

The Role of Spirituality in the Treatment of Torture Survivors

DEFINITIONS*:

Spirituality encompasses one’s personal experiences and understanding of the world as well as the individual need to connect with something beyond individual interactions and oneself. Spirituality is the internal experience of **seeking meaning and purpose**, inner completeness, harmony, and personal transcendence. Spirituality can be garnered through organized religion or through any set of beliefs that give meaning to the world.

Religion is secondary to spirituality and consists of an organized set of beliefs or worldviews that provide an understanding of one’s relationship and responsibilities for others.

Faith is the confidence that allows one to interpret a religious experience.

SPIRITUALITY IN THE LIVES OF TORTURE SURVIVORS:

- Recognize the protective factors and strengths of the client, such as strong faith
- Importance of spirituality in torture rehabilitation
 - Holistic perspective: spirituality is a component of the whole person
 - Cultural competence perspective:
 - Acknowledging the role of a client’s spirituality is a key component to being a culturally competent clinician or case manager
 - The majority of the world practices some form of religion
 - Some survivors of torture have been persecuted due to their religious beliefs

SPIRITUAL ASSESSMENT**:

- Do you see yourself as a religious or spiritual person? If so, in what way?
- Are you affiliated with a religious or spiritual denomination or community? If so, which one?
- Has your problem affected you religiously or spiritually? If so, in what way?
- Has your religion or spirituality been involved in the way you have coped with your problem? If so, in what way?

SIGNS OF A SPIRITUAL STRUGGLE**:

Divine Struggles:

- I feel like I’m being punished by God
- I feel angry with God for what has happened
- I feel like God has abandoned me
- I wonder whether God really loves me
- I wonder whether the devil has anything to do with this situation

Intrapsychic Struggles:

- I’m having doubts about my faith
- I’m not sure what I really believe anymore
- I know what’s right but I keep doing what’s wrong
- I don’t know why I am alive
- I feel guilty about the way I think, feel, or act

Interpersonal Struggles:

- I feel my church has abandoned me
- I disagree with what my church wants me to believe
- I disagree with family or friends about spiritual matters
- I feel like family or friends are spiritual hypocrites
- I argue with family or friends about whose side God is really on
- I hope God will have his vengeance on the people who hurt me

This information guide is based on an NPCT presentation on this topic, presented by **Ginger Villareal Armas**, MA, MS at the Fostering a Resilient Spirit conference In New Orleans on March 8 - 9, 2012.

The [National Partnership for Community Training](#) and the [Florida Center for Survivors of Torture](#) are programs of Gulf Coast Jewish Family & Community Services. This publication was funded by the Office of Refugee Resettlement. For more information on this document , for research purposes, or references please contact partnership@gcjfcs.org.

* From Webinar: “Religion, Spirituality and Faith in the Care of Torture Survivors.” Presented by Captain John Tuskan on April 29, 2009 www.healtorture.org

**Pargament, K. (2007). *Spiritually integrated psychotherapy: Understanding and addressing the sacred*. New York: Guilford Press.

The Role of Spirituality in the Treatment of Torture Survivors

THREE ASPECTS OF SPIRITUALITY:

1- The role of God or a strong belief system may help to address difficulties by allowing the client to find meaning in the torture experience through faith and by reframing the loss of control to surrendering to God's will. The client may have:

- Distressing thoughts related to the perpetrator
 - Preoccupation with revenge
 - Feeling powerless
 - Acceptance of the belief systems or rationalizations of the perpetrator
- Shattered beliefs
 - loss of faith
 - feelings of despair and hopelessness

2- Community or social support may help address difficulties by allowing the client to reconnect and rebuild faith through interactions with others on the individual and collective levels. The client may have:

- Negative view of self and capabilities
 - feelings of helplessness
 - trouble with motivation
 - shame
 - guilt
 - feeling completely different and alienated from others
 - “No one understands”
 - “I am completely alone”
- Interpersonal difficulties
 - isolation / withdrawal
 - distrust of others

3- Worship or practices can address the following difficulties by allowing the client to live in the present moment by focusing attention on the practices. The practices may be relaxing thereby lowering the survivor's baseline of distressing emotions, which can result in the improvement of emotion regulation and distress tolerance as well as an improvement in self-perception. The client may have:

- Difficulties with controlling / tolerating emotion
 - general dissatisfaction with life
 - self-injury
 - explosive anger
- Difficulties with living in the present and difficulties with memory; specifically, difficulty remembering details of traumatic event
 - dissociation
 - depersonalization / de-realization
 - flashbacks
- Negative view of self and capabilities
 - feelings of helplessness
 - trouble with motivation
 - shame or guilt
 - feeling completely different and alienated from others
 - “No one understands”
 - “I am completely alone”

NPCT is a training and technical assistance program which enhances awareness about the impact of political torture and teaches skills to respond appropriately using trauma-informed care principles. It is a partnership of the Florida Center for Survivors of Torture (FCST), the Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma (HRPT) and the Bellevue/NYU Program for Survivors of Torture (PSOT).



The Role of Spirituality in the Treatment of Torture Survivors

RECOGNIZE AND FOCUS ON STRENGTHS AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS:

- What are your client’s personal strengths and skills?
- What are protective factors that help your client?
- Who or what supports your client?
- What brings your client hope?

INTEGRATION OF SPIRITUALITY INTO TRAUMA TREATMENT

THREE STAGES OF RECOVERY*

Stage 1 - Safety and Stability

Objectives:

- Restoring survivor’s sense of control through empowerment
 - offering choices
 - “following” client
- Establishing safety and stability of environment, body, and emotions

Spiritual Integration:

- Worship (practices) can help to increase distress tolerance and emotion regulation
- A culturally competent helping professional, who acknowledges a survivor’s spirituality, can help to create safety in the relationship between survivor and service provider

Stage 2 - Remembrance and Mourning

Objectives:

- Reconstructing the story
- Transforming traumatic memory
- Mourning traumatic loss

Spiritual Integration:

- Community (social support) can allow a survivor to turn to religious leaders and counselors to aid them in the remembrance and mourning process by sharing their trauma narrative
- Worship (practices) can continue to help increase distress tolerance and emotion regulation especially during a time of remembrance and mourning of traumatic loss, both of which can have a destabilizing effect emotionally

Stage 3 - Reconnection with Ordinary Life

Objectives:

- Empowering and standing up for oneself
- Reconciling with oneself
- Reconnecting with others
- Finding a survivor’s mission
 - making meaning of trauma through social action
- Resolving the trauma and returning to everyday life

Spiritual Integration:

- God (belief) can aid in helping a survivor find meaning
- Community (social support) can lead a survivor to find empowerment through collective and social action. In addition, this will aid the survivor in reconnected to others
- Worship (practices) can continue to ground the survivor in the present and the study of scriptures can help to inspire finding meaning



*Herman, J. L. (1997). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence—From domestic abuse to political terror* (Rev. ed.). New York: Basic Books.

The Role of Spirituality in the Treatment of Torture Survivors

MINDFULNESS or the ability to experience the present moment **free from judgment is the act of being conscious or aware** of something. Mindfulness is often associated with Buddhism, but is found in most religious traditions.

Therapeutic application into Western interventions:

- Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (Kabat-Zinn, 1990)
- Dialectical Behavior Therapy (Linehan, 1993)
- Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (Segal et al,

MINDFULNESS PRACTICES:

- Focus fully on the present moment
- If the mind is wondering:
 - Return to your breath
 - Remember to pay attention to what is in front of you and what you are doing
 - Notice any sensations (tactile, olfactory, auditory)
- Gathas (mentally reminding yourself of what you are doing) may be helpful

MINDFULNESS CAN HELP THE CLIENT:

1. To stop dwelling on the past. Being in the present moment helps one not to ruminate about experiences from the past
2. To stop worrying about the future
3. To tolerate the present moment, even when its challenging or painful. Being in the present moment helps to experience the full range of the here and now, not solely focusing on the negative, but seeing the positive too. When a moment is painful or difficult, what makes it even more painful or difficult is thinking about how long the pain or difficulties will last. Shutting out distressing thoughts makes them more persistent and the methods by which we avoid the pain can bring more pain, such as, substance abuse. Paradoxically, noticing the thoughts we want to avoid will help to release them.

THREE PART BREATH EXERCISE: *

Slowly take a breath in through your nose. Notice how the breath moves from the lungs, from the abdomen, ribs, chest and shoulders. Notice your belly filling up like a balloon. When you exhale, let the breath ooze out of your lungs slowly, like a balloon losing its air, until they are empty.

MINDFUL BREATHING EXERCISE:

- (Inhale) - Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in
- (Exhale) - Breathing out, I know that I am breathing out
- (Inhale) - Breathing in, I calm my body
- (Exhale) - Breathing out, I smile
- (Inhale) - In
- (Exhale) - Out
- (Inhale) - Calming
- (Exhale) - Smiling

BODY SCAN EXERCISE: * Notice what is happening in your body before **Trauma Releasing Exercises.**

1. Focus on your feet. Are you leaning on one foot, leaning back or forward?
2. Focus on your ankles. What do you notice?
3. Focus on your calves and shins. What do you notice?
4. Focus on your knees. Are they locked or relaxed? If locked, relax with a very slight bend.
5. Focus on your thighs, hips and belly. What do you notice?
6. Focus on your belly and ribs. What do you notice?
7. Focus on your chest. Does the breath come in easily or feel restricted?
8. Focus on your shoulders and arms. What do you notice?
9. Focus on your neck, throat and head. What do you notice?

INTERACTIVE EXERCISE: PRACTICING MINDFULNESS

- 1 - Have participants focus on the present moment through a breathing exercise
- 2 - Demonstrate for participants the coordination of inhalation and exhalation with *gathas*, or mental reminders of what one is doing in the present moment
- 3 - Have participants practice together
- 4 - Explain how this exercise can be generalized to most daily activities, including walking, and demonstrate mindful walking
- 5 - Have participants practice mindful walking around the room in a line. Specifically, have participants coordinate their breath to the movement of their steps (inhale for four steps, exhale for four steps, while repeat the *gathas* “breathing in, I know that I am breathing in” and “breathing out, I know that I am breathing out”)
- 6 - Discuss with participants their ideas of how they can generalize mindfulness to their daily activities, specifically, during their work with torture survivors

* Napoli, M. (2006). Tools for balanced living: A mindfulness practice workbook (2nd ed.). Scottsdale, AZ: Performance Dimensions.

