



How and Why Does Spiritual Wellness Relate to Mental Health?

Growing spiritual wellness can enrich the lives of individuals with mental health conditions. Generally speaking, people with “more religiosity and spirituality have less depression, anxiety, suicide attempts, and substance use/abuse, and experience better quality of life, faster remission of depressive symptoms, and better psychiatric outcomes.”¹ Spiritual wellness is associated with a person’s experience of mental and behavioral health symptoms, as well as perception well-being.²

What is Spiritual Wellness?

Spiritual wellness involves having meaning and purpose and a sense of balance and peace. This is one of two aspects of life that sustain people during their recoveries. The mental health system sometimes views spirituality as pathology rather than as helping people to connect with cultural, religious, and/or spiritual traditions and environments that enhance self-identity.³

Dimensions of Spiritual Wellness

For many people, spiritual wellness provides resources for coping, receiving support, and growing resilience—all of which improve quality of life.

Providers can support individuals with mental health conditions, helping them to develop and enhance core elements of spirituality:⁴

- Connection, which refers to psychosocial needs like love and belonging;
- Peace, which relates to emotional needs like hope and balance;
- Meaning/Purpose, which ties to existential needs like role and self-actualization; and
- Transcendence, which ties to religious needs like spiritual resources and a relationship to what is sacred.

Cultural Activation

Cultural activation is defined as an individual's "recognition of the importance of providing cultural information to providers about cultural affiliations, challenges, views about and attitudes toward behavioral health and general medical health care, as well as the consumer's confidence in his or her ability to provide this information."⁵

As behavioral health providers, encourage individuals with mental health conditions to participate in their care and recovery. One way to empower people is to be mindful and respectful of their cultural, including spiritual, identities. Ask appropriate questions: The cultural information of the individuals served is essential to assigning and naming diagnoses, as well as planning for treatment and recovery.⁶

Spirituality and Other Dimensions of Wellness

Spiritual wellness is a dimension that connects with many others, including physical, social, emotional, and environmental wellness.

Physical wellness

Studies show that the practice of spirituality and/or religiousness can decrease symptoms of anxiety, stress, and depression and reduce alcohol use.⁷ Yoga and meditation are two spiritual practices that have physical and emotional health benefits.

Yoga has been shown to provide mental health benefits for people with "depression and/or anxiety...post-traumatic stress disorder, schizophrenia, obsessive-compulsive disorder, addictive behaviors, attention-deficit disorders, and even autism."⁸

When practiced regularly, meditation supports relaxation, expands awareness and improves overall health. Studies show that a regular meditation practice may lessen anxiety, depression, and insomnia, as well as help lower blood pressure.⁹ According to the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, "There are many types of meditation, but most have four elements in common: a quiet location with as few distractions as possible; a specific, comfortable posture (sitting, lying down, walking, or in other positions); a focus of attention (a specially chosen word or set of words, an object, or the sensations of the breath); and an open attitude (letting distractions come and go naturally without judging them)."¹⁰

Emotional and social wellness

Two important components of enhancing emotional wellness are self-reflection and connection with others. Furthering spiritual wellness may provide opportunities for both:

- Self-reflection can be part of meditation, prayer, or spiritual ritual
- Connection with others when people come together around a shared philosophical, spiritual, or religious belief or practice

A group (or groups) of people coming together, fostering connections and relationships, may create additional opportunities to develop social wellness through social supports. Social networks and social supports can improve overall health,¹¹ including physical and mental well-being.¹²

Environmental wellness

Studies indicate that spending time in nature is an “underutilized (and perhaps unknown)” health promotion strategy. Ensuring that individuals with mental health conditions regularly experience time outside (e.g., a local park, beach, community garden) can lower stress, improve mood, and enhance overall wellbeing.¹³ For some people, simply being in nature can support spiritual wellness.

There are also benefits to specific locations, like therapeutic landscapes and holy places. “Therapeutic landscapes emerged in the early 1990s as a central concept for understanding how place, setting, and situation factor into physical, mental, and spiritual health and healing processes.”¹⁴ Holy places (and associated activities) can be sources of meaning and purpose while also reinforcing coping strategies and resilience.¹⁵

Spiritual Wellness and Trauma

Spiritual practices and beliefs can help people with life meaning and purpose, and it can help people come to understand and manage traumatic experiences. Being aware of our own and other people’s relationship to spirituality and/or religion can deepen the understanding of and relationship between the impact of trauma, healing, and recovery.

Studies show that spiritual wellness “is often associated with lower levels of symptoms and clinical problems in some trauma populations. For example, anger, rage, and a desire for revenge following trauma may be tempered by forgiveness, spiritual beliefs, or spiritual practices.”¹⁶

For behavioral health providers who want to learn more about the spiritual wellness of individuals with mental health conditions and others who have experienced trauma, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs suggests starting with four questions. An adapted version of these questions is as follows:¹⁷

1. Are you affiliated with a religious or spiritual community?

2. Do you see yourself as a religious or spiritual person? If so, in what way?
3. Has the event affected your spirituality? And, if so, in what ways?
4. Has your belief system played a role in your coping with this event? If so, in what way?

If it is not already a part of common practice, respectfully asking individuals served about their definition of spiritual wellness is a good place to start. Showing interest and curiosity could create opportunities for individuals to let providers know what's important to them. Asking people about their religious or spiritual practices as part of a spiritual health history may improve satisfaction with care, adherence, and health outcomes.¹⁸



Remember: the wellness approach to recovery offers a holistic framework in which people are viewed as whole human beings.¹⁹ Whether working toward effective prevention efforts, treatment planning, or service delivery, keep the Eight Dimensions of Wellness and the value of spiritual wellness in mind when serving individuals with mental health conditions.

Relevant Resources

[Emotional Wellness Toolkit](#) | National Institutes of Health

[Wellness Institute Publications](#) | Collaborative Support Programs of New Jersey

[Creating a Healthier Life Handbook](#) | Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

[Meditation](#) | National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health

[Free Guided Meditations](#) | University of California, Los Angeles

[Relaxation Response](#) | Herbert Benson, MD

[The Center for Mindful Eating](#)

[National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health](#)

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Endnotes

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