

Making space for spirituality

How to support service users



Mental Health Foundation

Introduction

Spirituality can play an important role in helping people live with or recover from mental health problems. This booklet explains why it is important and suggests how staff can incorporate spirituality into the support they offer to service users. It is for staff who work in services for people with mental health problems. These staff may work in day services, in the community or in residential or in-patient units. The booklet may also be useful to service users themselves, their families and carers.

Making space for spirituality draws upon the experiences and knowledge of the many people who have contributed to our work on spirituality. We are very grateful to them, and to CSIP for their support for this publication.

Care Services Improvement Partnership 

What is spirituality?

"It is what is deepest in us – what gives us direction, motivation. It is what enables a person to survive bad times, to be strong, to overcome difficulties, to become themselves."

Spiritual Well-Being: Policy and Practice, Bradford 2001

Spirituality means different things to different people. They may interpret it as:

- their religion or faith
- giving meaning and direction to their life, sometimes described as their 'journey'
- a way of understanding the world and their place in the world
- belief in a higher being or a force greater than any individual
- a core part of their identity and essential humanity
- a feeling of belonging or connectedness
- a quest for wholeness, hope or harmony
- a sense that there is more to life than material things

“I don’t believe in a God – a divine being of any description... But I do have a great wonder at the workings of the world and the universe. I suppose you could call that a spiritual response.”

“The quieter the location, the more healing it can be. Being constantly around people is draining to me.”

Spirituality is often seen as a broader concept than religion. Some spiritual beliefs are particular to an individual, whereas the beliefs attached to a religion are shared by large groups of people who follow established teaching.

People may develop and express their spirituality through:

- religious practices such as worship, prayer and reading religious texts
- coming together as a spiritual community
- living by certain values
- rituals such as burning incense
- wearing particular clothes or eating particular foods
- cultural or creative activities such as making music or creating art
- getting closer to nature
- activities that develop self-awareness or personal control such as contemplation or yoga
- physical activity
- friendship or voluntary work

Some people may consider these activities central to their lives, but they may not think of themselves as ‘spiritual’ nor associate these activities with ‘spirituality’.

A human right

Being able to express and explore our spirituality is a basic human need and a universal human right.

Under human rights law, we all have the right to ‘freedom of thought, conscience and religion’. This right applies to everyone and is enshrined in European and UK law, based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It gives us the freedom to act according to our beliefs, except where this means breaking a law which protects the rights and freedoms of other people or which exists in the interest of public safety.

Read more about human rights at www.yourrights.org.uk – search for ‘freedom of thought’

Can spirituality protect mental health?

More and more people now understand that our wellbeing depends on a mix of factors including biological, psychological and social factors. Taking account of people’s spiritual beliefs is therefore an important part of viewing people’s mental health ‘in the round’.

Spirituality can help people maintain good mental health. It can help them cope with everyday stress and can keep them grounded. Tolerant and inclusive spiritual communities can provide valuable support and friendship. There is some evidence of links between spirituality and improvements in people’s mental health, although researchers do not know exactly how this works.

Can spirituality help people with mental health problems?

Spirituality can also help people deal with periods of mental distress or mental illness. Spirituality can bring a feeling of being connected to something bigger than yourself and it can provide a way of coping in addition to relying on your own mental resilience. It can help service users make sense of what they are experiencing.

“You are able... outwardly to share in the liturgy of the mass and... it's sort of an acted out statement of faith even when your mind and your emotions may not be able totally to provide faith.”

“I walk to the gardens and sit on the grass. I listen to the water fountain and close my eyes. I imagine a peaceful place... This helps when my mind is very busy and I feel overwhelmed. It helps to ground me, relax me and eventually get me back in touch with reality.”

“I have realised that my need to dance helped me to survive and recover from my earlier years.”

“I'm quite happy to live with the idea that... in a fallen world there are things that happen to people just... through chance and circumstance. But what one does need to believe is that all of that is happening in an ultimately meaningful framework.”

“I think that if you have got an inner journey that has to be your number one priority in life. I believe passionately that we are spiritual beings who are discovering aspects of ourselves that we did not know existed.”

Having a spiritual life can give people strength and improve their wellbeing. But some people's experiences of spirituality may be damaging to their mental health. They may find certain belief systems repressive and their followers judgmental.

Occasionally, people's past experiences can be unhelpful to their recovery from mental health problems, whether or not they felt uncomfortable with those spiritual influences at the time. Their beliefs may disturb or frighten them and that can lead to behaviour that other people find challenging.

How can you respond to the spiritual needs of service users?

Spirituality is often overlooked by the staff working in mental health services. That may be because in the past services have been heavily influenced by the 'bio-medical model'. This sees mental health problems as caused by biological factors, leaving little room for spirituality and other important areas of people's lives. In addition, some staff interpret what service users say about their spirituality as a symptom of their mental illness.

"I think it was a combination of my GP, the medicine and my spiritual life. In some incredible way they all came together and I think it was the spiritual element that was the glue that held it together."

Listening to recitation of the Qur'an is "soothing to the mind and heart."

It is not helpful to dismiss or ignore the spiritual needs of service users. Taking them into account can support their path to recovery or help them live with their mental health problems in the best way for them as individuals. Encouraging service users to explore what is important to them spiritually can be a valuable self help strategy. People often want to talk about their spirituality and listening to what they say shows respect for their beliefs.

People express their spirituality in many different ways and spiritual beliefs can influence the decisions service users make about the treatment they receive or how they want to be supported. Giving service users the space to lead full spiritual lives requires staff to be sensitive to cultural difference.

Staff may feel on unfamiliar territory when discussing spirituality, perhaps because it was not covered in training. Talking about spirituality may touch something very personal in you as well as in service users. However helpful talking may be, it can also be difficult. This difficulty should not stop you helping service users to express their spirituality because for many of them it will be central to their existence.

Psychosis or spiritual experience?

People with psychosis may hold unusual beliefs (delusions), describe hearing voices or have other experiences that seem out of touch with reality, but people who are mentally well may also describe this kind of experience. Some people have spiritual experiences that are like psychotic symptoms, for instance believing in angels or identifying themselves as a white witch or hearing the voice of their god. When someone who has always held such beliefs becomes unwell, these experiences are not necessarily symptoms of their mental illness.

Whether or not such experiences are a symptom of psychosis, staff need to respond sensitively to people who describe these experiences or are in a state of heightened awareness. Being open minded shows respect for their spiritual beliefs. Encouraging people to talk about their experiences gives them an opportunity to be heard and understood which may reduce any distress they feel.

“In some ways, being in a shamanic journey is similar to delusional states that I have been in. But the journeys typically last 30 minutes, not a couple of months, there is a supportive environment and also set techniques for leaving ordinary reality and most importantly coming back... I once went on a journey to find out more about my fear. I found my fears and confronted them and as a result, their impact was lessened considerably.”

All staff need to respect service users' spirituality as a human right. A mental health service culture that responds to spiritual needs:

- acknowledges the spirituality in people's lives
- gives service users and staff opportunities to talk about spirituality
- encourages service users to tell staff their needs
- helps service users to express their spirituality
- uses person centred planning and incorporates spiritual needs

"My social worker picked up that I was ready to explore what was happening to me."

"It wasn't really a room which you would associate with any kind of religion. It was open to all... it didn't feel like you were going to be interrupted and you felt like it was the right place for talking."

How are you doing?

The Healthcare Commission requires acute in-patient services to report on some of the ways the spiritual needs of service users are met. The questionnaire for service user groups asks whether service users are given up to date 'information about spiritual and cultural services, choices and support available on the ward'. The questionnaire for ward managers asks whether faith/spiritual and relaxation/meditation activities are delivered on the ward. The results in your service could indicate areas for concern demanding further action.

Community mental health service users are not required to record the same information, but could use Healthcare Commission materials to ask the same questions.

The Healthcare Commission publishes its mental health service surveys – visit www.healthcarecommission.org.uk

Practical steps to support service users

- Consider the spiritual beliefs and needs of service users during their initial assessment when they enter the service and throughout their care and treatment / engagement with your service. Allow sufficient time for this.
- Help users identify the aspects of life that give them meaning, hope, value and purpose and work out with them how they can include these elements in their current lifestyle.
- Include spiritual activities in care plans and reviews.
- Give everyone the opportunity to speak to a chaplain or spiritual leader - people who do not regard themselves as spiritual or religious may welcome this option, too.
- Give service users ongoing opportunities to discuss their beliefs with you and with others who share these beliefs.
- Ask day service users or in-patients how they prefer to spend their time. Encourage them to run activities for other service users to enable them to gain the benefits of communal spiritual practices.
- Make a room available where service users can sit quietly, reflect, worship, pray or talk with others. Give them access to religious or spiritual resources such as reading material or art equipment.
- Develop links with local faith groups and tap into networks of people with particular spiritual beliefs, such as humanists. People from these groups may be able to accompany service users to religious services or support them to continue their established ways of expressing their spirituality. You can search for groups at the local library or on the internet.
- Be aware that service users may be troubled by their beliefs and this may lead them to seek help or behave strangely at times. They may have their own ways of dealing with distressing beliefs and want your support with them. If these methods do not work, more help may be required.

Staff needs

You cannot consider the spirituality of service users without thinking about your own. Understanding your own beliefs and values and acknowledging their importance to you can help you understand and respect the key role that service users' spirituality may play in their identity and how it influences the way that they cope with their current problems.

Spirituality is important to people whether or not they are mentally well and the staff of mental health services may themselves be past, current or future service users.

- Supervision opportunities should give you the chance to develop your understanding of the relationship between spirituality and mental health, to offload your experience / concerns, get support, ask for advice and request further training. Staff counselling can also help.
- Get together with your colleagues to talk about your own spiritual beliefs and needs. Asking yourself the questions you ask service users may help you appreciate the different forms that spiritual belief can take.
- Make links with religious and spiritual leaders so that you can learn from each other and explore the connections between spirituality and mental health. Find out more about different faiths and beliefs – see contact details below.

Find out more

Further reading

Keeping the faith: Spirituality and recovery from mental health problems
Mental Health Foundation, 2007

The impact of spirituality on mental health: A review of the literature
Mental Health Foundation, 2006

Taken Seriously: The Somerset Spirituality Project
Mental Health Foundation, 2002

Doing Research Ourselves: A Report of the Strategies for Living Research Support Project, Mental Health Foundation, 2001

Why are we here? Meeting the spiritual needs of people with learning disabilities, Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities , 2004

Resources on spirituality and mental health

The Multi-Faith Group for Healthcare Chaplaincy provides information on the needs and practices of 20 faith/ethnic communities
www.mfghc.com

The Social Perspectives Network looks at how social factors affect mental health
www.spn.org.uk – see Spirituality, faith and religion in the Our Work Themes section

Promoting Mental Health: A Resource for Spiritual and Pastoral Care gives advice to church communities on welcoming and supporting people experiencing mental distress
www.scmh.org.uk - see Mentality resources in the Previous Work section

The NIMHE (National Institute for Mental Health in England) Spirituality and Mental Health Project developed and promoted good practice on the role of spirituality in good mental health
www.nimhe.csip.org.uk/our-work/spirituality-in-mental-health

Spiritual Well-Being: Policy and Practice, Bradford 2001
Bradford Social Services / Bradford Community Health NHS Trust / Bradford Interfaith Education Centre, cited in Inspiring Hope at
www.nimhe.csip.org.uk/our-work/spirituality-in-mental-health/spirituality-resources.html

The Bishop John Robinson Fellowship is an educational and research fellowship which aims to foster good practice regarding religious and spiritual factors in mental health care. Contact Julia Head, Bishop John Robinson Fellow in Pastoral Theology, c/o Spiritual and Pastoral Care Service, Maudsley Hospital, Denmark Hill, London SE5 8AZ.

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For more information about mental health, visit:

www.mentalhealth.org.uk

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