Spirituality in Counselling and Psychotherapy

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Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing there is a field. I'll meet you there.

Rumi
Defining ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’

- What do these words mean to you and your clients?

- Common dictionary definitions often talk of religion as the framework – buildings, pastors, books, beliefs under which people gather, whilst reserving spirituality for the individual’s own beliefs and experiences. (Also usefully discussed in Harborne, 2008.)
Words matter!

I notice that even the words we use to talk about these issues are under challenge and often passionate dispute.

These words – ‘spirituality’ and ‘religion’ - really matter to many people. I think the polarisation and controversies around religious beliefs in recent years has increased this mattering.
Some definitions of spirituality

1) ‘Spirituality which comes from the Latin *spiritus*, meaning “breath of life” is a way of being and experiencing that comes through awareness of a transcendental dimension and that is characterized by certain identifiable values in regards to self, others, nature, life and whatever one considers to be the Ultimate.’ (Elkins et al. 19988: 10).
2) John Rowan on ‘something experienced as spiritual’:

Sometimes it may be experienced as inside ourselves; this is the typical experience of contacting the real self. Sometimes it may be experienced as outside ourselves: this is the typical experience of contacting the transpersonal self. Sometimes it may be experienced as a total letting go: this is the typical experience of contacting the divine, which may be known as energy, as nature, as god or goddess, as pure being, as the void or whatever.

(Rowan, 1993: 3)
3) ‘Spirituality is an intra, inter and transpersonal experience that is shaped and directed by the experience of individuals and of the communities within which they live their lives. It is intrapersonal in that it refers to the quest for inner connectivity… It is interpersonal in that it relates to the relationships between people and within communities. It is transpersonal in so far as it reaches beyond self and others in the transcendent realms of experience that move beyond that which is available at a mundane level.” (Swinton, 2001: 20).
Spirituality in counselling

Let’s think about spirituality in terms of:

(a) experiences that people have they refer to as ‘spiritual’;
(b) the beliefs that they have in relation to their spirituality;
(c) the value system explicit or implicit they have in relation to their spirituality;
(d) finally where this all fits in with organised religion or not.
Spirituality and spiritual experiences within a therapeutic context

- It is rooted in human experiencing rather than abstract theology.
- It is embodied.
- It involves linking with other people and the universe at large.
- It involves non ordinary consciousness.
- That active engagement with spirituality tends to make people more altruistic, less materialistic and more environmentally aware.
- It deals with the meaning that people make of their lives.
- It faces suffering and its causes.
- It relates to God/Goddesses/ultimate reality.
- It often uses the word ‘soul’ or ‘higher self’.
- It uses techniques such as prayer, meditation, contemplation, mindfulness, yoga and Tai Chi. (West, 2011: 16-17).
Allman et al. (1992) surveyed American Psychologists about mystical experiences in their clients. They also presented a case study or vignette of a client having a mystical experience with some psychotic features. Some therapists regarded the client as psychotic others ignored the psychotic features. It seemed that the therapists’ own view of mystical experience was biasing their response.
What can counsellors (and other healthcare practitioners) do?

1) Leave it to the clergy!
2) Use CPD courses to improve on what might well inadequate basic training.
3) Explore in supervision
4) Consider their own relationship with religion and spirituality
5) Read about it; talk about it.
“The practice of therapy always feels sacred to me. I consider the client’s spiritual well-being and spiritual path, even if we do not discuss it as such. I consider the therapy room to be sacred space a sacred container for the issues of the soul. Generally I do not use this language with clients, however, it is my personal frame for the process”.
Practitioner’s own stance

1) Religious, although they may carry their religious faith and belonging lightly, however it will impact on the values that underpin their work with clients cf Peter Gubi’s (2002, 2011) research into the use of prayer in counselling.

2) Spiritual but not religious, this is quite a common position for people within Britain today, what Davie (1994) calls ‘believing but not belonging’, cf the popularity of religious practices such as mindfulness, yoga and meditation.

3) Not spiritual, some people do not get it and do not want it and wonder what the fuss is about!

4) Anti religious, a subset of 3), this grouping has been strengthened by recent polarisation of opinions for and against religion. People in this group will sometimes carry hurt and anger in relation to their experiences of organised religion.
Does it matter?

“When I was ill, I certainly learned VERY quickly to keep the spiritual side of myself separate from the rest of myself whenever I met with any of the ‘professionals’.”

(counselling client in Jenkins 2006: 80)

John Swinton – spirituality the ‘forgotten dimension’ in mental health care

Then Royal College of Psychiatry - Spirituality and Psychiatry Special Interest Group

My own experience as a client facing my counsellor wearing a cross.
Possible challenges when working with clients around spirituality

1) Client presenting issues relating to their spirituality and/or religious faith;
2) Experiences within the therapy session that either client or therapist or both regard as spiritual;
3) When working with a client’s spirituality leads to spiritual or religious issues for the therapist.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Challenges</th>
<th>Client's issues around spirituality and religion</th>
<th>Spirituality in sessions</th>
<th>Therapist’s spirituality</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Experience</strong></td>
<td>Can I listen to client's description of their spiritual experiences in an open, accepting and respectful manner?</td>
<td>Can I allow the apparent loss of boundaries that may be involved and face the possible fears of both of us?</td>
<td>Can I allow myself to connect in this profoundly spiritually way and face my possible fears and vulnerabilities?</td>
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<td><strong>Meaning making</strong></td>
<td>Can I suspend judgment of the meanings clients make of their spiritual experience?</td>
<td>Can I make sense of such experiences within my therapeutic, or even spiritual frame of reference?</td>
<td>Am I willing to explore what this means to me? And do the therapeutic work involved?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Values</strong></td>
<td>Can I sit comfortably with the spiritual and religious values of the client implicit and explicit? Even when they differ widely from my own?</td>
<td>How does such experiences sit within my value system?</td>
<td>Does this change how I approach the therapeutic encounter? And can I embrace this change?</td>
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When to refer?

1) When we feel the therapeutic work they need to do is beyond our expertise or we feel ‘out of our depth’;

2) When we feel they need to work with someone from their own faith tradition;

3) When we feel a referral for a mental health assessment is necessary, hopefully with their consent.
“It seems as if for a space, however brief, two human beings are fully alive because they have given themselves and each other permission to be fully alive. At such a moment I have no hesitation in saying that my client and I are caught up in a stream of love. Within this stream there comes an effortless or intuitive understanding and what is astonishing in how complex this understanding can be” (Thorne 1991: 77).
Boundaries

1) Potential loss of boundaries for client. How do we make and keep it safe for our clients?

2) Potential loss of boundaries between client and therapist.

3) Sometimes either therapist or client may feel they experience God or other presences in the room.

4) Where does therapy end and spirituality or religion begin? Or rather when does a therapeutic encounter begin to feel more like spiritual direction or accompaniment and who decides?

SUPERVISION!
Life as a (spiritual) journey?

For many of us the journey through life at least some of the time seems spiritual.

“When I am clear about my faith and comfortable with it – whatever it looks like – then that is good. I know what I think. I know what I believe and I know what I do not believe. I know what my values are, or I know that I don’t know. Then, when I am like that, I can listen to clients.” (Wyatt, 2002: 182).
How to do it

1) Know yourself in relationship to spirituality and be at ease with it
2) Have some awareness not just of the major religions but of human spirituality which is especially important in Britain
3) Be ready for moments of presence and I/Thou occurring and be accepting of how clients frame such moments
4) If none of your clients ever discuss their spirituality you should be concerned
5) If you do assessments with your clients formally or informally why not find out if:

A) they were raised within a religious tradition;

B) are in one today and how does that feel?;

C) regards themselves as spiritual and what does that mean to them;

D) take part in spiritual or religious practices and what is that like?
Research?

The more the better, counselling and spirituality are too important not to be researched in different studies from differing bases.

My own current and future agenda:

1) how counselling and religious pastoral care overlap, differ, miss out client needs.

2) What spiritual interventions are being used, how, when, how often and with what outcomes?

3) The forthcoming spiritual listening project.
References


