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## Article 84

# **Strategies for the Competent Integration of Spirituality Into Addictions Counseling Training and Supervision**

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Spirituality is widely covered in both the counseling (e.g., Benda & McGovern, 2006; Cashwell & Young, in-press; Morgan, 2007; Sori-Ford, 2008; Young, Wiggins-Frame, & Cashwell, 2007) and addictions counseling literatures (e.g., Cashwell, Clarke, & Graves, 2009; Ciarrocchi & Brelsford, 2009; Cook, 2004; Dyslin, 2008; Juhnke, Watts, Guerra, & Hsieh, 2009; Laudet, Morgen, & White, 2006; Morgan, 2009; Morgan & Jordan, 1999). The inclusion of addictions counseling within the latest standards of the Committee on Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP; 2009) presents new challenges and opportunities to improve the profession, especially in the area of spirituality. The CACREP addictions counseling standards highlight the importance of spirituality in two sections. Section C.4. states the need to understand “the role of spirituality in the addiction recovery process” (p. 18) and section

G.3. states that an addictions counselor needs to understand “the assessment of biopsychosocial and spiritual history” (p. 22). What does it mean, however, to *understand* or *assess* spirituality? Similar to the debate on how to include spirituality into the counselor education curriculum (e.g., Briggs & Rayle, 2005; Curtis & Glass, 2002; Ingersoll, 1997; Leseho 2007) there still exists questions on how to effectively integrate spirituality into addictions counselor training (Morgen, 2009). Perhaps it is not a surprise then, given the possibilities and the explosion of knowledge available in this realm, that students and even more experienced counselors are somewhat nervous about how to incorporate spirituality into addictions counseling training and practice, even if they are convinced that it is a good idea.

Part of the answer may lie in the Edgar Allan Poe story *The Purloined Letter* (1844/1984). In the story, a police force searches for an important stolen letter. In the end, the detective discovers the letter was hidden in the most unlikely location – out in plain sight. Our position in this paper is that one way to begin the integration of spirituality and counseling is to look at the core counseling skills and perspectives we all learn as *already spiritual* at their core. Spiritually-sensitive counseling is not some esoteric realm of study, but may be likened to a dimension of depth in the work we already do. As professional counselors who have examined the intersection of counseling, spirituality, and the addictions, we would like to offer such a perspective here. This paper will both briefly and generally examine the following areas: (1) how basic counseling skills already provide the foundation for meeting the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC; 2009) competencies for effective spiritual communication, and (2) how Existential Theory provides a forum for engaging a reluctant counselor trainee in a meaningful self-exploration of spirituality (as per the ASERVIC domain of counselor spiritual self-awareness) so she can better spiritually engage with her client.

### **ASERVIC Competency Domain of Communication**

Counseling those in recovery involves several clinical perspectives and skills that we believe are also deeply spiritual. First, of course, is a stance of *empathic listening* (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). This is primarily an attitude and a behavior, not a feeling. Rogers, of course, understood that establishing a growth-producing relationship required three conditions (genuineness, unconditional positive regard, and empathic understanding) in order to facilitate healing and health. Establishing this kind of relationship has been described as already a spiritual intervention (Stanard, 2007). It also becomes the ambience within which there can be both acceptance and exploration of one’s self and one’s story.

As the counselor listens to the recovering client’s story unfold, there are ample opportunities to affirm growth, to look for strengths, to support hard-won efficacy. Strengths-based responses on the part of the counselor as she listens empathically support self-efficacy, communicate respect for the effort that early recovery entails, and convey optimism for the future. Consistent with the most basic of helping skills (Ivey & Ivey, 2003), this communication is framed within the language and imagery used by the client. Speaking in the client’s visual and emotional imagery demonstrates both acceptance and validation of the client’s struggle. In short, these counseling behaviors *embody hope*.

Most addicts come to the challenge of recovery devoid of hope, having failed many times to change or end their addictions. The restoration of hope – a key spiritual element – is a necessary condition for beginning and maintaining the process of recovery (Prescott, 2007). Many times, support of hope is more critical even than finding new meaning in life.

The unfolding story of the “costs” – and fleeting benefits – of addiction inevitably leads to the experience of regret. Many poor and selfish choices form the heart of the addict’s career and the labeling of one’s difficulties as illness or “disease” does not fully diminish the experience of guilt and shame. As the recovering client becomes clearer about this phase of addiction and remembers more about the choices, this regret and shame threaten to re-ignite stresses that can overwhelm the resolve to stay sober. They can become a catalyst for relapse.

Here the wise counselor utilizes a core spiritual insight from 12 Step programs that picks up a major theme from existential philosophy and counseling perspectives, the notion of finitude or “**essential limitation**” (Kurtz, 1982). This leads to kindling a “spirituality of imperfection” (Kurtz & Ketcham, 1993). The founders of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), the first 12 Step program, came to understand a fundamental truth of their experience and codified it into the First Step. Accepting oneself as limited (“I am an alcoholic... my life is unmanageable”) paradoxically brings wholeness.

Acknowledging the truth of oneself also empowers and sets the person free. This spiritual insight is also the AA vision of the truth about human existence: “To be human, to be essentially limited, A.A. insists, is to be essentially dependent. The alcoholic’s choice – the human choice – lies not between dependence and independence, but between that upon which one will acknowledge dependence – a less than human substance such as alcohol within oneself, or a more than individual reality that remains essentially outside – beyond – the self” (Kurtz, 1982, p. 54). It is the choice of wholeness and autonomy through inter-dependence.

Just as the First Step unfolds into the other twelve, the notion of essential limitation or human finitude gives birth to many other fundamental spiritual elements. There is, of course, an **acceptance** of oneself as “limited” and “imperfect,” a calming realization that one does not have to be perfect or always in control. Undue stress and unrealistic expectations do not have to be one’s habitat. One’s past choices and failings can be faced and acknowledged as part of imperfection. That is, to accept one’s self as limited and imperfect is also to **allow for mistakes and imperfections**; one can let go of the facades, and masks, and illusions of mastery – the varied attempts to control – that often pervade life. It is okay to be human. The relief that accompanies this realization is often palpable in counseling sessions.

If I am fundamentally limited, imperfect and fallible, then so is everyone else. In accepting oneself in this way, the possibility is opened for true mutuality, to **relationship and acceptance of others**. One is connected with others. In other words, one can **belong**; she or he has come home. This creates the possibility of **community**. The recovering person becomes part of a larger whole, a fellowship with other recovering persons which is a far cry from the lonely pain of being actively addicted. With this comes an openness to guidance (sponsorship & counseling), to mutual accountability (recovery program), to shared vulnerability (fellowship), to the willingness to work on changing one’s priorities and choices (life reform). Gregory Bateson understood this

change in perspective – what he described as the need for a “change in deep unconscious epistemology” – he also called it “a spiritual experience” – in his discussion of the complementary and symmetrical perspectives of alcoholic thinking. Interestingly, he described this as flowing into “the theology of Alcoholics Anonymous” (Bateson, 1972, p. 330-331). Facilitating this radical change in perspective is a core skill in spiritually-sensitive counseling.

One other skill that is critical to the recovery process and is easily utilized in the course of counseling is the process of self-examination, taking a full inventory of one’s life, and **confession** of both failings and strengths vital to recovery. These are also critical spiritual exercises across many traditions from East to West (Kurtz & Ketcham, 1993).

As clients enter the realm of regret and recrimination for the past, often it is helpful to suggest that (a) this is a normal part of early recovery, and (b) their heart and spirit are “getting ready to do a 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> step.” The obvious parallels between this process and incorporation of cognitive-behavioral skills into counseling strengthen the notion of a “fearless moral inventory.” As DiClemente (1993), a co-founder of the transtheoretical model of change states: “Maladaptive cognitions are a key level of change addressed by AA” (p. 85).

Recovery programs offer a variety of formats for reviewing and recording one’s past, and methods for revealing or confessing this past to another, which can be extremely useful for the recovering person. Collaboration between counselors and recovery coaches or sponsors in these tasks can be helpful. They aid the recovering person in self-review and self-acceptance, and can lead naturally into taking action toward release through the making of amends and remaining mindful of one’s choices in the present and future.

Throughout, the counselor also can emphasize important life-skills for dealing with negative thinking, rationalizations, and harsh accusations from the internal critic (“stinking thinking”), such as monitoring negative self-talk, countering false or overly negative accusations, acknowledging when my choices have caused harm, and making amends. Resolving interpersonal conflicts and healing broken relationships from the past, as well as silencing the voice of the “internal critic,” are integral at this stage of recovery and “insurance against the guilt and negative emotions that could trigger relapse” (DiClemente, 1993, p. 85). These processes also involve concrete acceptance of oneself as “essentially limited,” but part of a community and wider world to which I can belong.

### **ASERVIC Competency Domain of Counselor Self-Awareness**

Training addictions counselors to actively engage with spirituality is a challenging task. Many times the addictions counselor comes with a specific pre-existent spiritual philosophy (perhaps from personal recovery experience). In this instance the pedagogical challenge is to instill a wider and more flexible perspective on spirituality. For many others, the concept of spirituality is intimidating and confusing, typically resulting in a census-like dichotomous question of *are you spiritual?* This is quickly followed with the overly broad (and unanswerable) question *how are you spiritual?* This is akin to asking someone to explain their personality. You get an answer, of course, but how much does

that answer move you closer to forming a bond with the client (Morgen & Cashwell, 2009)?

Zinnbauer and Pargament (2000) discuss that a counselor may operate from one of four perspectives towards spirituality. The rejectionist discounts any incorporation of spirituality and may even demonstrate hostility towards any spiritual/religious counseling content. The second perspective, exclusivist, is one where the counselor believes in only one true spiritual path and that all clients must endorse and follow the same spiritual philosophy. This stance on spirituality may reflect counselor countertransference and could even lead to burnout or empathy fatigue (O'Mara, 2006). The final two perspectives on spirituality, constructivist and pluralist, reflect the counselor's grounded belief system while also recognizing the extent that there is an empathic and compassionate appreciation for diverse belief systems. This brief section will emphasize how Existential Theory may provide a strong educational and practical forum for instilling counselor self-awareness and comfort with spiritual content in session.

Existentialism has a long history of application to spirituality-based counseling (Bauman, 1998; Eliason, Hanley, & Leventis, 2001; Eliason, Samide, Williams, & Lepore, 2007) and addictions counseling (Ford, 1996; Greaves, 1980; Hart & Singh, 2009; Wiklund 2008a, 2008b). The link between existentialism, spirituality, and addictions counseling is based on the shared foundation in philosophy along with religious (e.g., Oxford Group) roots (Eliason et al., 2001; Eliason et al., 2007). Consequently, Existential Theory works within a language that translates across the spirituality and addictions disciplines. Unfortunately, Fitch, Canada, and Marshall (2001) found that counselor education programs do not emphasize Existential Theory within the teaching and training of humanistic theories. Person-Centered Theory, rather than Existentialism, is the humanistic theory of choice in counselor training.

Trepidation about engaging in a spiritual discussion, or insistence on a rigid spirituality definition, may diminish if a counselor understands spirituality as a multidimensional construct relevant to both counselor and client. Anxiety around self-awareness of beliefs, and attitudes towards spiritual matters may be housed within a limited understanding of the exact definition and application of spirituality (e.g., spirituality as a religious construct) or a reluctance to change one's personal beliefs (e.g., this form of spirituality helped me achieve recovery, so you must accept this form of spirituality as well). Spirituality has been defined in countless ways (Cook, 2004), but the conception of spirituality as a mechanism for deriving meaning out of life (Morgen, 2009; Shockley, 1994) seems an approachable perspective for those anxious about engaging in a spiritual dialogue (perceived as consisting of religious or philosophical themes) with a client. Furthermore, finding purpose and meaning is an integral component of Existentialism (van Deurzen Smith, 2002; Yalom, 1980). Consequently, Existentialism seems an appropriate theory to frame a counseling discussion centered on spirituality as defined as a search for meaning.

The following is a brief summary of an Existential-themed supervisory intervention designed to facilitate spiritual self-awareness within the counselor while enhancing the counselor's ability to recognize and conceptualize the client's spiritual matters. The supervisory intervention uses Spinelli's (2005) four inter-relational realms of descriptive inquiry for investigating the client's worldview: (1) I-focused, (2) You-focused, (3/4) We-focused/They-focused. The Existential dialogue with the trainee is

required to enlarge spiritual understanding, thus better preparing the counselor for a spiritual-themed discussion with a client. Each component of the supervisory intervention will be briefly reviewed within the context of the following brief supervisory example.

*Sarah was a second-year addictions counseling graduate student who entered the field due to an interest but with no personal or family history of addiction/recovery. Sarah consistently expressed a discomfort with spirituality because she “isn’t that religious” and she “doesn’t know how to talk about the matter.” Furthermore, Sarah feels “incompetent” to deal with spiritual matters because she feels her graduate training, though having reviewed the concept in a few courses “here and there,” failed to provide an application component for using spirituality in session. Sarah recently was shaken by a client who told her she could “never” understand spirituality because “she is not in recovery and working the 12-steps.” Sarah has considered leaving the profession because she believes the client’s statement to be true.*

**I-focused.** Spinnelli (2005) stresses this domain as an area to review client beliefs and experiences within the world. As applied to a trainee in supervision, the I-focused domain is an appropriate forum for discussing the trainee’s belief system regarding spirituality. Questions for inquiry include the development of her spiritual beliefs, or what it means to Sarah to have no well-defined beliefs. If Sarah endorses no well-defined spirituality beliefs, in what exactly does she believe? From where does she derive meaning and purpose in life? Sarah chose to enter the counseling profession. Thus, there must be something driving her desire to attend graduate school and accrue countless hours of training while working towards licensure. Where does Sarah find meaning in her life and how does that meaning relate to counseling?

**You-focused.** Spinnelli (2005) saw this domain as the client’s experience of the other in the current encounter. The You-focused domain in supervision is appropriate for when a trainee has a client for whom spirituality is important. Here, the discussion centers on Sarah’s experience of the client. How does the client make Sarah feel when it comes to spirituality? At her next supervisory session Sarah was worried and nervous that she had no way to engage with the client because she was not a fellow recovering individual. The supervisor spoke with Sarah about spirituality as not being a dichotomous concept. Furthermore, spirituality is not limited to 12-step philosophy. One integral Existential exercise was where the first step in the 12-Steps was re-defined within the broader Existential context of freedom and responsibility. Though Sarah had no background in addiction, Sarah could recount a few difficult times in her life where she felt as if she lost the ability to manage her world. Broadening the discussion to the Existential concepts of meaning, responsibility and choice, and finite time to forge an existence helped Sarah recognize that no client can deny her the ability to discuss spirituality. In addition, the supervisory dialogue helped Sarah realize she was much more spiritual than she ever considered herself as being.

**We-focused/They-focused.** Spinnelli (2005) looks at the experience between the client and counselor in both the present moment and beyond the boundary of the counseling session. ASERVIC (2009) embraces this philosophy by stressing the need for a counselor to understand and evaluate personal spiritual beliefs and values. Any spiritual discussion is a daunting task as the counselor is engaging the client in a dialogue on life, loss, meaning, and inspiration. Regardless of recovery history or endorsement of

12-steps, Sarah is a human being with fears, dreams, and struggles. A resistance to spirituality, from an Existential perspective, focuses on Sarah's reluctance to find *the courage to be* (Tillich, 1952):

...theological assertion that every human soul has an infinite value is a consequence of the ontological self-affirmation as an indivisible, unexchangeable self. It can be called the courage to be oneself. But the self is self only because it has a world, a structured universe, to which it belongs and from which it is separated at the same time. Self and world are correlated, and so are individualization and participation. (Tillich, 1952, p.87)

Counselors trained in Existentialism already understand and appreciate this mutual system of self and world. Before Sarah could engage with a client on spiritual matters, she needs to spend time understanding her desired identity as a counselor, who she is as a person, what she values and believes, and how her beliefs can both bias her impressions of others and bridge the chasm between her world and that of her client. How did Sarah's collective *being* shape her past and how does it shape her present counseling? Phenomenology stresses you can never know another's world, but you can observe how another's perception of their own world influences behavior. Prior to these conversations Sarah worked from a mind-set that spirituality was either an esoteric concept beyond the grasp of a beginning counselor, or the sum of personal experiences about which she had no right to inquire. Over time, Sarah came to recognize spirituality as being the expression of the *courage to be* and once she understood her own courage, she was better grounded to spiritually engage with others. Most importantly, she had a framework (via Existentialism and the *courage to be*) to pursue that dialogue.

Existentialism is in no way the only route towards achieving the spiritual self-awareness required of a spiritually-competent counselor. However, considering trainee anxiety, confusion, and reluctance regarding spiritually-based counseling discussions, Existentialism does offer a teachable (via Counseling Theories) language applicable to supervisor and trainee to instill a more competent and confident integration of spirituality into counseling practice.

### **Conclusion**

Does the search for the complex, esoteric concept of spirituality (via debate over where in the curriculum, practicum, or internship training the concept belongs) give trainees the message that spirituality is something best reserved for the seasoned counselor? Does this influence some of the trainee anxiety around using spirituality in counseling? Spirituality is currently a popular counseling scholarly issue. Reviews of countless articles underscore the complexity of the how and why behind spirituality training within the counseling profession. The purpose of this paper was to pose a simple question. Similar to the police scrambling to find the stolen letter in Poe's tale, is the counseling profession looking for spirituality in the wrong place? Is it right there in front of us all? Has it been so all along?

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