

‘HEALING FROM WITHIN: A Guide for Assessing the Religious and Spiritual Aspects of People’s Lives’

Dr Larry Culliford and Rev Dr Stuart Johnson

A reliable way to broach the subjects of religion and spirituality is simply to ask, ‘What sustains and keeps you going in difficult times?’ A person’s answer to this enquiry usually indicates his or her main spiritual concerns and pursuits.

Although several clinically tested screening and research instruments are available, the leaflet published here, *‘Healing from Within: a guide for assessing the religious and spiritual aspects of people’s lives’*, is meant to be particularly user-friendly, and suggests sensitive ways of exploring this vital issue more deeply. First published in 2001, it is currently available to staff, patients and carers in hospital and community settings throughout South Downs Health NHS Trust’s adult mental health services (South Downs Health NHS Trust Mill View Hospital, Hove, BN3 7HZ)

It has also been distributed elsewhere, and is widely accepted as useful, non-denominational and non-threatening. The leaflet is also referred to in a forthcoming Royal College publication ¹ (also available on this website), which explains something of the rationale behind it. For this reason, this electronic version is being made more widely available. Please copy and use it freely, as you wish. The authors welcome appropriate feedback.

¹ Culliford, L *Healing from Within: Spirituality and Mental Health* in McClure, M (ed). Partners in Care Resource Pack. London, Gaskell. Sep 2005.

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Introduction

Here is a useful definition of spirituality:

“A quality that goes beyond religious affiliation, that strives for inspiration, reverence, awe, meaning and purpose even in those who do not believe in God. The spiritual dimension tries to be in harmony with the universe, strives for answers about the infinite, and comes especially into focus at times of emotional stress, physical (and mental) illness, loss, bereavement and death”.

Murray & Zentner (1989):

Nursing Concepts for Health Promotion

Research and experience show that people have religious and spiritual resources to draw on when needed. Here are some questions which may be helpful in opening up this area. A gentle, unhurried approach works best. We offer five headings:

Setting the Scene

What do you think life is all about? Is there anything that gives you a particular sense of meaning or purpose.

The Past

Emotional stress usually involves some kind of loss, or the threat of loss. Have you suffered any major losses or bereavements? How did they affect you? How did you cope? What helped you to survive?

Is it possible that you gained something from experiencing such a loss? Would you say you were emotionally stronger or more resilient now?

The Present

Do you have a feeling of belonging and being valued here? Do you feel safe? Are there enough opportunities for meaningful activity? Are you treated with respect and dignity? Are you being listened to as you would wish?

Thinking about what is happening to you now, how would you describe it? Would you say you were having symptoms of mental illness of some kind? Would you prefer another explanation? Would it help to talk, to try and make some sense or meaning out of your life and what's going on? Could there be a spiritual aspect to your problem or your current needs?

Would it help if a room in the hospital was set aside as a quiet place to pray or worship? Would it help you to speak to a chaplain, or someone from your own faith community? Please feel free to say more about your religious background.

The Future

How do you consider the immediate future? What about the longer term? Do you sometimes find yourself thinking about death and dying? Or about the possibility of an afterlife? Would you like to say a bit more about this?

What are your main fears regarding the future? Do you have any lingering guilt, or feel the need for forgiveness? What, if anything, gives you hope? Is there anything else you would like to say, or ask?

Remedies

What kind of support do you think would help now? What do you think would be helpful specifically in terms of religious and/or spiritual energy?

Who do you think could best offer any support that you may require, for instance, health professionals, members of your family, or members of your religious community? How will you go about asking for the help you need? What can you do to help yourself?