

Integrating Spirituality into Counselling: Therapist's Views and Experiences

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Abstract

The role of spirituality in psychotherapy has received growing attention in the last two decades. The focus is on understanding the ways that spirituality relates to therapists, clients, and treatment methods. This paper explores the therapist's views and experience on spiritual ingredients in counselling, keeping in mind the Indian context and experience. The participants were mental health professionals from different backgrounds with 15 to 30 years of experience. It was a qualitative study and a semi structured interview schedule was used. In this study, thematic analysis was used for analysing the data. Themes and concepts were formulated for each interview transcribed and an analysis undertaken. The main themes that emerged were: the views and experiences of mental health professionals about the use of spiritual ingredients in counselling, role of spirituality in counselling, healing process and well-being. Therapists consider the approach of spirituality as a key ingredient in the whole phenomenon of therapeutic healing.

Introduction

Counselling is a process involving a special relationship between the person who asks for help with a psychological problem (the client or the patient) and the person who (the counsellor or a therapist) is trained to provide that help (C.H. Patterson, 1948). In other words Counselling is a helping relationship. The purpose of Counselling is to facilitate wise choices of the sort on which the person's later development depends (Tyler, 1969), the relationship is important because it constitutes the principle medium for eliciting and handling the significant feelings and ideas which are aimed

at changing a client's behaviour. The task of Counselling is to give the client an opportunity to explore, discover and clarify ways of living more satisfyingly and resourcefully (British association for Counselling, 1984).

One can trace the genesis of counselling to a spiritual experience between individuals with the sole intention of bringing positive change in people's life to improve their well-being, alleviate distress and maladjustment, resolve crises, and increase their ability to live better functioning lives. It is spiritual because the healing takes place in the therapeutic relation of a therapist and a client. Relationships between friends, marital partners, families, and business associates are difficult to manage and maintain over the course of time and many turn to outside help to obtain a perspective and to obtain the tools needed to manage the emotional upheavals that plague the life of every person. Spirituality refers to an individual's experience that provides a greater sense of inner peace, harmony, hopefulness, and compassion for others and oneself. The term 'spiritus' in Latin means 'the breath' that is most vital to life. It involves an individual's experience of and relationship with a fundamental, nonmaterial aspect of the universe that may be referred to in many ways-God, higher power, mystery whereby an individual finds meaning and a connectedness to something greater than oneself.

Spirituality is defined as a relationship with God, or whatever is held to be the Ultimate, that fosters a sense of meaning, purpose, and mission in life. In turn, this relationship produces fruit (such as altruism, love, or forgiveness) that has a discernible effect on an individual's relationship to self, nature, others, and the Ultimate (Carroll, 1997; Sermabeikian, 1994).

Since both counselling and spirituality focus on the same goal, which is the general well being of an individual, there is a greater need to understand the relationship between counselling and spirituality. Therefore, this article intends to explore the therapist's views and experiences on the use of spiritual ingredients in counselling.

Background

The importance of Spirituality in Counselling is highly recognized and talked about. Spirituality is increasingly being recognised as an important consideration in theory, practice and research in all areas of mental healthcare. We are moving towards the merger of scientific and spiritual cultures. According to Narendra Nath Wig (2009) an eminent Psychiatrist "The spiritual dimension is an essential and important aspect of health, particularly mental

health.”

Assessment of spirituality is an emerging area of interest for research among the mental health professionals, but most such researches that were conducted do not directly talk about spiritual ingredients in counselling and the therapist views and experiences. Shafranske and Malony (1996) uphold the view that psychologists have an ethical obligation to consider the religion and spiritual life of their clients just as they would consider their other cultural characteristics such as race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Mohan Das, (2008) decries that a ‘spiritual dimension’ which has received support from 80-90% of the population worldwide is largely left out by the mainstream mental health systems. However, he reiterates that therapists should not incorporate any such practices blindly without substantiating and validating them through intense scientific scrutiny.

Spiritual practices have been documented to improve physical functioning, self esteem, drug compliance, and longevity. Rowan John (2005) considers spirituality as so important that he thinks all counsellors should practice spirituality. He suggests that therapists should carefully explore their own attitudes towards spirituality and equip and inform themselves about spiritual issues. Spirituality gives meaning and direction to a person’s life and answers important dimensions of life such as the quest for meaning, purpose, self-transcending knowledge, meaningful relationships, love and commitment (Swinton & Pattison, 2001). Many positive psychologists (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Snyder & Lopez, 2002) have hypothesized that a deep understanding of ourselves and our lives is enhanced by our search for the sacred.

In addition to this William West (2005) has also said that it is not essential that the therapist is a theist but he must be able to incorporate and facilitate his client’s spiritual needs and beliefs. In his study he talks about four types of therapeutic relationship - working alliance, transference/counter transference, reparative person to person and transpersonal which all provide an embracing framework for any therapeutic work and can also include working with spirituality.

Thematic Analysis

The participants of the research maintained the view that a person undergoing a counselling session has to be dealt with from a holistic perspective that includes body, mind and spirit. Though all those who participated in the research emphasised the importance of these elements; their views on the essentiality of the same differed.

However, all the participants shared a common view that spirituality is an important element in the counselling process.

One of the participants shared the view that counselling is basically born out of spiritual experiences between individuals and this rapport between a therapist and the client reflects spiritual elements like trust, respect, hope and optimism. He felt that in spite of its importance, spirituality is not considered as an essential ingredient in the counselling process. Psychology for a long time has taken care of the mind as the cognitive process, the heart, as the affective process, and the body, as the behavioural process. The need to look at the soul as well with the realization that the world today has the greatest need of addressing this element in human beings and counselling needs to address every iota of the individual.

The findings also show that there is an actualising tendency in human beings which leads to the higher power or transcendental element. The proponents of the humanistic school like Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers stress on the point of self transcendence against the concept of secular counselling of self fulfilment. The basic premise here is that psychological well being is closely interconnected with spiritual well being. Participants in this study felt that therapists may not be equipped with the varied types of interventions involving spiritual elements because of the limitation in their training. This result also affirms that spirituality plays an important role in many aspects of mental health such as positive mental health, counselling, and psychotherapy. Hence the spiritual outlook of the therapist will influence the therapeutic process he / she adopts with the client.

A majority of the respondents felt that spirituality failed to play a role when the client was not inclined towards it. However, a therapist who practices spirituality can spontaneously influence the client. Once a therapist is trained particularly in the use of spirituality and the tools for transformation of individuals, it can equip the therapist to use spiritual elements even with people who do not recognize the spiritual side of their lives.

The spiritual Ingredients in Counselling

The research result indicated several positive elements involved in spirituality. For instance, the application of spirituality gives more meaning to life, it is highly subjective, it is one's perception about life, it is a supreme power, God is a feeling, it is prayer, it is chanting, it is meditation, and so on.

Faith, positive thinking, hope, prayer and optimism are identified by the participants as very important spiritual elements that help the therapeutic process. Yoga and meditation are part of spiritual activities in India, which are helpful to remove anxiety and bring balance of the mind.

The result reiterates the importance of spiritual elements in counselling in the Indian context. The cultural tradition of India is spiritual and has a significant influence of religion, religiosity, practice of different rituals and festivals. Ritual elements need to be kept in mind in counselling since the person is studied in conjunction with the environment of traditions and culture he/she lives in, which is religious.

Indian culture being a highly ritualistic one, participants reaffirmed the positive aspects of chanting, the Gayathri mantra, Sudarsana kriya (Art of Living), pranayama and meditation for clients who are inclined towards them. The participants also responded that they were not following any specific pattern when and where spiritual elements were used to facilitate the therapeutic process. A majority of the participants tend to introduce spiritual elements as and when required.

One of the participants opined that the therapeutic relationship is part of spirituality and uses spiritual ingredients all the time during the therapeutic process, but with varying intensity. Another participant preferred to introduce it in the second half, that is, at the interpretation part of accepting one's own difficulties after a proper counselling process and application of techniques is completed.

Research data also shows that therapists who believe in the use of spirituality used these elements from stage one to termination stage, though different elements are used in different situations. Spiritual ingredients like faith, forgiveness, hope, reconciliation, are highly effective in this process as they train the client. It is also noticed that if the therapist believes in spirituality, he will incorporate it unknowingly and unconsciously in almost all conflicting situations. The therapist also has to be aware of the basic issues in spirituality to practice, and to be able to apply it appropriately with clients.

Over indulgence in Spirituality and its Effects

An extreme dependence on prayer and rituals was not encouraged by therapists, who participated in this study. They believe that irrational beliefs can affect the clients in a negative manner.

Therefore an irrational belief system needs to be challenged and confronted. In order to help a client Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) is an effective technique.

The participants in general encouraged their clients to visit holy places, make offerings, and perform family rituals and prayers if this was part of their belief system.

Research data has demonstrated the positive outcome of faith healing and has shown that faith is a very effective element in the healing process of people with terminal illness. If one believes that God gave him life, sustains it and helps him through a process of healing when he is ill, it will have a positive effect on him.

Influence of Spiritual Elements in Counselling

In general, the use of spiritual elements in counselling leads to holistic improvement in the clients, though it happens differently for different people. For some people recognizing this spiritual element in their life has been greatly beneficial. They come to address spirituality in a new light. They have made sense of their faith and they have looked at spirituality not just as a back-up tool to rely on when things fail, but as something that generates certain level of energy that helps them to live their lives well.

Another participant shared his experience that, clients get insights from their own lives to improve holistically and in the spiritual domain. So they see a larger connection and get a better overview of their problem. The result also demonstrates that spiritual elements bring about total healing and the person enjoys inner freedom, inner joy and experiences a kind of peace within.

The results have also shown that, spiritual elements play a more important role at a later stage of prevention after addressing the immediate problem in terms of removing the ailment or to minimize the suffering, either physical or psychological pain. While focusing on prevention, the objective is to improve the coping skills and making him a better individual. This will bring about changes with reference to how the person will act and react in different situations when a problem comes up.

In this study the first objective was to explore the views and experiences of the participants about spirituality in Counselling and Psychotherapy. The participants revealed that spirituality gives more meaning to life, it being a highly subjective concept varies from person to person and it is a feeling which most people attribute as God or the Supreme force. Just like a child who flies a kite and is unaware of its height or its exact location but has a

sense of the thread; similarly in spirituality too one can think or sense somebody or visualize somebody and can pray to somebody. Spirituality is equivalent to the meaning that one gives to life.

Every person at some point or the other of his life is in search for the true meaning and purpose which automatically transforms into the search of something bigger than themselves. When confronted with a problem people tend to look beyond that problem which ultimately leads them towards spirituality.

Another view held by the research participants is that psychological well being is closely associated to spiritual well being. Personal well being and spiritual well being are intimately connected. It helps in improving the overall integration of the person concerned by making him aware of the spiritual elements of his own self.

Another respondent shared his experience stating that therapeutic process has an important role be it in psychotherapy or counselling. He also holds the view that empathy, gratitude, attitude and humour hold significant places in therapeutic processes. In addition to this, he says that we are a part of a bigger design, which we merge with once we move beyond ourselves, or in other words we touch the realm of spirituality and in doing so rituals are an effective tool. Therapists play a very crucial place in leading the people to this ultimate bigger design.

One of the therapist's shared the view that even though counselling is born out of spiritual experiences, the spiritual element has been missing in counselling for a very long period. He stated that spirituality is an absolutely important ingredient in counselling. Psychology has taken care of the mind as the cognitive process, of heart as the affective process; and of the body as the behavioural process. It even serves as a medium to address the needs of the soul which is one of the greatest needs of people today.

According to another participant one of the basic aspects of spirituality is a belief in God or some supernatural force. For some it is not necessary to believe in God to be spiritual, for them spirituality is realizing the absolute truth.

Another respondent said that he was convinced about the need to address spirituality of the clients and said that the therapist should be aware of himself and his or her spirituality, positive thinking, optimism and hope.

Another therapist was of the view that spirituality is completely dependent on the person's perception of life. Spirituality cannot

be imposed on anyone; it depends upon the comfort level of the person. According to him as long as somebody does things in a way that it does no harm to another, it can be named as spirituality, religiosity etc. Spirituality becomes an important element in counselling only if the client is inclined towards it. If a person does not believe in the existence of God or some supernatural being no one can impose that philosophy upon him. It is also shown that there is no common solution for similar problems.

Research participants responded that spirituality can be a tool for transformation of the individual. When that is required, they make use it. Spirituality can lead one to self awareness and understanding. When a client talks about spiritual elements, the therapist can bring in God, the transcendental and the faith element. Connectivity is another important element. It all depends on how we talk about the here and now, connecting with the environment, connecting with the people around and connecting with the higher power. Naturally it leads to a holistic perspective and harmony in life.

Participants also shared that too much of spirituality or extreme dependence can be dangerous. For example, vitamins are good for you, but too many vitamins can hurt your body. Spirituality, spiritual practice and rituals are beautiful because they touch our human self. However too much of that will have undesirable consequences.

The findings also show that the phenomenon of healing and forgiveness are unique experiences for the therapist. Spirituality creates energy that helps a person to live his life well. People who have suffered brokenness in their life, and are filled with anger and hatred and those who have suffered consequences of grief and emotions had benefited from the healing process of forgiveness and, then move to different levels of understanding about the spiritual level of forgiveness. For people who have suffered because of religion in terms of guilt, they would probably benefit from counselling and come to recognize that God is not the cause of their misery and their brokenness but experience a need to address this different level. In this process the old perspective of God as the one who judges and punishes is revised to a new perspective. Thus they come to terms with a God who is loving, caring, forgiving, accepting and so on. Indeed, it is the role of the therapist to facilitate this correct perspective.

To use spiritual elements in counselling a therapist should get in touch with his or her spirituality. However the client's need must be the priority. It is good to have a basic knowledge of different

religions, rituals and spiritualities. In addition to that, a therapist who believes in the higher power can practice it.

Data also reveals that on account of such spiritual interventions clients often acquire better insights and coping skills. The resultant improvements are found holistic and spiritual. Besides clients are enabled to see a larger connection and perspective and also get a better understanding of their problems.

The views and experiences of therapists show that the most important ingredient that a therapist looks at from the point of view of spirituality is the faith of the person- how the person has experienced the higher power or God, the divine intervention of God and the empowerment that he received from the higher power. It is also important that one integrates spirituality as part of intervention.

Another mental health professional responded that for every counselling session before entering the counselling room, he prays for himself and for the client. He also shared that it brings some kind of closeness with the client and with God. It is his experience that there are three in a session - God, himself and the client.

Participants also responded that irrational thinking, irrational practices and a false belief system are areas that they confront to correct their cognition. The outcome of these kinds of interventions is found more effective and beneficial to the client. Because it brings in total healing the person enjoys freedom, inner joy and experiences a kind of peace within.

Another participant revealed that he uses more than 50 to 60% of spiritual concepts while facilitating the session. He is of the view that yoga and meditation are very effective. To induce positive thinking, one can use the concept of God, belief in God and a belief in religion. A spiritual element can also help a client to have better coping skills and problem solving ability.

Respondents have also shared that they have experienced that prayer and meditation are highly effective and relaxing. The strength of prayer comes in terms of relaxing and helping a person to focus and concentrate. Further, rituals are an integral part of them.

Research data has also shown that visiting holy places and offering family rituals and prayers are also very effective in balancing life. Sometimes faith alone can have a healing effect. However, as a caution too much dependence on these elements can be dangerous.

As an outcome of using spirituality as part of intervention one of the participants responded that respect to other human beings have increased. He also responded that spirituality is part of life and he uses it from the beginning of the session to the termination stage. However, the intensity varies depending on the client. In addition to that, spirituality cannot be seen as a separate compartment. It depends on the world view of the therapist. Moreover, it is the personality of the therapist that imbibes the spirituality component.

Major Findings

Spirituality is an important ingredient in counselling, spirituality has been associated with humankind from time immemorial. The data has revealed that spiritual elements like God, supreme power, a bigger design, beyond, transcendental, higher power, love, peace, joy, hope, faith, religion, religiosity, belief, prayer, meditation, rituals, forgiveness, optimism, trust, respect, harmony, holistic, balance, therapeutic, calmness, and happiness are significant in the healing process and counselling intervention. The participants were in total agreement of the fact that a person at a session has to be looked at, in a holistic perspective that includes body, mind and spirit.

The data revealed that spiritual elements are an indispensable part of counselling, which focuses on special grounds depending upon the individual concerned, however the intensity of spirituality involved is not the same in all cases and varies according to the needs and requirements of clients.

While conducting interviews with the participants there was a unanimous agreement on the importance and involvement of spiritual ingredients in counselling. It was held by one of the participants that the crux of the relation between the therapist and the client is spiritual as it involves all the predominant elements of spirituality such as trust, hope, faith and respect.

The result also states that spirituality plays an important role in many aspects of mental health such as positive mental health, counselling, and psychotherapy. Hence the spiritual outlook of the therapist will influence the therapeutic process he adopts with the client.

The data reiterates that spirituality is positive. The most positive thing is expanding the consciousness of the individual. It helps the client in the context, to look for an achievable target. The findings also stress the importance of spiritual elements in

counselling in an Indian context. The cultural tradition of India is spiritual and has significant influence of religion, religiosity, practice of different rituals and festivals. Ritual elements need to be kept in mind in counselling since the person is studied in conjunction with the environment of traditions and the culture he lives in, which is religious.

It is also observed that after practicing spirituality there was a visible change noticed in the therapist as well which of course is interesting. The therapist experienced a sense of contentment, humour, fulfilment, all inclusiveness, creativity, and a non judgemental attitude.

The data also showed that a healthy religious belief system is helpful when a person is terminally ill, or has gone through a traumatic experience, death or bereavement, is in a depressed state or experiences helplessness and hopelessness. In such situations if a person believes strongly, genuinely and truly in God; that God is there to help me, he will develop a different perspective and outlook. Therefore, religious belief is an extra force to mental health to prevent many problems. However, blind belief and unhealthy rituals are dangerous. A false belief or pseudo belief, in order to please God will not serve the purpose. Converting the client to the therapist's point of view is not a healthy precedent.

The use of spiritual elements in counselling leads to holistic improvement in the client. It happens differently for different people. For some people recognizing this spiritual element in their life has been greatly beneficial. They come to address spirituality in a new light. They have made sense of their faith and they have looked at spirituality not just as a back-up tool to fall back on when things fail, but as something that generates a certain level of energy that will help them live their lives well.

Every person at some point of their life will search for the true meaning and purpose of life which automatically transforms into the search for something bigger than himself. When confronted with a problem people tend to look beyond that problem which ultimately leads them towards spirituality.

Data also shows that helping a person to get out of the guilt feeling and unforgiving tendency develops into a new and constructive perspective. Therefore, one needs to facilitate positive thinking and discourage negative thinking. Moreover, it facilitates the client to accept reality. It is also evident that a therapist's belief can play a greater role in a therapeutic relationship.

Participants were also of the impression that a healthy belief system can lead to meaning in life and purpose in life. An understanding of their religion and belief system can be helpful. Counselling must not bring the client to the therapist's point of view but help him deal with the situation.

Implications

The goal of application of spirituality in counselling is to help individuals and couples to achieve healthy, satisfying, and intimate relationships.

Clients who have had a transformative experience in therapy, without exception have felt cared about, respected, and deeply understood by their therapist who has got in touch with spiritual elements.

Supportive therapy will help one to regain a sense of safety, empower one to handle one's own life, establish a support system, and find a way to return to normalcy.

Forgiveness and compassion are important for a meaningful, happy life. Yet, it is much easier to understand the importance of forgiveness than to actually practice it.

It is time to integrate Spirituality and Psychotherapy when a client is faced with different life situations and difficulties like: mourning the loss of a loved one, trying to cope with a serious illness, having difficulty getting along with teenager, feeling exhausted from taking care of an elderly parent and confronting some other crisis or life transition.

At any time, we can face uncertainties and experiences that threaten our emotional and spiritual well-being. Caught off-guard by the numerous crises and transitions that accompany life, we may not know how to cope or where to turn for help. In this context a therapist who is trained with spirituality can be more effective.

Some people turn to psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers for help in coping with these crises and transitions. Others look for support and the opportunity to discuss these issues within a spiritual context. But can one find spiritual help and psychotherapy at the same time? Most religious leaders have little time or training to provide in-depth and extensive therapy. And most psychotherapists have little training or desire to discuss in-depth spiritual matters during sessions with clients. There is an emergency for counsellors and psychotherapists who are competent to cater to the needs of clients from different walks of

life, especially focusing on spiritual ingredients as part of their interventions.

Moreover crises and transitions are sometimes addressed in terms such as faith, meaning, purpose, and direction, as well as in psychotherapeutic terms. Therefore, training of a counsellor or a therapist can also include the fourth dimension spirit other than mind, body, behaviour.

As in any other theory, spiritual approaches can be incorporated in counselling education. It is indeed, the need of the hour that the training of a counsellor or a therapist should give due importance to spirituality. Moreover, in the clinical service spirituality can be an effective element.

Conclusion

The Spiritual journey of a client is nearly always a reflection of important themes in that person's life. It is time for therapists and their trainer's and supervisors to relate to the reality of their clients spiritual lives, and to look beyond any prejudices that they may have relating to religion and spirituality.

There are times when science cannot answer certain questions. Here comes the role of the therapist to use spirituality as an element for better processing. Trusting oneself is very important it is also important that we are able to connect with a higher power that can be God or Supreme Being.

It is beneficial for a therapist to be in touch with his/her own spiritual life. It will be an added advantage that the therapist knows which particular element of spirituality can or cannot work for a client to attain a particular objective aimed for a better outcome. Self awareness of the therapist is the most important element here. Fundamentalism, a rigid way of looking at religion and over emphasis on spirituality can be a hindrance in the process of counselling. Too much emphasis on prayer and the God element can also be a block. The Impact of rituals on daily life is another area that a therapist needs to be aware of to understand a client.

Spirituality is about the growth and meaning of relationships. Spirituality may be defined as the ability and the tendency present in human beings to find and construct a meaning about life and existence and also to move toward personal growth, relationships and relation with others.

Psychology has been hesitant to recognize other dimensions of healing, such as spirituality, seeking instead causal connections

for illness. The cause and effect theory alone should not become the priority while treating clients, but the clients' spirituality must be given due weightage seeking the fact that it is not just mind and body but the person in total who needs care and respect.

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