Spirituality in Counselling and Psychotherapy

Prof. William West,

- Reader in Counselling Studies, University of Manchester.
- Visiting Professor, University of Chester
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 to 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. 1998: 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 be inadequate basic training.
3) Explore in supervision
4) Consider their own relationship with religion and spirituality
5) Read about it; talk about it.
Where do we stand?

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.
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.
Spirituality in the therapy session

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!
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


