SPIRITUALITY APPLIED to SHORT-TERM and LONG-TERM COUNSELING CHALLENGES

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Increasing Interest in Spirituality

- Exploring spirituality and its effects has blossomed over the past few decades in academia and popular culture.
- Scholarly journals and national news magazines have also contributed to this interest.

- Some call it “a paradigm shift” (Gregory, 1994; Larson, Wood & Larson, 1993) to a “New Age” consciousness.

- Though spirituality has become more popular and openly discussed, it remains for many people an uncomfortable, unclear, or controversial topic.
Approaches to Grasping Spirituality

The scope of spirituality is hard to capture, even by a list of definitions. Some common frameworks for describing and debating spirituality are:

- distinctions between “religion” and “spirituality” (institutional, hierarchical vs. personal, communal)
  - historical separation of Church, State & private life
- the mundane/material vs. the mystical/relational
  - historical division of body vs. mind/soul/spirit

(McCarthy, 1995, 2007)
### Priorities of Modern “Technocratic” Societies

- Data analysis and expertise
- Exclusionary specialization
- Control and productivity
- Focus on the future
- External selection
- Legal liability
- Rugged individualism
- Achieved status
- Material ownership
- Competition and takeover
- Conquering disease
- Power, speed, strength

### Values of Many Spiritual Traditions

- Intuition, wisdom and vision
- Holistic integration
- Being in harmony
- Living in the moment
- Internal choice
- Self-responsibility
- Beloved community
- Inborn sacredness
- Resource stewardship
- Nurturance and service
- Illness as a life lesson
- Peace, balance, wellness
I think of spirituality as a wellness resource in 3 dimensions:

1. **Philosophical/existential**: to understand the self and the mysteries of life
2. **Sociological/relational**: to harmonize the demands of daily living and our interactions
3. **Psychological/developmental**: to express and actualize one’s true self
1. Understanding the Mystery of Our Existence

- Spirituality can be a path of seeking wisdom that helps people fathom ultimate questions about existence and their place in it.

- A domain of ideas and images about the creation, meaning, and eventualities of life.

2. Balancing the Demands of Our Overloaded Lifestyles

Spirituality as a value base for ways of living

- “spiritual” vs. “technocratic”
- altruistic, nurturing, harmonious vs. materialistic, competitive, controlling
- oasis from both material overindulgence and high-tech, low-touch isolation

Relevant terms: sacred space, sanctuary, compassion, forgiveness, grace, blessed community, acceptance, contemplation, service, serenity, meditation, gratitude, healing, sacrifice, silence, simplicity, justice
3. Actualizing the True Self

- spirituality as a guide and support to optimize the reflections, choices, challenges, and transitions in our lives
- spirituality as a framework for shaping and incorporating both the inspiring insights as well as the frustrating struggles along the path toward self-actualization
3. Actualizing the True Self (cont.)

- “The human being needs a framework of values, a philosophy of life, a religion or religion surrogate to live by and understand by in about the same sense that he needs sunlight, calcium or love” (Maslow, 1968, p. 206)

- Relevant terms: authenticity, awakening, life path, life journey, hope, meaning, destiny, mission, vocation, integrity, vision, transformation, wisdom, spirit guide, stewardship, surrender.
Relevance of these three spiritual domains to the counseling process

- Clients & counselors alike have yearnings for:

1. **Understanding** when faced with existential questions about the world and our place in it
2. **Serenity** when overburdened by the stress of daily living and difficult relationships
3. **Guidance** when taking a step toward short-term problem solving or ultimate self-actualization
Benefits of Counselor Competence and Comfort with Clients’ Spirituality

The following single sentence from an introductory counseling textbook (Morgan, 2000, p. 176) lists five benefits in itself: “Attention to the spiritual dimension of a person leads to

1. an attitude of respect for the whole person,
2. a valuing of his or her beliefs and meaning-making,
3. a visioning of the counseling room as a sacred space in which life stories are told,
4. authentic encounter is encouraged, and
5. change--even transformation--is facilitated.”
Commonalities between counseling and spiritual practices

- **Self-examination** – a process for cultivating both awareness and openness to change

- Like spiritual rituals, effective counseling requires achieving a delicate balance between
  1. Learning and application of specific micro skills
  2. The art of being and responding in the here and now
Counseling and spiritual practice commonalities (cont.)

- It is fundamental to achieving *multicultural competence* for counselors to develop awareness of their own culturally shaped viewpoints and how those mesh with the relevant viewpoints of clients.

- Because *religion/spirituality* is deeply infused within *many cultures*, it is likely to be a *contributing dimension of clients’ background socialization and perspective on problems and how to resolve them*. 
Worthington (1989, pp. 556-557) cautioned counselors to seek out a broad understanding of different perspectives on religious faith, because:

1. A high % of the U.S. population identifies itself as religious.
2. Many people in emotional crises spontaneously consider religion in their deliberations about the dilemma, even if they have not recently been active in a formal religious community.
3. Many clients, even religious ones, are reluctant to bring up their religious considerations as part of secular therapy.
4. Overall, therapists aren’t as religiously oriented as clients.
5. Thus, many therapists might not be as informed about religion as would be maximally helpful to religious clients.
Essential Guidelines

- The best available guide for assessing a counselor’s readiness to anticipate and respond to spiritual content and process in serving clients is the list of Spiritual Competencies. This proposed set of 14 skills was developed and revised (2009) by the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC, a division of the American Counseling Association) and is on their website, along with other fine resources.  www.aservic.org
The session will conclude with a small-group activity to delineate and discuss counseling applications of the content presented and additional ideas contributed by the participants.

The References and a list of Suggested Readings will be sent upon request.

Many thanks for your interest in this presentation. I welcome your sharing of your perspectives, experiences, and resources related to spirituality.

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