

## **Spirituality**

**Kimberly Diah, M.S., Lisa K. Lashley, Psy.D., Charles J. Golden, Ph.D.**

**Nova Southeastern University**

The concept of spirituality is polysemic and adapts different meaning based on individual experiences, culture, and purpose. For many, spirituality means being a part of a structured religion such as attending church, going to a mosque or synagogue. For others, it is a personal journey that involves meditation, yoga, private worship with a higher power or God and reflection. Spirituality can also be a way of seeking meaning through connections with other people, or nature. Virtually, it is a broad concept that allows multiple perspectives to take hold. While the object or belief may differ, the commonality among spirituality suggests a connection to something more significant than the individual self and involves searching for purpose and meaning in life. Spirituality exists as a universal human experience that can adapt and change throughout life through evolving relationships and experiences with the world.

The experience of spirituality is understood as a transcending or sacred experience with a divinity that goes beyond the boundaries of time and space, but also includes observable features seen through spiritual practices or behaviors motivated by spirituality. The multifaceted nature of spirituality makes it challenging to set clear-cut definitions. Contrasted with religion which is understood to be an organized institution of beliefs and practices, spirituality is assumed at the individual level within varying contexts. While spirituality may exist within religion as a central focus, religion also includes nonspiritual aspects related to traditions and the parameters of its institution. Spirituality appears to be connected to self-exploration of life and self-identity. It is the aspect of humanity that seeks meaning and expression of one's purpose. There is a need to feel connected and increase that connectedness to life, one's self, the divine, nature, and other

significant aspects people ascribe power or meaning. The relationship between religion and spirituality are not mutually exclusive and share commonality rooted in belief, reflection, comfort, and respect that are tied to the individual experience. This shared experience affects the way thoughts, emotions and behaviors are expressed.

The foundations of spirituality are unique but also linked to cognitive, affective and behavioral phenomena. Seeking the meaningful connections within one's spirituality can lead to positive feelings of peace, contentment, acceptance, wonder, gratitude, and amazement. Spirituality influences ways of being, thinking and behaving. The component dimensions of spirituality that are widely agreed upon include purpose, exploration, connectedness, change, growth, truth, comfort, peace, overcoming suffering, enlightenment, personal transformation, and servitude. The multidimensional nature of spirituality makes it hard to define or ascribe to any one principle. Despite these difficulties, research has attempted to attribute a scientific definition that many might arguably disagree with given subjective experiences.

Spirituality has several roles across life stages that may prove to have a crucial impact during childhood, adolescent and adult development across contexts. Similarly, spiritual growth depends on a background rooted in traditions, beliefs, customs, religious, societal and personal experiences. For children, the knowledge of spirituality emerges out of their ability to explore with joy and wonder. Children have a unique ability to explore and interact with their environment. Thus, spirituality allows an appreciation of the universe that allows a seamless connection with the people and their situations.

Researchers or practitioners who see the spirituality emerging attempt to put one's experiences in a conceptual framework. Thus, in order to do so there needs to be an understanding of spirituality in the context of the individual, whether that includes a religious or

non-religious definition. The process of developing this experience of transcendence involves the human capacity to recognize the self as being part of something sacred. Overall human development is marked by a need to search for interconnectedness and purpose. Spirituality is embedded in several dimensions of the same thought process as life is a myriad of positive and negative experiences. Spirituality for many is a way to seek comfort and peace in a period of stress and can help one navigate through uncertainty and conflict. Thus, spirituality it is not a construct that should be studied under regular scientific practices, but instead should be considered as an unbounded concept of human experience that involves profoundly personal and subjective experiences.

### **Further Reading**

Beauregard, M., O'Leary, D. (2009). *The spiritual brain*. New York: Harper Collins.

Miller, W. R., & Thoresen, C. E. (2003). Spirituality, religion, and health: An emerging research field. *American psychologist*, 58(1), 24.

Scott, D. G. (2009). The role of spirituality in human development and identity: An introduction. *International handbook of education for spirituality, care, and wellbeing*, 3, 269-274.