

INITIAL ENGAGEMENT OF SPIRITUAL ISSUES

Much as we wish, not one of us can bring back yesterday or shape tomorrow. Only today is ours, and it will not be ours for long, and once it is gone it will never in all time be ours again.

(Buechner, 1969)

[W]e cannot escape our own beliefs and value systems. To truly hear someone, it is necessary to take the stance of “not knowing,” without losing sight of the goals of the work. This means jointly creating a view of the problem with the client, whose own understanding of it is key to its resolution.

(Gotterer, 2001)

Based on the core competencies required by the social work accreditation agency, social work programs are required to prepare students to use a practice approach that has four components of a dynamic and interactive process beginning with engagement (CSWE, 2015). The other components are assessment, intervention, and evaluation. The next six chapters look closely at how a spiritually sensitive social work approach implements these four components. This chapter explores the first phase, engaging clients.

A client’s spirituality is sometimes evident especially in the initial contact with a social worker. This is particularly the case when it is a religious expression. It can take a verbal form such as mentioning a church or synagogue affiliation or a non-verbal form such as wearing a religious head covering. It can be revealed by clients explicitly, as in a casual comment such as “I meditate” or implicitly by the client informing you they are not available on Wednesday nights because of an important commitment.

Possible scenario—an elder female client

Client: “Prayers are so important to me in getting through my day. Are you allowed to pray with me in this session?”

Question for reader: How would you feel about this question? What could you say that would be engaging the client to share the meaning and importance of prayer to her?

Bringing Spirituality into Initial Discussions

The initial component is referred to as engagement or engaging the client. This is a time of exploration, negotiation and relationship building (Canda & Furman, 2010; Cunningham, 2012). We are exploring what the client needs and negotiating how we can help. From these explorations, we can begin to determine if and how the agency can help. Often this involves the worker not only asking the clients questions about what they need but also communicating, in a variety of important ways, how the agency can help them. One of the things that a spiritually sensitive social worker could do during engagement is communicate, in a neutral way, that the worker is open to discussing spiritual or religious concerns if they are pertinent to what is needed. This communication can most easily be mentioned in response to spiritual cues offered by the client.

Clients may share spiritual cues in the initial interview to communicate that they have a spiritual or religious background or a spiritual issue to bring up. If such a cue is ignored, it may not be brought up again in later sessions. Therefore, a worker

Some Examples of Spiritual Cues to Consider from Clients

1. Verbal expressions—e.g. “I don’t know what I would do without the Lord.”
2. Religious symbols—e.g. wearing a cross around her neck or a head covering.
3. Seeking help with changes in her life.
4. Wanting to experience inner peace after the loss of a special friend.
5. Mentioning social supports—e.g. “I attend a support group in my neighborhood.”
6. Having difficulty facing a recent diagnosis of a terminal disease.
7. Client’s schedule—e.g. “I cannot meet on Fridays.” (He attends prayer service at his mosque.)
8. Indirect non-verbal expressions: When asked about spirituality, she smiles as if she is very familiar with this concept.
9. Questions about the agency or service provisions: “Do I have to share my situation in the group? What kinds of things am I expected to share?”
10. Awareness that the client is struggling with guilt about something they recently did.

needs to recognize when a spiritual cue is expressed or indirectly manifested by recognizing the value of this spiritual cue to a client and possibly expressing an explicit openness to bringing it into the conversation. In addition, the worker may want to explore further what this cue may mean to the client. A welcoming ear to hear more rather than silence or indifference may be important. An example of such an encounter with a homeless person carrying a Bible illustrates this in the box below.

Spiritual cues often may be difficult to understand in the form that they are presented and could be viewed as more negative than positive. An example of this came up in a Spirituality and Social Work course when the concept of spiritual cues was first introduced. Several of the students mentioned spiritual cues of their clients that they viewed as “crutches”; they also viewed them as excuses by clients for not doing anything about their situations. An example involved a client saying “Jesus, take the wheel.” This comment seemed potentially troubling, possibly because the student did not know how to respond. “Jesus, take the wheel” may be a client’s way of saying they are feeling overwhelmed by their circumstances and have to depend upon Jesus to help them. As a response, one way to keep the conversation going could be to say, “You seem to depend upon Jesus to help you in difficult times. Do you want to share more about how Jesus helps you?”

As an exercise, consider next how you might respond to another comment brought up by this student group. How would you respond to the comment of the client with ALS disease on p. 158?

If the client does not share any spiritual cues in this initial contact, it may or may not be appropriate for the worker to initiate a brief comment inviting the client to share any spiritual issues if they are helpful. A possible comment by a worker at the appropriate time could be something like, “Spirituality is something that is important to some people coming to our agency. If it is important to you, I want to encourage you to share your spiritual background or any spiritual concerns that may be relevant to the help that you are seeking (e.g. housing, job, a relationship issue). If

Initial contact of a client seeking help from a faith-based homeless clearing house

A homeless man openly carries his Bible into the interview with the intake worker. He refers to his Bible as his only important possession.

Worker: I see that the Bible seems to be really important to you.

Client: Yes I use it all the time.

Worker: Would you like to share how it helps you? I am interested in hearing about it.

Client: I read special verses in it when I am having problems.

Worker: Feel free to bring your Bible into our discussions whenever you think it can help us in our efforts to find you housing.

spirituality is not important for you in our discussion, just ignore my comment as it will not be relevant to you.” This statement might lead the client to share something spiritual or religious; it may also open up a discussion about what spirituality means to the client. Or it may be something that the client remembers and brings up later. If a client asks what spirituality means to the worker, it would be important to point out that every human being has a spiritual aspect or dimension; it can be religious or it may not be. A simple definition of spirituality could be added by the worker since the term takes on different meanings to different people.

Forging a Spiritually Sensitive Relationship

Little is likely to happen when clients share their spiritual issues unless they are expressed in the context of a nurturing professional relationship being developed during the engagement. Relationship building is important to all social work relationships and it has a special role to play for a spiritually sensitive worker. When we meet with a client, we are expected to view them in a holistic way as a biological, psychological, social, mental, cultural, and spiritual being. As a spiritually sensitive worker, in particular, we honor our client as a spiritual being. Honoring a person spiritually can be like honoring the still small voice within them that can guide them and inform them about what is right for them to do. So what is involved in a nurturing professional relationship? It involves attending to empathy, being open to intuition, identifying spiritual strengths of clients, and fostering self-determination, among other things.

Exercise

A student was assigned a client who has ALS disease (also referred to as Lou Gehrig’s Disease, a progressive neurodegenerative disease). At one point in the interview, this client said, “God brought me to this [problematic] physical condition.”

In response, explore how you might supportively respond to this client. As part of your response you may want to consider helping the client explore more positive ways that his God might view him and his disease.

Exercise

If the client does not share any spiritual cues in the initial contact, what might be the down side of the worker making an introductory comment as suggested above? How might this comment be detrimental to the worker/client relationship?

Empathy

Empathy is about getting into the shoes of a client and trying to feel what they are feeling. Empathy is important during the entire helping process but it is especially important in the beginning phase of engagement (Rogers, 1951; Shulman, 2011). We recognize that every human being is very complex and often initially hesitant to share very much of who they are; thus they often openly reveal only a very small part of themselves and it could be a superficial side. Their strengths, for example, may be initially difficult to find or easily overlooked. Or they may be overshadowed by current problems that are looming before them.

Transcendence, a concept described earlier in the book, is important to consider here. Spiritually sensitive social workers are expected to transcend their own being to be where the client is (Rogers, 1977). We make every effort to be totally present with this person, undistracted by our own internal chatter or personal insecurities. Indeed, we strive to be in the present. “I am only here with my client who needs my help” is a mantra that we can recite to ourselves. We are trying to listen and understand with what a Hindu person might refer to as the third eye, holding back on talking, and mostly listening at a deeper level.

Hodge (2004) offers a few principles that expand upon the importance of empathy for the spirituality of a client. First, it is important to respect a client’s spiritual autonomy. This includes refraining from discussing spirituality if the client chooses not to discuss it. Another is to use language drawn from the client’s worldview, for example, shifting to Allah rather than God, or synagogue instead of church when these terms are relevant to clients. Another principle is to demonstrate interest and curiosity in a client’s spirituality along with encouraging the client to elaborate on their experiences with it when appropriate (Patterson, Hayworth, Turner, & Raskin, 2000). Also it is important to be sensitive to the biases and misunderstandings that clients from some religious groups may experience from social agencies and other groups. Some examples of such groups are the Jehovah’s Witnesses, Evangelical Christians, Mormons, and Muslims. Finally, Hodge points out that some social workers who may have rejected their childhood religious affiliation may be inclined to share this experience with clients if they feel similarly; Hodge (2003) cautions that we need to be careful not to work through our own unresolved issues with a client who may be in a similar place.

Intuition

As we build empathy in our relationship with a client, we are also anticipating our intuitive side to emerge. Luoma (1998) defines intuition as an act or process of coming to direct knowledge without reasoning. It involves an inner voice, or knowing without logical thought and without actually knowing how we know. Instead of “thinking” about the person we engage, we are feeling something with or about

them. Luoma also points out that intuition is manifested not as something that can be turned on or off; it just happens without explanation. Intuition often is evident before thought processes even become evident, or it could emerge as conversations with clients are evolving. Intuition is something that some people have an easier time experiencing than others. Yet, it is something that most people can experience if they are comfortable enough to give attention to it. Many people may admit that they sometimes experience a deeper sense of something or an insight that they cannot explain in terms of its source; and this message could be very profound or useful in helping a client (Luoma, 1998). Muller (2010) adds to the meaning of intuition suggesting that humans have an intimate capacity to discern what is true. It is an inner compass, a visceral knowing, that indicates what is right to do or to become. Besides intuition, he suggests it could have other names such as our spirit, our spark of divinity, a still small voice inside, or our inner light.

We emphasize that intuition is one of several tools at our disposal in the helping relationship. We intuit what is going on with our client beyond what might be expressed. While our intuitive thoughts are but one source of evidence that often needs confirmation from other sources, they can be important as we explore what the client needs and may be expressing. These intuitive thoughts are also, by virtue of their nature, tentative and important to explore in the form of questioning rather than accepting them as absolute truths. For example, a worker may sense that a client, in silence, is hesitating to share something very important but private. A worker's possible response could be, "Are you possibly wanting to share something difficult to express, or something that you may not yet trust me enough to share?"

Facilitating an Openness to Being Intuitive—An Exercise

- Find another person to work with on this exercise.
- Close your eyes for a few moments and get quiet and centered inside.
- Next, face the other person. Close your eyes for a moment. Quiet yourself inside. If there are distracting thoughts, just become aware of them and gently nudge them away. Use your mantra (a special word that calms you) if distractions come.
- For a few minutes, just simply look at the other person. Just look into their eyes in gratitude for who they are. Try to imagine that you are communicating with their soul—soul to soul.
- Afterward, share what happened with your partner for a few minutes.
- Finally share any ideas or reactions about what you experienced with the class. Were any thoughts or feelings related to intuition evident? If so, was it confirmed as accurate by the other person?

While this question is viewed as just one of many possibilities, the important point is that it is shared as a question that can be passed over if the client finds that it is not pertinent.

Spiritual Strengths

Client strengths are important to consider as we engage new clients in a relationship. To engage these aspects of a client, we need to become aware of them and their importance and use the exploratory process to identify them. Spiritual-related strengths could be an almost unlimited number of things and vary from one person to the next.

Social workers should become keenly aware of their clients' strengths and how to bring these strengths into the discussion with this client (Saleebey, 2013). Yet, we have a tendency to easily overlook or minimize the importance of our clients' strengths related to spirituality or religion (Banerjee & Canda, 2009). What are your spiritual strengths? Are they easy for you to identify? Compare your strengths with a colleague's and determine how they are similar and different.

Examples of Possible Spiritual Strengths

- an affiliation with a spiritual or religious organization;
- active participation in such an organization;
- having a spiritual discipline such as prayer, meditation, chanting;
- awareness of one's own spirituality;
- can identify a personal spiritual characteristic, such as being intuitive;
- desire to know more about one's spirituality;
- actively seeking to develop oneself spiritually;
- having spiritual or religious friends;
- a capacity to be intuitive;
- comfort in talking about one's spiritual needs;
- feeling empowered by one's spirituality;
- having access to spiritual resources;
- using spiritual resources available within a group;
- comfort with the spirituality of other people of different religious backgrounds.

Exercise

When you think about spiritual strengths, what things come to mind for you?

Self-Determination

Client self-determination is a basic ethical standard that guides what happens in every relationship between a social worker and client (NASW, 2008). Clients tend to know what is best for themselves in most cases. While some may lack judgment about what they need, they always have an inherent right to decide what is in their best interests unless there is a danger to themselves, others, or to society. Self-determination includes a client's right to their own spiritual and religious beliefs. This is an especially critical assumption to make when we enter into a discussion of spiritual or religious matters with a client. One of the most important reasons why some social workers are hesitant or even opposed to helping clients with spiritual issues is the fear that they will bring their own religious positions into these discussions and attempt to proselytize or convert their clients. Some religions, including Christianity and Islam, include among their central tenets the importance of evangelism; people are to be recruited to become followers of Christ or Muhammad. So this temptation is very real for social workers affiliated with such religious groups (see Dialogue box on p. 163).

In chapter 2, the emphasis was on social workers knowing themselves as spiritual and religious or non-religious people. This is important so that they will have a heightened awareness of who they are spiritually and what their worldview is related to religion, spirituality, and related topics. The importance of knowing their spirituality is not for purposes of using these beliefs to influence clients. To the contrary, the point is to consciously avoid doing this. The purpose of knowing themselves is to appreciate their own spirituality so they can appreciate the potential importance of spirituality to their clients. Then we need to listen objectively to what our clients share about their spiritual beliefs and yearnings. We also need to intervene, verbally and non-verbally, in ways that support the healthy maturation of our clients' spiritual beliefs and practices.

Self-determination is an ethical principle that is central to a spiritually sensitive social worker. In this regard, mindfulness is a philosophical orientation that workers can adopt to help them remain focused on the client in the present, and not on their own personal issues. A mindful worker learns to be as fully present to who the client is and what the client brings and shares.

In most instances, social workers will not be working with clients of similar spiritual and religious backgrounds. In our increasingly diverse religious society, we must prepare ourselves for differences to exist as the rule, not the exception. The importance of spiritual sensitivity may be most challenging when working with

Dialogue between a social work field instructor and a new student

Student: When do I tell the client that I am a Christian?

Field Instructor: You don't. It's not about you; it's about your client!

client populations underrepresented among social workers and social work educators who teach them. Examples include Evangelical Christians (Furman, Perry, & Goldade, 1996; Sheridan, Wilmer, & Atcheson, 1994) and Muslims (Canda & Furman, 2010; Ibrahim & Dykeman, 2011). Ibrahim and Dykeman (2011) recommend, for example, that engaging Muslim clients not involve asking too many questions because it may be perceived more as interrogation than a helpful exploration. Instead, these authors suggest giving more emphasis to active listening, positive asset search, paraphrasing, clarifying, and moving slowly in efforts to take into account the central importance of their religion.

Any number of combinations of spiritual and religious affiliations are possible between a social worker and their clients, as the examples in Table 7.1 suggest. The list of possible combinations is almost limitless, as the below examples suggest. Further, one can see from any of these combinations that the workers will truly be challenged to maintain an objective ear and an open heart in listening to a client share their problems within their own spiritual and cultural contexts. What are some of the reasons why some of these combinations may be difficult for you? How easily can you transcend your own spiritual background to be comfortably present with the background of your clients? What do you or can you sometimes do to succeed in keeping your spiritual beliefs and biases in check while working with a client of a different spiritual background?

Personal Obstacles to Deeper Exploration

Several obstacles are likely to interfere with our readiness to explore a client's deeper spiritual issues. These obstacles are important to consider during initial engagement when a relationship with a client is beginning to take form and the

Table 7.1 Examples of Spiritual and Religious Combinations between Social Workers and Clients

WORKER	CLIENT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mainline Protestant Christian • agnostic • New Age enthusiast • cultural (but not religious) Jew • Evangelical Christian • European-American Buddhist • non-practicing Catholic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Orthodox Jew • Evangelical Christian • practicing Catholic • Christian Fundamentalist • Hindu • Muslim • atheist

client is sizing up the worker with questions such as, “Can I work with this person?” and “How well can they understand me?”

Taboos as Obstacles

Some researchers (Rice & Dudley, 1997; Shulman, 2011) suggest that some of these obstacles can be thought of as taboos. One such taboo is that social workers have a tendency to consider the realm of their social work exploration and assistance to be essentially limited to psychosocial, cultural, and biological sciences. Concerns outside these areas, the reasoning goes, are assumed to be beyond social work’s expertise. Religion, for example, is thought of as a topic that social workers know little if anything about and we automatically think of it as something for another professional to address, such as a clergy person.

Social workers primarily focus on the psychosocial functioning of a client’s life, but that could mean addressing psychological issues at a deeper level that may touch on their spirituality as well as cultural issues entwined with it. We also stress the importance of being holistic—considering all factors that may be relevant to a case, including religious and spiritual ones (CSWE, 2015). For example, if clients are searching for more meaning in their lives and want to talk about joining a religious community such as a church, synagogue, or mosque, that could be a potential social support worth exploring with them.

A Latina teenage female client in the public schools offers another example. An MSW student presented a case involving this teenager in her MSW practice class. The teenager recently began seeking advice from the MSW student, her school social worker, because of difficulties she has been having with her parents. She was involved in heated arguments with her parents because she wanted to be taking birth control; she perceived this decision as being that of a responsible young adult. She had a boyfriend but stated she was not having sexual intercourse with him. However, because of her parents’ strong Catholic religious beliefs, among other issues, they were strongly opposed to this student’s decision and threatened to kick her out of the house or severely punish her for this decision. As the MSW class explored what this student’s next steps might be, a suggestion was made to explore the teenager’s religious beliefs as a Catholic and how they may play a role in her birth control decision and in her differences with her parents. For example the worker could ask several questions such as, “As a Catholic, how do you feel about birth control? Do you have different views than your parents based on your beliefs?”

Exercise

What do you think? If you were assigned this case, would this be a potential topic of relevance to you? Explain why or why not.

In the class discussion, some MSW students rather emphatically argued that social workers should not be discussing her Catholic beliefs in the public schools. The topic seemed to them to be a taboo in a public school.

Another taboo identified by Bein (2008) is similar to the first. Many social workers do not perceive themselves as experts in any area of spirituality or religion. They especially know little about someone's religion if it is different from their own. If a client brings up a religious issue such as personal prayer as a discipline or recites religious passages from the Torah or Quran, many social workers are likely to feel inadequate in responding, particularly if the client's religious practices are unfamiliar to them. They rationalize that they cannot comfortably carry on a meaningful conversation about what is essentially a religious practice of the client. Instead, the tendency is to explain that they know little or nothing about this topic, or they may simply listen and move to another subject as soon as respectfully possible because of their hesitations to continue it.

In these and other taboo areas, many social workers seem to forget that we do not have to be an expert on a topic to discuss it (Bein, 2008). You only need to be attentive to what the client is saying and interested in learning more about it to determine if it is relevant to why they are seeking help. Once a client shares a spiritual topic or concern of some sort, a discussion of that concern can naturally follow in which a worker can find out how and why this topic is important to the client.

Nevertheless, even if social workers want to engage the client's spirituality, they usually do not know what to do next. While many think that they have nothing to offer in this area and revert to silence or changing the subject, a worker using a spiritually sensitive approach would want to support the client's right to self-determination and respond as they would to any other pertinent topic. They could ask the client to elaborate on it.

A referral to a clergy person is often one possible way to help. A further discussion about this may lead the worker to believe that clergy are the experts and a referral is actually needed. Yet, if we do not initially assess what the religious issue is or whether it possibly relates to the other problems that the client is meeting with us about, how can we make a responsible referral? What would be the specific reasons we would be referring a client to a clergy person? We probably would not have enough pertinent information to know.

We are also not experts in several other areas. Take housing as an example. We are, in most cases, not experts in housing unless we are employed in a housing agency; yet, we initially explore these issues with clients to find out what kinds of help they may need and what agencies to consider for a referral. In addition, it may turn out that their housing concern is related to why they are seeing us. Help may be needed by a couple, for example, if they are in disagreement about which housing option to select and need help with making a decision.

So how far into a conversation on spirituality should we go if we are not sure the discussion is going to be directly relevant to our agency's function? This is

often an underlying question that needs careful consideration and professional judgment. Workers could make the mistake of delving too far into a topic that is not relevant to a particular client's problem or in contrast they could stop the discussion abruptly and overlook the importance of the topic to them. One fear that some social workers may have is that they will get so far into discussing spirituality that they will find themselves well beyond their capacity and expertise to help.

Barriers of Overly Zealous Workers and Clients

Instances are always possible of an overly zealous social worker pursuing spiritual issues with clients or overly zealous clients doing so with their social workers (Bein, 2008; Canda & Furman, 2010; Gardner, 2011). In either case, obstacles can easily emerge that can interfere with engaging a spiritual concern at a deeper level. Let's take the instance of overly zealous clients. Let's imagine an encounter between a social worker not affiliated with any religious group and a client who has newly joined a Pentecostal church and wants to enthusiastically share it with anyone who will listen. Possibly such a client may subconsciously wish to win the worker over to her beliefs as well.

The workers in these instances could be facing a personal barrier if they are not aware of their own biases against the client's religion or a bias against the client continually making reference to it. A worker may react by holding back and not engaging the client's religious comments because of their perceived intensity and passion. Or the worker may just listen and look for an opportunity to change the subject. Such a worker should be in touch with their biases and/or any internal resistance they may feel toward the client. In addition, they should prepare themselves to do what a spiritually sensitive worker may do. This could be a time to recognize and affirm the client's religious affiliation, share what seems to be a perceived spiritual strength of the client based on their religious comments, and begin to explore how these strong passions can be channeled into the helping process to effectively address the client's problem at hand.

The other possibility would be workers who are overly zealous about their religion meeting with clients who do not openly share any particular spiritual cues. For example, if a client does not mention any spiritual affiliations, the worker may comment that joining a spiritual group could be very important to one's life. Or the worker could keep probing with questions in search of the possibility that the client feels something similar to what the worker feels. In these cases the worker should become aware of the possibility and potential danger of sharing their religious beliefs or orientation in one way or another (Gardner, 2011). It is important for the worker to become aware of such religious biases and be prepared to do what a spiritually sensitive worker would do. If the client does not seem to mention any spiritual issues, the overly zealous worker should probably move on to explore other pertinent areas.

The Influence of the Agency

Another potential obstacle to discussing spiritual concerns with a client is the agency in which a social worker is employed (Bein, 2008; Svare, Hylton, & Albers, 2007). An important question to consider is what the agency's policy is about discussing spiritual and religious matters with clients. This is a good question to explore and get clarification on if there are any ambiguities. Often there is no explicit agency policy on discussing religious issues, and discussing spirituality may even be less evident in a policy because of the multitude of ways in which spirituality is defined. Further, when there is no policy, the views of different administrative and supervisory staff may be different from each other and often merely reflect their own personal views.

An example of ambiguous agency policy and procedures was evident in a community mental health facility that was used as a field practicum by MSW programs in a large populated area. An assessment instrument used by the social services department included the question, "Do you have any spiritual or religious supports?" To the surprise of a student who was placed there, she was explicitly instructed by an administrative person not to ask this question or any other questions about religion. No explanation was given for this contradictory message. This student had been prepared to conduct a spiritual assessment based on what she had learned in a Spirituality and Social Work class but she ended up remaining silent about it because of these instructions.

A related obstacle to an ambiguous agency position is a perception by employees that an employer does not want them to discuss spiritual issues with clients (Svare et al., 2007). This is not a position that has been confirmed explicitly by the agency or any administrative staff but it is simply something that is suspected. In this case these workers may have a tendency to be new and sufficiently hesitant about working with clients on these topics. This is more likely to occur in public or quasi-public agencies and large bureaucratic agencies in which policies and procedures of how to proceed are quite extensive, technical, and difficult to comprehend. Thus, the topic of spirituality is avoided and ambiguity remains about whether it can be discussed with clients.

This perceived obstacle is one that can be assertively explored and overcome by a social worker using a spiritually sensitive practice approach. Such a social worker can bring this concern to the administration of an agency for clarity about a policy. A highly desirable response could be that a spiritually supportive policy is not only discussed, but also developed and implemented if there was no prior policy. Such a policy should include a clear working definition of both spirituality and religion. In addition, an explanation can be given of how these two concepts can be relevant during assessment and intervention work with clients. An explanation is also needed about when these topics should not be brought up or discussed with clients. In the absence of a policy, a formal understanding could be provided indicating why

Exercise: Agency Clarity about Discussing Spirituality and Religion

Recognizing that discussing spirituality could be perceived as a taboo topic in some agencies, consider how you would obtain clarity about this issue in your agency. Ask colleagues and administrators if there is a policy or formal position about discussing spirituality or religion with clients. If so, how are these two concepts defined? Under what circumstances is spirituality allowed or encouraged? Are there safeguards that preclude a worker from bringing up their own spirituality and imposing it on clients? If there are safeguards, how are they explained? If none of these issues are clarified, ask whether it would be appropriate to set up such a policy or formal position.

and how spirituality may be an appropriate topic to discuss in client-worker conversations. This could be done in a staff meeting or during a training session.

Deeper Exploration in Engagement

How deeply or extensively should a practitioner delve into a spiritual concern with a client when it is explored? The answer to this question will vary based on the client, agency setting, and other factors. We may only need to explore a spiritual concern for a few minutes and then realize that it is not relevant to a case. Or we may find out in a brief conversation with a client that we need to make a referral to another agency to obtain help with this issue. In this case we will want to know the relevant spiritual and religious resources that are available and the eligibility requirements and admission procedures. Or another possibility is that we could open up a deeper conversation that is appropriate for the worker and client to continue. Of course there can be other possible options as well. Let's look at some of the ways that a spiritually sensitive worker can respond to a relevant spiritual concern at a deeper level of engagement.

First, we would acknowledge that this appears to be an important topic of the client and encourage them to continue to share. Expressing an interest in the client's concern and an openness to what the client wants to share is not to be underestimated; it expresses deeper empathy and conveys an openness to hear more about this topic. This is a good time for the worker to concentrate on an internal mindfulness exercise such as concentrating on the breath and gently nudging away internal chatter. Safe space needs to be created for clients to begin sharing their beliefs, views, and experiences without any sense of being rushed, interrupted, or judged. We follow the client's lead, helping them share, in a free-floating manner, what is in their minds and hearts. They need to listen to what they are sharing as well. This is important because what they share may seem new even to them as this may be a rare opportunity for them to share these personal spiritual concerns

with someone else. This sharing could be viewed as storytelling, which can be very therapeutic (Bein, 2008). The worker can draw on the techniques of the Person-Centered Approach involving active listening, probing for elaboration, and conveying a deep respect for the values that are apparent in what is being said; all to hear the deeper messages that are person-centered (Corey, 2011; Rogers, 1951).

Many different questions could be asked at this point in the discussion in order to move it forward. Some examples are:

- This seems to be important to you. Please tell me more if you wish.
- Can you give me an example of what you are saying?
- Can you share with me how this topic (e.g. meditation, religious passages, etc.) may help you with your problem?
- How can I help you? Does it help if we discuss this topic further?
- Is there anyone else who is available to help, possibly within your support network?

Engagement leads to assessment. Many of the topics and particular supports mentioned during initial engagement are naturally pursued further. What begins to unfold in engagement can be given more complete attention when the emphasis is on assessment. Thus a well-rounded, comprehensive, and holistic assessment brings together the exploration of different sets of concerns, those of the client and those related to the agency's overall purpose. It is suspected that in most cases, spiritual concerns and supports are likely to come up early in engagement when introductions are being made and a relationship between the worker and client is being explored around how they can work together.

A Sacred Way to Greet Our Clients

The Hindus greet each other with “Namaste,” which means in Sanskrit, “The divinity in me greets the divinity in you.” It is based on the Vedic principle (from the ancient Hindu scriptures called the Vedas) that the divine energy is everywhere and in all beings. This sacred Hindu custom suggests that we leave our ego at the door. Our ego is our psychological navigating system for getting us through our day. It brings judgment to what we do, distinguishes reality from fiction, discourages us from behaving in ways that lead to trouble, makes our decisions, and helps protect us from potential dangers. While all of these functions are essential to have to survive, spiritual authors suggest that there are times when we need to suspend these functions and just experience the present time as fully as we can. So “leaving our ego at the door” means letting go of all of our controls, removing our protective armor, and setting our defenses aside.

When we greet the divine in the other person, what do we mean? Martin Buber, the prominent Jewish theologian, proposed an “I–Thou” relationship that helps us to be fully with another person without pretenses, masks, or hidden motives

(Buber & Kaufmann, 1971). We enter this relationship to enhance the other person in some way and to truly share ourselves. In contrast, Buber refers to an “I–It” relationship as one in which we hold back and share with another in a guarded way and with personal advantages in mind. Buber points out that we tend to move in and out of these “I–Thou” moments.

Let’s consider more closely how the greeting “Namaste” and the concept of I–Thou can be relevant to the helping relationships. For example, we may be helping a homeless person, a troubled teenager, or a homebound elderly person. In any of these helping relationships, our ego can easily become an obstacle for us if we do not leave it at the door. When we assist others who may need our help, we can easily have distracting or even conflicting motives for helping them, such as wanting to feel good or to get some credit or recognition. Or we may feel a sense of our importance as the giver and inadvertently look down on the recipient. Our ego can also be an obstacle if we jump in too quickly; we may be offering answers to clients’ problems before we fully learn what they need or whether they even want our help.

According to Bein (2008), an American Buddhist social worker, Zen Buddhism offers a similar approach and helps clarify the meaning of this sacred Hindu custom of Namaste. Zen is a sect of Buddhism that teaches the helper to be “awake and intimate” with their clients and the helping process; we are to be authentic; have an open, compassionate heart; and accept our clients’ pain and fear, their successes and failures. We trust in the present moment and we focus on our breath to facilitate our calmness and mindfulness. Bein proposes that we maintain a “strong back” or a stable posture capable of holding the clients’ suffering and pain so that the clients can feel comfortable exploring their thoughts, feelings, circumstances, hardships, and stories. We also are to maintain a “soft front” or an open-hearted disposition toward our client.

Leaving our ego at the door and greeting our client with whom we meet with “Namaste,” is no easy task to take on. It takes lots of practice and lots of trial and error in attempting to behave differently than the usual ways we interact with others. But if it’s true that this divine energy is everywhere including in us and other people with whom we interact, what could be more fulfilling? In fact, this most profound way of greeting each other could become something that catches on and mutates out of control.

Conclusion

An important feature of the spiritually sensitive approach described in the book is that the initial engagement component of social work practice is likely a critical one. It is important for at least two reasons. First, it is often the first and possibly the last time that clients are likely to communicate cues that spiritual issues are important to them. Second, if this is so, it is a time to welcome clients to discuss these issues if they are pertinent to the helping process. Forging a spiritually

sensitive relationship is important during initial engagement and depends upon the social worker communicating empathy, being intuitive, recognizing and affirming spiritual strengths of clients, and encouraging client self-determination. These are all important aspects of setting the stage for helping a client. Obstacles to exploring spiritual issues are also discussed in the chapter. One obstacle is to view the spiritual or religious issues of the client as a taboo not to be discussed. A second obstacle could be either a social worker who is overly zealous in approaching this topic or an overly zealous client. Another obstacle could be the agency sponsor that has no explicit agency policy or position on discussing the clients' spiritual or religious issues; in this circumstance workers are left without clarity on how they are supposed to respond to these issues.

Discussion Questions and Exercises

1. Over time, many lively discussions have occurred among social work faculty, students, and practitioners across the country revolving around how to respond when clients bring up prayer. If a client asked you to pray with them, for example, what would you likely say? How can your response be supportive of the client's needs and at the same time authentic to your views on prayer in the helping process?
2. Review the table on religious combinations between the worker and client presented earlier in the chapter. Which religions of clients do you think you will find most challenging in your practice? Which ones do you think will be the easiest for you? What are some of the reasons why some combinations are difficult for you? How easily can you transcend your own background to be comfortably present with the spirituality of these clients? What do you think you will need to work on to be able to effectively do this?
3. The agency that you work for can be a valuable ally or an obstacle for you in discussing pertinent spiritual and/or religious issues with your clients. Explore whether your agency (or field placement agency) has a policy or any other guidelines on the relevance and importance of spirituality in its programs. If so, ask how they define spirituality and whether they differentiate it from religion. Under what circumstances is spirituality allowed or encouraged as a topic of discussion with clients? Also ask if there are any safeguards to prevent a worker from bringing up their own spirituality and imposing it on their clients? If there are safeguards, how are they explained? If none of these issues have been clarified, ask whether it would be appropriate to work on such a policy or at least arrive at a formal position on these issues.

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