Spirituality and Aging: Meaning and Purpose

The Institute of Medicine, Education, and Spirituality at Ochsner

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Finding Meaning in Spirituality

• People of all ages seek meaning in life.
• Religion and spirituality have similarities and differences.
• Older adults learn to reach beyond themselves (self-transcend): express caring behaviors for others and express a disinterest in material things.
Religion and Aging

• Moberg (1970) defined religion as the “personal beliefs, values, and activities pertinent to that which is supernatural, mysterious, and awesome, which transcends immediate situation, and which pertain to questions of final causes and ultimate ends of humanity and the universe.”

• “Religion can enhance or impede self awareness, accurate perceptions, adequate expressions and realistic intentions” (Maloney).

• Moberg (1980) reported that most all person over the age of 65 reported having religious affiliations.
Religion and Spirituality

- Religious beliefs and practices represent forums for the expression of spirituality and serve psychological functions. Ryan, Rigby and King (1993) pointed out that these functions may include:
  - Explaining the unknown.
  - Protecting against the terror of death.
  - Providing a system of shared meanings and social practices.
  - Guidance that aids in the maintenance and enhancement of personality and mental health.

What is extremely important here, is that these functions become internalized.
Religion and Coping

- In studies by Koenig of stress reduction, almost 45% mentioned the use of religious coping behaviors.
- Coping is the efforts, both action-oriented and intra-psychic, to manage environmental and internal demands and conflicts among them.
- Stressors are losses or potential losses in the following: biological, personal/psychological, physical/environmental, and social/cultural. Each of the above considers family, love and marriage, parenting, health, self issues (self-esteem), friendships, social relationships, finances, and work. All these areas are considered by counselors and caretakers.
Religion and Coping

• Koenig et. al. found that among correlates of well-being among adults age 75 and over, religious activities and attitudes explained more of the variance in well-being than any other variable except for health.

• In other studies, they found those older adults with a mean age of 73 who were actively involved in religious behaviors or intrinsically committed were significantly more likely that the less religious to achieve high morale and well-being scores.
Spirituality and Religion

• The major role of spirituality in older adults is to find ultimate meaning in life.

• Expression of spirituality through religious practices, compassion, service to others, or passing on wisdom brings deep personal satisfaction and comfort.

• Everyone has a spiritual component, but not everyone is religious.

• Religion can be the practical expression of spirituality through its organization, rituals, and practices of belief.
Nature of Spirituality

- Religion includes specific beliefs and practices, while spirituality is far broader.
- Spirituality speaks to many denominations and beliefs.
- Spirituality includes a system of beliefs that encompass love, compassion, and respect for life.
- Spirituality is about relationships: with ourselves, others, and the universe.
- Spirituality requires abstract thinking and exercise of the will.
- Spirituality provides insight into self and others.
- Spirituality is a way of living and coping.
Spirituality Characteristics

- Spirituality integrates all aspects of personhood in the search for meaning.
- Spirituality extends beyond the physical, material self to a state called transcendence.
- Transcendence manifests in many ways:
  - Creative work
  - Religious beliefs
  - Children
  - Identification with nature
  - Mystical experiences
Spirituality Characteristics

• Older adults reflect more because of time and illness, have less concern for material things, and are more interested in satisfaction and meaning in life.
• They have more experiences that seem mystical.
• Other developmental factors
  – Greater appreciation of time vis-à-vis quality of life
  – Time to meditate and fantasize
  – More contemplation and reflection
The Relationship between Well-Being and Spirituality Acknowledged

• National Conference on Spiritual Well-Being was developed by the White House Conference on Aging in 1971.

• Spiritual well-being was defined by the National Interfaith Conference on Aging (NICA) in 1972 as “the affirmation of life in a relationship with God, self, community and environment that nurtures and celebrates wholeness.” (Moberg, 1995)
Research Finding for Religion and Aging

• 9 of 10 older adults rate religion important in their lives.
• Positive relationship between religion and physical health.
• “Change and Stability During the Third Age” Longitudinal investigation of Self-Rated Health and Religiousness with the Terman Life Cycle Study of children with high ability (1922-1986).
  – This study utilized a distinct age range from 65-79 called the Third Age.
  – The study studies psychosocial development in terms of stability and change.
Research Findings: Self-Rated Health

• One of the main questions of the study was the relationship of self-rated health and religiousness.

• Self-rated health is a common way of studying health. People are asked a question: “How has your health been recently”? This is rated from 1 (very poor) to 5 (very good). It has been found that ratings of health predict how long people will live and how much health care they will consume. People with poor self-rated health are typically 50%-100% higher in mortality than are those for people who rate themselves as “very good”.
Research Findings: Self-Rated Health

• Self-rated health scores changed during the life cycle which are very sensitive to a variety of variables such as physiology, functional ability, and psychosocial well-being.

• Good ratings may be related to positive emotions which are correlated with well-being.
Research findings: Self-rated Health

• The results for a mean-level changes study in Self-Rated Health before and during the third age were:
  – For the first three decades of adulthood, a typical person maintains a relatively favorable impression of his or her health.
  – Around 50, a second phase seems to begin. Self-rated health mean levels begins to cascade, in an accelerated fashion into the mid-90s. Basically there were no real gender differences in self-rated health. The decline for both starts 15 years before the 65th birthday.
Research Findings: Self-Rated Health and Religiousness

• Researchers have found a positive relationship between religiousness and self-rated health.

• Question: Does religiousness protect people from declines in self-rated health that takes place before, during, and after the Third Age.
Research Findings: Self-Rated Health and Religiousness

- Findings: Religiousness (defined by engagement in public religious activities, attitudes about religion, and the personal importance ascribed to religion) explained developmental changes in self-rated health (even after controlling for personality, negative health behaviors and social support/activity). It helped to predict the longitudinal course of self-rated health. BUT only for women.
Research Findings: Religiousness and Third Age

• There was less cascading especially when religiousness was strong in early adulthood. So better health with religiousness, especially before the Third Age.

• What about Religiousness in the Third Age.
  – From the Terman population, it was found that there were three different outcomes for different individuals.
    1. 40% declines before the Third Age and declines continue
    2. 41% of people with weak religious backgrounds and less agreeable personally, declines continued from early to Third Age
    3. For the rest of % highly religious proportion who were more agreeable and slightly less likely to get married, the Third Age was characterized by a leveling off of religiousness at very high levels and towards the end of the Third Age the beginnings of small declines.
Other Research Findings of Religiousness and Health

• Most report that religion helps them cope or adapt with losses or difficulties.

• Religion as a source of well-being increases and is more important over time unlike other sources of well-being.

• Due to many factors older adults do not have full access to spiritual resource, unable to travel or poor health.
Spiritual Needs of Physically Ill Elders

- Spiritual needs are interwoven with all the other needs and cut across every dimension of human life. Many of these needs, though not all, can be met through religious/spirituality channels.

- What are the spiritual needs? A Need…
  1. For Meaning, Purpose, and Hope.
  2. To Transcend Circumstances.
  3. For Support in Dealing with Loss.
  4. For Continuity
  5. For Validation and Support of Religious Behaviors
  6. To Engage in Religious Behaviors
Spiritual Needs

7. For Personal Dignity and Sense of Worthiness.
8. For Unconditional Love.
9. To Express Anger and Doubt.
10. To Feel that God Is on Their Side.
11. To love and Serve Others.
12. To Be Thankful.
13. To Forgive and Be Forgiven.
14. To Prepare for Death.

Koenig, H. Aging and God: Spiritual Pathways
Religious Traditions

• Traditions become more important as people age. Religion offers a way to express spirituality with social support, security, a sense of belonging through religious affiliations and is significant in coping with age related changes.

• Adherence to ethnic traditions correlate with successful aging and coping. They help recover wholeness and well-being through their distinct cultural values and structures while they connect to their history and heritage.
Native American Tradition

- Native American
  - Two purposes of life: to know the self and be of help to others.
  - Beliefs and spiritual powers vested in nature, the land, and animals.
  - Values are similar in the many hundreds of tribes. For example, many believe that adults relive their past, reconnect with that which has created them and this leads them to healing the wounds of a lifetime.
Japanese Americans

- Intergenerational healing among four distinct generations
  - Old group faced economic and racial prejudices when they immigrated and suffered societal injustices
  - War forced relocations with their children
  - Third generation attended to their children and vested in them the hope of success while integrating into a dominant culture.
  - Younger generations learn of their spiritual heritage and they try to reconnect with the traditional values, culture, and rituals.
African Americans

• The role of African American women in Churches and spirituality is pivotal. They attend church more frequently, participate more in church related activities and score higher on measures of religiousness and commitment.

• African American organizations support the community.
Mexican Americans

• Women use their religious and cultural traditions to adjust to new environments, even in the face of broken homes and poverty. They sustain families and build more secure communities.

• Religious traditions and practices are extremely important to them.
Threats to Spirituality

• Losses
• Challenged value systems (loss of work)
• Separation from religion and/or culture
• Death of family members
• Personal and family disasters
• Changes in environment, health, or self concept – nursing home or catastrophic illness.
How to identify unmet needs or lack of spirituality

- Threats to self
- Insecurity or lack of self-esteem
- Seeking spiritual assistance
- Questioning one’s existence or meaning
- Depression
- Doubts, or despair
- Guilt
- Boredom
- Anger
Strategies to Introduce Spirituality

• **Hope**
  - Expectation for future
  - Motivation for action
  - Means of fulfilling goals.

• **Elements**
  - Recognition of threat
  - Assessment
  - Ways to resolve
  - Recognize negative outcomes and retain optimism
  - Find supportive relationships
  - Determination to endure
Likely Strategies by Caregiver

- Strategies for caregiver
  - Assess available supports
  - Identify a comforting environment
  - Assess past coping abilities
  - Identify changes needed to improve situation and abilities
  - Refer to clergy, chaplain or other health care professional
  - Prayer
  - Imagery
  - Artistic expression
  - Healing
  - Memory and reminiscence use
  - Medication and relaxation
Memories and Legacies

• **Legacies**
  – Write memoirs
  – Previewing and assembling photograph albums
  – Taping memoirs
  – Expressing through art
  – Creating a memory garden
  – Giving away mementos, distributing possessions to others
  – Developing family histories or genealogies
  – Making trips to family homes and pilgrimages to locations of spiritual significance
  – Autobiographies or life histories.
Practical Applications

- Listen
- Be aware of signs of mental health problems and refer
- Share concern and observations
- Provide privacy
- Reassure the value of the person
- Allow decisions to be made
- Accept without judgment
- Help express religious, spiritual or social needs
- Recognize cultural differences
- Keep separate values and spiritual beliefs that are different
- Use humor as appropriate
Resources

• Creativity in later life, Generations. XV(2):1-72.
• Reasons to Grow Old: Meaning in Later Life. Generations, xxlll, No. 4.
References


References


References


REFERENCES

• LINKS

  • The Forum on Religion, Spirituality and Aging - part of American Society on Aging

  • Everyday Mysticism: Spiritual Development in Later Adulthood - Article by Robert Atchley. On web site for Naropa University, a private, non-profit, fully accredited liberal arts college with a unique Buddhist educational heritage.

  • The National Interfaith Coalition on Aging (NICA) - offers information on aging and spirituality with links to other mainline Christian agencies dealing with aging.
References

• The Institute of Spirituality and Aging - a nonsectarian, interfaith nonprofit organization, created to help elders and caregivers of diverse faiths identify and promote spiritual values in their lives and develop a more meaningful connection between spirituality, health and aging.

• For other information and research findings, please refer to data bases, such as Ageline or Age Search