

# Understanding the Life Issues of Spiritually-Based Clients

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## Abstract

Understanding the meaning of life events from the perspective of a spiritually-based client is essential in social work practice. This article discusses several life events that are likely experienced by clients with spiritual worldviews. The meaning of childbirth and the perception of human nature provide insight into the family's socialization experience. In adolescence, sexuality and the potential for parental conflict emerge as issues that require a spiritually-sensitive approach. In adulthood, the spiritual reality has the most notable impact on an individual's attitudes, behaviors, and the decision-making process. Because spirituality operates similar to cultural realities, the authors support the development of a knowledge base for working with clients who have a spiritual worldview.

THE SOCIAL WORK PROFESSION HAS SHOWN a growing interest in spirituality. Recent papers on spiritual topics include spiritual and religious principles in social work practice (Ballinger & Watt, 1996; Elhany, McLaughlin, Brown, & Bertucci, 1996), the inclusion of spirituality in human behavior and practice courses (Martin & Bailey, 1996; Thornton & Garrett, 1996; Russel & Derezotes, 1996; Robbins, Canda, & Chatterjee, 1996), and the benefits of examining one's own spirituality (Dudley & Rice, 1996). Over the last decade, others have looked at the contributions of religion to social work (Canda, 1988; Siporin, 1986), the religious beliefs of social work educators and practitioners (Bergin, 1991; Derezotes, 1995; Sheridan, Bullis, Adcock, Berlin, & Miller, 1992; Sheridan, Wilmer, & Archeson, 1994), spirituality in social work course content (Canda, 1989), and religion in social work research (Faver, 1986) and have engaged in debates about spirituality in social work (Cornett, 1992; Hemert, 1994).

Despite this interest, minor attention has been paid to the client's spiritual perspective being a factor in practice. Some articles have addressed spirituality and religion in the context of practice. Joseph (1987) examined life-functioning issues in a "life-cycle framework." She pointed out the need to consider spirituality but did not address the need for a group-specific knowledge base. Sermanbeikian (1994) emphasized the need to integrate spiritual-

ity, but traditional religions are downplayed in favor of a broader view of spirituality. There is one text that is specifically devoted to spirituality in social work practice (Bullis, 1996), but a review of several practice texts using the generalist model (Compton & Galaway, 1994; Hepworth & Larson, 1993; Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 1993) show minimal attention to spirituality. In these texts, religion is briefly mentioned as part of the assessment process, but they do not discuss how religion may impact the client. DuBois and Miley (1996) provide more in-depth coverage of this area as they address religious diversity and its importance to practice. Their view reinforces the authors' position that religion and spirituality are salient considerations for an accurate assessment of any client system. In many instances, failure to recognize the client's religious beliefs and practices and/or their "spiritual hurting" leads to premature or misapplied intervention plans. To properly address spirituality in social work, the profession must focus on an understanding of salient life issues when working with spiritually-based clients.

## Defining Terms

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Before discussing life issues related to spirituality, it is important to define the terms, *religion* and *spirituality*. Some clients consider spirituality to be different from re-