

White Paper

Integrating the Examen and Mindfulness in Secular Substance Use Disorder Treatment Programs.

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Integrating the Ignatian Examen

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Executive Summary

Substance Use Disorder (SUD) is a complex, multifaceted condition that affects millions of individuals worldwide. Traditional treatment models often focus on the biological and psychological aspects of addiction, yet there is a growing recognition of the importance of addressing the spiritual dimension of recovery. This white paper explores the findings of a recent clinical trial conducted by Christopher M. Buenrostro and Thomas G. Plante (2024), which examined the integration of the Examen, a spiritual practice of reflection, and mindfulness within a secular SUD treatment framework. The results suggest that this combined approach enhances emotional regulation, reduces cravings, and fosters a greater sense of purpose among participants.

The integration of spiritual practices, such as the Examen, into secular treatment programs provides a more holistic approach to recovery, addressing not just the physical and mental health needs but also the spiritual and emotional well-being of individuals. This paper outlines the trial's methodology, key findings, and the implications for future substance use disorder treatments.

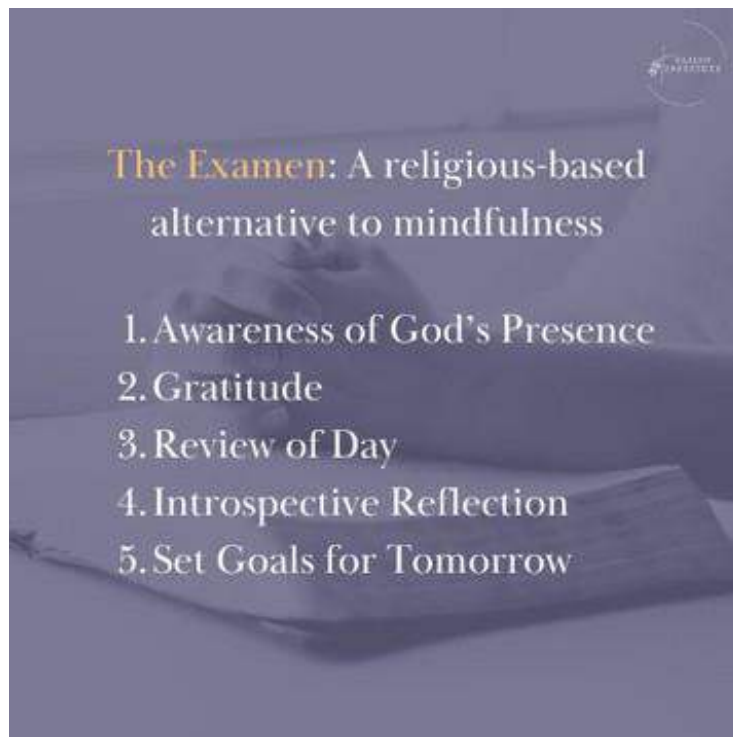
Introduction

Substance Use Disorder (SUD) is a pervasive issue that requires comprehensive treatment approaches. While secular treatments like Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT), and mindfulness-based interventions have shown success, there is increasing interest in incorporating spirituality into treatment programs. Spiritual practices often provide individuals with a sense of purpose, hope, and connection, which can be vital components of long-term recovery.



Christopher M. Buenrostro and Thomas G. Plante conducted a groundbreaking clinical trial published in *The Journal of Addiction Counseling* (2024) to explore the integration of the Ignatian Examen and mindfulness within a secular treatment program. This white paper reviews the trial’s methodology, findings, and implications for the broader field of addiction treatment.

The Examen



Background

The Examen is a centuries-old spiritual practice rooted in Ignatian spirituality. Developed by St. Ignatius of Loyola, the Examen is a reflective exercise that encourages individuals to review their day, paying attention to their emotions, experiences, and actions. It is designed to promote self-awareness and gratitude while helping individuals align their daily choices with their personal values.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a secular practice with roots in Buddhist meditation. In the context of SUD treatment, mindfulness involves cultivating an awareness of the present moment without judgment. This practice has been shown to help individuals regulate emotions, reduce cravings, and improve coping mechanisms during recovery.

Traditional Approaches to SUD Treatment

SUD treatment traditionally focuses on biological, psychological, and behavioral interventions. These treatments have shown efficacy, but often fail to address the spiritual dimensions that may influence an individual's recovery process. By integrating spiritual practices with evidence-based therapies, treatment programs can offer a more holistic approach to healing.

Methodology

The clinical trial conducted by Buenrostro and Plante involved participants from a secular SUD treatment program who were randomly assigned to one of two groups:

1. **Mindfulness Group:** Participants received standard mindfulness training, including guided meditation and exercises to increase present-moment awareness.
2. **Mindfulness and Examen Group:** Participants received the same mindfulness training but with the addition of the Ignatian Examen. This practice was introduced as a secular reflective tool, encouraging individuals to reflect on their daily experiences, emotions, and choices.



The trial lasted for eight weeks, during which participants practiced both mindfulness and the Examen daily. The primary outcomes measured included emotional regulation, cravings, relapse rates, and overall life satisfaction. Data was collected through self-report surveys, interviews, and clinical assessments at the beginning, middle, and end of the trial.

Key Findings

The results of the clinical trial demonstrated several significant benefits of integrating the Examen with mindfulness practices in secular SUD treatment:

Enhanced Emotional Regulation

Participants in the combined Examen and mindfulness group reported improved emotional regulation compared to those in the mindfulness-only group. The Examen encouraged deeper reflection on emotional responses, allowing participants to identify patterns in their behavior and emotions, which facilitated better coping strategies.

Reduction in Cravings Cravings, one of the leading causes of relapse, were significantly reduced in the combined group. The reflective nature of the Examen helped participants become more aware of the underlying triggers for their cravings and develop healthier responses to these triggers.

Increased Life Satisfaction and Purpose

Participants who practiced the Examen alongside mindfulness reported a greater sense of purpose and life satisfaction. Reflecting on their daily experiences and identifying moments of gratitude helped to reinforce positive changes and foster a deeper sense of personal growth.

Lower Relapse Rates

The combined group showed lower relapse rates compared to the mindfulness-only group. By incorporating both spiritual and psychological tools, participants were better equipped to handle the challenges of long-term recovery.



Implications for Substance Use Disorder Treatment

The trial's findings highlight the value of integrating spiritual practices into secular treatment programs. While mindfulness has become a widely accepted practice in SUD treatment, adding the Examen offers several distinct advantages:

Holistic Recovery: Addressing the spiritual dimension of recovery can lead to more holistic healing, fostering emotional, psychological, and spiritual well-being.

Scalable Intervention: The Examen is a simple, scalable intervention that can be easily incorporated into existing treatment programs without significant cost or training requirements.

Universal Accessibility: Although rooted in Ignatian spirituality, the Examen can be adapted as a secular reflective practice, making it accessible to individuals regardless of religious or spiritual beliefs.

Long-Term Resilience: By promoting self-awareness, gratitude, and emotional regulation, the Examen can contribute to long-term resilience in individuals recovering from SUD.

Recommendations for Implementation

Based on the findings from Buenrostro and Plante's clinical trial, the following recommendations are proposed for integrating the Examen and mindfulness in secular SUD treatment programs:

1. **Training for Clinicians:** Clinicians and counselors working in SUD programs should be trained to facilitate both mindfulness and Examen practices, ensuring they can guide clients through these exercises effectively.



2. Pilot Programs: Treatment centers should consider piloting programs that incorporate the Examen alongside mindfulness practices to evaluate their efficacy within their specific populations.

3. Tailored Integration: Programs should explore ways to tailor the Examen to meet the unique needs of their clients, particularly those who may be resistant to spiritual language or practices.

4. Ongoing Research: Further research should be conducted to explore the long-term benefits of combining spiritual practices like the Examen with secular SUD treatments, as well as their applicability across diverse populations.

Conclusion

The integration of the Examen and mindfulness in secular SUD treatment programs represents a promising new approach to recovery. By addressing both the emotional and spiritual dimensions of addiction, this combined practice offers individuals a more comprehensive set of tools to navigate the challenges of recovery. Buenrostro and Plante's clinical trial demonstrates the potential for spiritual practices to enhance the efficacy of secular therapeutic approaches, offering hope for more effective, holistic recovery models in the future.

Reference

<https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1398&context=psych>

Buenrostro, C. M., & Plante, T. G. (2024). A clinical trial of the Examen and mindfulness within a secular substance use disorder treatment program. *The Journal of Addiction Counseling*, 03 January 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jaoc.12127>



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