own feelings about this topic (see sidebar on exploring your religious identity). These same questions can help you begin the conversation with the women you support. Of course, no one should be forced or even encouraged to explore these issues if they show no interest. And if you don’t feel comfortable discussing this topic, you should arrange for someone else to be available for women who want to address spiritual and religious concerns.

⁷ Shorto, R. (1999). *Saints and Madmen*. NY: Henry Holt and Company.





Avoiding Re-traumatization

As a peer supporter, you may encounter individuals who have been traumatized by religious practices and it is important for you to know how to engage in healing dialogue about this subject. As we discussed in earlier chapters, one of the most fundamental principles of trauma-informed practice is to be constantly vigilant about possible sources of re-traumatization. One of the first things you need to do is to put aside your own religious or spiritual beliefs, even beliefs that have become so much a part of your worldview that you don't think of them as spiritually based. For example, the statement that "everything happens for a reason" may seem obviously true to one person, but be deeply offensive to another. We will discuss some ways to do this in the next section.

Art is a spiritual medium—a means of learning to appreciate and work with the emotions that afflict us. We can take our blackest depression, and smear it on the page for all to see. We can draw out our anger with sharp lines and angles, and put it into a design with the cloud of the depression. Added to that, we can portray our deepest yearnings with waves of color. If we allow ourselves to express these feelings honestly and creatively, our work will at the same time reflect our pain and become something beyond it, something good and beautiful. We can take the actual cause of our suffering, the conflicting emotions and, by expressing their essential qualities, transform them into liberation.

– Sally Clay, *Transforming Poison*

www.sallyclay.net

It is important to remember that some of the women you work with may have been directly traumatized by religious practitioners. Since 1983, repeated clergy child sexual abuse scandals have rocked institutional religion in the United States and across the globe. Catholic Church experts estimate that 6-12% of all priests have engaged in illegal sex with children under the age of 16, affecting hundreds of thousands of children. Sexual abuse of minors has also been reported in a wide range of other organized religious and

spiritual communities.⁸ In some American Indian and other indigenous communities, entire generations were traumatized by being removed from their homes and sent to religious schools where abuse was the norm.

Sexual abuse committed by religious leaders is a lot like incest—it involves the betrayal of a beloved and trusted authority figure. But it also involves a misuse of spiritual power, and it involves fear, awe, and respect for clergy based on religious faith and training. The results can be devastating. Religious communities often deny the abuse, attempt to cover it up, or blame the victim. This can result in an acute sensitivity to authority figures, to cover-ups, and to the abuse of power, wherever it occurs.

While much media attention has focused on clergy sexual abuse of boys, girls and women are frequently victimized. Religion is sometimes used to justify child abuse or domestic violence. Abusers may act without consequences because they are part of a hierarchical structure that endorses their position of power and/or relegates women to prescribed roles. Some of the women you work with may have been coerced into religious practices by families or religious schools. Others may have experienced distorted versions of theology. For example, the concept of surrender to God or a higher power can easily become submission to authority, forgiveness can be used to excuse abuse, and suffering itself can be justified as spiritually desirable. While some women may have found support in religion to overcome trauma or to leave abusive situations, it is critical for a peer supporter to be alert to ways in which women may have been harmed.

As we discussed in an earlier chapter, a trauma-informed peer support environment will always be cautious about any trappings of power or authority. Introducing religious or spiritual material into peer support environments must be handled with caution. The use of sacred texts, practices, or symbols; working directly with clergy or spiritual leaders; or being in environments with incense, candles, stained glass windows, prayer rugs, or religious music are all potentially re-traumatizing. No religious or spiritual elements should be introduced in a peer support setting without asking permission from everyone who might be affected.

⁸ Falot, R. & Blanch, A. (forthcoming) *Psychological trauma and PTSD*. In K.I. Pergament, et al (Eds.), *APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality*.

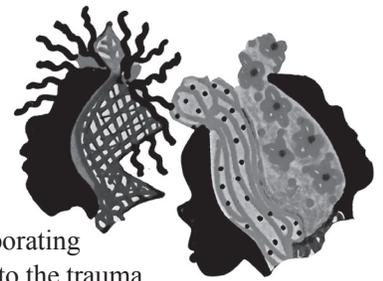
Creating a Safe and Inclusive Environment

One of the most essential things you do as a peer supporter is create a safe and inclusive environment. When it comes to religion and spirituality, it is important to make sure that people of all faith traditions and spiritual paths, as well as those who are not religious or spiritual, feel welcome and respected. It is important to establish some ground rules when opening this conversation, including:

- No proselytizing (trying to convince people to endorse a specific religion).
- A non-judgmental attitude is essential. Regardless of what you might have been taught in your religious upbringing, while in the group, the assumption is that no religion or faith tradition is better than another.
- Atheists and others who do not believe in God or a higher power are welcome to reflect their own philosophy of life.
- Differences in belief and practice, like other forms of diversity, are something to learn about and celebrate, not to avoid or ignore.
- Every person's experience is unique and important. People need to feel free to express both positive and negative experiences with religion and spirituality without implying that others should feel the same way.

One way to help establish a safe and inclusive environment is to make sure that the women you support are the ones making decisions about what spiritual activities they engage in. Of course, you also need to ensure that nothing occurs in a group setting that is offensive to anyone. The arts are one way to help people explore their inner dimensions. People can write about their personal spiritual journey, or draw their lifetime spiritual “timeline” or “map” using whatever art supplies are available. In drawing their maps, people portray their spiritual journey visually, illustrating key turning points (like getting baptized or initiated, engaging in religious study, joining a group, or having a particular inner experience). They can also illustrate the relationship between their spiritual journey and other aspects of their lives, including trauma healing. All of these techniques allow the individual to explore their spiritual experience and, if they choose, to share it with the group in a nonjudgmental way.

Connecting with Religious and Spiritual Supports



Many possibilities exist for incorporating religious and spiritual practices into the trauma healing process. All of the world's religions and “wisdom traditions”⁹ offer important insights about suffering and healing, and many include concrete strategies for managing thoughts and emotions. The first step is to become familiar with the resources in your community and to discuss with the women you support whether or not they want to explore spirituality and, if so, how. A number of spiritual tools and practices are listed in the sidebar. Helpful materials can be found in many communities and online. For example, the Capacitar website has instructional materials for a variety of healing techniques based in indigenous religious tradition—and they are available in 13 different languages (*see Resources*).

While some of the women you work with may choose to discuss their religious and spiritual issues with you or with their peers, others may prefer to develop relationships with religious teachers or faith groups in the community. They may want the support of a like-minded community outside the human service system, be comforted by the traditional rituals and environment of an organized religious setting, or seek wisdom from acknowledged spiritual teachers. Helping the women you support to establish a faith connection in the community—perhaps with a local church, synagogue, ashram, mosque, or traditional healer—is an important step in community integration. Although all faith traditions deal with suffering, many religious leaders are uncomfortable with extreme states and may need some coaching on how to work effectively with trauma survivors. If possible, see if you can develop a partnership where you can learn about the wisdom within the religious tradition and, at the same time, teach the faith community about trauma-informed care. Several resources listed below can assist in helping religious leaders become more trauma-informed.

⁹ “Wisdom tradition” is a term used to describe the inner core or mystic aspects of a religious or spiritual tradition without the trappings, doctrine, and power structures that are associated with institutionalized religion.



SPIRITUAL TOOLS, PRACTICES AND RESOURCES

MEDITATION. Many forms of meditation are available, and teachers and ongoing meditation groups exist in most communities. Some are associated with Buddhist centers and others are unaffiliated. Meditation is simple to learn, can be practiced alone or in a group, and has been shown to be helpful in managing stress and intense emotions.

CHANTING, DRUMMING, MUSIC, DANCE. Many spiritual traditions use rhythm and repetitive movements to help people connect with the divine or other forces, in part by controlling unwanted thoughts and emotions. Mantras or sacred phrases, circle dances, and drumming are often used in indigenous religions and in the mystical traditions of Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. “New Age” and unaffiliated teachers also give instruction in these techniques. Religious music such as hymns can also be deeply healing.

YOGA, T’AI CHI, BREATHWORK. Many trauma survivors benefit from practices that focus on the body, like yoga, t’ai chi and breathwork. Yoga is based in Hinduism, T’ai Chi comes from Taoism, and the breath is of fundamental importance in many religious traditions. Teachers can be found in most communities, and there is a growing body of evidence that these practices are effective in stress management and trauma healing.

STUDY OF SACRED TEXTS. Reading sacred texts as a source of ancient wisdom is a fundamental practice in the Abrahamic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, Islam and the Druze religion—which are also called the “religions of the book.” Studying the Torah/Bible/Koran can be done individually or in a group, with or without a teacher. For many people, it can be deeply healing. For people who consider themselves to be “spiritual but not religious,” a huge variety of more modern writings on spiritual healing exists.

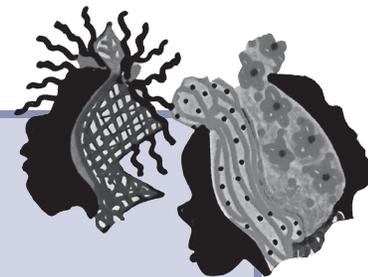
TRADITIONAL HEALING. Traditional cultural healers can be powerful additions to the peer environment, particularly if you serve women who are newcomers to the United States or who are deeply embedded in a particular cultural tradition. Making connections with traditional healers can help the peer program to become more culturally sensitive.

PRAYER, SPIRITUAL SERVICES. Individual prayer is helpful for many people, as is attending services at a church, synagogue, mosque or temple of their choice. Women should be encouraged and supported in these practices. However, if they want to do group prayer or hold a religious service within the program, make sure that there are options for other faiths. The same thing holds for observing religious holidays—if you decide to celebrate Christmas as a group, make an effort to also observe key holidays of other major faiths.

NATURE. For many people, connection with the divine can be felt most strongly in nature. Nature walks, retreats, or simply spending time in a beautiful place is often deeply healing. As a peer supporter, you can make sure that people have opportunities to spend time alone in nature or even arrange for group ceremonies or rituals in places of natural beauty.

TWELVE-STEP GROUPS. For some people, twelve-step groups provide an essential spiritual grounding in a higher power. A variety of groups and locations are available in most communities. Twelve-step groups can be effectively used either as a substitute for or as an adjunct to traditional religious practice.

CHAPTER SUMMARY: KEY POINTS



- Chances are good that many of the women you work with have an active spiritual life, considering themselves either “religious” or “spiritual.”
- Many common trauma healing practices were or are associated with religion or spirituality, including meditation, massage, yoga, and prayer.
- As long as you do not endorse one religion over another or allow your personal beliefs to interfere with your ability to offer peer support, you will not be violating the principle of separation of church and state if you are involved in discussions about spirituality or religion in the context of peer support.
- It is important to be vigilant about possible re-traumatization in discussions of religion and spirituality, since some of the women you work with may have been traumatized by religion.
- Some of the women you support may choose to discuss their religious and spiritual issues with you or with their peers, and others may prefer to develop relationships with religious teachers or faith groups in the community.
- It is important to recognize that, for many people, religion or spirituality plays no role in their lives, and that must be honored and respected.

RESOURCES

Bilich, M. et al (2000). *Shared Grace*. Binghamton, NY: Haworth.

Capacitar Emergency Response Kit in 13 languages, http://www.capacitar.org/emergency_kits.html

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Yoga and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: An Interview with Bessel van de Kolk. Available at <http://www.traumacenter.org/clients/MagInside.Su09.p12-13.pdf>