

Issues of Substance 2009 Conference

Facilitated *Pathways and Bridges to Change* Discussion Session

Session Report

Session Topic:

Spirituality and Recovery

Date:

Wednesday, November 18, 2009

Facilitator:

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Summary (brief abstract of session):

This session was an elective topic that was chosen by conference participants, and produced the highest number of registrants. Participants convened at seven tables. Based on the summary notes of the seven table facilitators and the concluding plenary dialogue where table feedback was shared, overview themes emerged including:

- A strong desire among participants to see spirituality included as an integral part of all national conferences on addictions in all its aspects
- A diverse reading of what 'spirituality' means, including traditional 12-Step and native spirituality concepts and practices but also extending well beyond those towards emerging notions of mindfulness, bioethical concerns about value-based behaviours and policies, and respect for the range of ways that humans beings are spirited and quest to find meaning and significance in their lives and in their understanding of nature and relatedness to the cosmological order
- A need to give expression to one's own questions and wisdom based on experience and reflection
- An openness to listening to the ways that others find meaning and creatively engage in the living challenge of finding personal purpose and shaping shared community
- A respect for the difficulty and struggle involved in the work of recovery and the valuable balancing and integrating role that spirituality can play in the project of intentional change at the individual, group and societal levels



1. Coming out of this conference, what are the key issues and concerns that have emerged for you?

Participants showed a strong consensus that the conference was valuable, yet what brought them together in this session was a shared need to discuss spirituality, including its modest standing in the conference. Why were 12 Step meetings set for early morning (7 AM) rather than at more opportune times that fit into the conference schedule? Why was other spiritually oriented knowledge exchange not clearly invited and articulated in the conference invitation and structure? At the same time, there was an optimistic belief that anticipated the successful inclusion of more spiritually oriented focus coming out the conference, and confidence that it would provide a strong building block for designing not only the next conference but also the learning agenda for helpers and the program development agenda for funders and leaders in the coming period. But to begin with, some basic questions need to be addressed:

- Is recovery central to what we do? Do we have consensus on what recovery is? How do we define spirituality?
- Going beyond spirituality's marginal standing in Halifax to build spiritual practices into the conference so that the learning challenge is framed not just intellectually, not just practically, but open to spiritual pathways of change, renewal and recovery
- The emerging contribution of neuroscience was enlightening
- Core competencies offer promise for shaping how we think about helping people towards recovery
- Growing dialogue about the importance of collaboration, which underlines need for holistic approaches to change and recovery that includes and makes use of spirituality
- Many culturally specific approaches don't fit the evidence-based model, yet spirituality is fundamental to most culture-oriented approaches to health, well-being and recovery
- Seeing illness as a loss of spirit, addiction as a process of demoralization at multiple levels, and recovery as reclaiming spirit in individuals, families, groups and communities
- Building the knowledge base for spirituality-based approaches that can be provided comfortably and competently by clinicians
- The opportunity (and need) to bridge Aboriginal cultural and spiritual practices with mainstream approaches so that both are enhanced by the interconnection
- Valuing that spirituality and recovery emerged as a strong interest among conference participants and that a forum such as this session would be constructed to advance that, which also gives rise to the challenge of how this can be built on in the future...



2. Pathways and Bridges to Change:

a. What big changes need to be made in the next 10 years?

The perception that spirituality is stigmatized and stereotyped was seen as a core issue in establishing spirituality as a potent and key vector to recovery and improved health. A primary focus must be to clarify and demystify spirituality and the holistic notions of recovery and well-being contained in thinking of health and illness in ways that include these perspectives. That said, the discussion revealed interest and confidence that spirituality could itself become the subject of science, and that the changes that comprehensive, person-centred helping approaches promise are measurable and should be measured. In that respect, the coming period could be a time of discovery and knowledge exchange regarding the inclusion of spirituality in the scope of addiction work at the individual, community and societal levels, as well as a time of articulating best and worst practical strategies and approaches to help people with addiction problems towards improved health and functioning. A practical illustration of this was the sensitivity of discussion participants to how and when spirituality becomes a component of addiction treatment—if exploring personal values and meaning should occur at the beginning and throughout the process of providing help and service. Specific points identified included:

- Wondering if current approaches to best practices create a space that welcomes spirituality. How can it be given a better fit in an evidence-based world view?
- Looking at the blending of science and spirituality, and studying the evidence base for spirituality in addictions treatment
- Finding the opportunity to offer leadership by integrating and incorporating spirituality in the curriculum of national and other conferences
- Creating opportunities through retreats, conferences, etc. for staff to explore spirituality, including learning skills that enable staff to become practitioners of mindfulness and incorporating those skills into working with others
- Finding ways to ensure that spirituality does not become reduced to religiosity and ensuring it is seen as something quite different from devotional and dogmatic systems of belief and practice
- Demystifying spirituality, and finding ways of overcoming stigma and barriers to a fuller embrace of spirituality in addictions work
- Seeing the potential value in placing spirituality up front and exploring it as a standard practice in engaging and assessing people, thereby using spirituality as a way of connecting with people



- Including the facilitation of spiritual exploration as a core competency; developing outcome monitoring regarding spirituality

b. What big steps need to be taken to produce the desired changes?

Participants' comments add up to a call for a poly-centric approach to what they see as a vital goal—the normalization of spirituality in the set of services and supports for people with problems related to addiction. This means workers bringing it to the table in their own workplaces, consumers and family members articulating what it means for them in practical ways, boards and policy developers committing to it as key to the value base of work, researchers showing evidence for better and worse practices, and experts in knowledge exchange providing support for skill uptake and sustaining practice. The concept of core competences is becoming broadly accepted as a way to develop and evaluate the addictions treatment workforce, and participants used that construct to make the case that “spiritual competency” should be part of the toolkit of each practitioner and part of the service package across addiction treatment settings. The challenge becomes how to explicate and operationalize what spiritual competencies might look like, but participants demonstrated confidence and willingness to put it to the test, with a call for spirituality to be made a legitimate subject of research investment and formal study using a wide set of qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods.

- Develop policy and practice tools that are client-centred, strength-based, and thereby more holistic, recovery-oriented and ‘spiriting’
- Seeing needs in terms of a hierarchy—basic physical safety and nurture (food & shelter) are important from a biological perspective, while from a psycho-spiritual perspective, feeling respected, welcomed, understood, and supported is key to evoking desire and commitment to change—so that humanizing the helping experience is optimized by a full bio-psycho-social-spiritual approach to change and well-being
- Understanding what ‘spiritual competency’ would look like in addictions treatment, and providing learning that helps practitioners demonstrate this competency
- Explicitly creating spirituality and recovery as areas for research focus and investment
- Clarifying current knowledge baseline (both evidence-based practice and practice-based evidence) about spirituality and what it means for addiction treatment policies and practices
- Supporting innovative practices (mindfulness, complementary therapies, for example) and evaluating their impact and efficacy in treatment and recovery



- Identifying and engaging with community resources that can bring spirituality into the treatment and recovery process
- Recognizing the interrelatedness of other areas of therapeutic focus (for example, building social and emotional competencies, providing resources that support health and well-being, from housing to opportunities for education and work) with spirituality, so that the framework for helping and service is truly 'wholistic'
- Using gradual, incremental steps to knowledge building that include stakeholders such as clients and family members in building a knowledge agenda focused on spirituality and recovery
- Establishing qualitative approaches as being of equal importance to quantitative methods (where funding rules are strongly biased)
- Drawing on promising experiences such as Hear Me Heal and narratives approaches
- Using rituals, ceremonies and practices such as healing circles to gently and compassionately confront issues and to create positive experiences of community and connection
- Using holistic framework to educate community about the health basis of addiction and the benefits of comprehensive, compassionate approaches to service and support
- Advocating for the value base of addiction work, which itself is a 'spiritual' foundation for best practices, innovation and evaluation

c. What changes can you make to move us further along the way to change?

Participants identified that much could be done to advance spirituality as a core component in recovery. They felt there were considerable assets that could be drawn upon in every community, from personal practices and shared initiatives in the workplace to peer support for people and families journeying in recovery. Innovations and new standards could be built, such as educating the community and service users about spirituality as a key recovery concept. Participants held the strong belief that spirituality is proven in our everyday practices and interactions, and they recognize that it takes practice to improve and grow in the domain of spirituality—be it individual, group or community. Finally, there was awareness that the real test is how qualities of spirituality inform the work of recovery—the reason addiction services exist in the first place.

- Bringing discussions such as those that emerged in this session to team meetings, with the aim of applying what we have learned
- Finding expert resources on these issues and pursuing our own knowledge through reading, dialogue, and study, including conversations with clients
- Providing psycho-educational sessions to clients and others concerned about spirituality



- Becoming more self-aware and self-confident about our own spirituality, in the context of a shared value of respect for difference
- Becoming models of aspects of spirituality, such as mindfulness, empathy, respect, compassion, gratitude, hopefulness, ethical behaviour
- Building library of spiritual resources for clients, community, and staff
- Creating a shared spirit of care and healing in your helping environment
- Returning to the value base of the work of helping, from the perspective of our professions and our agencies—their missions and goals
- Increasing opportunities for practice and shared experience with a spirituality focus, such as drumming, meditation, mindfulness, relaxation, silence, music, and structured physical exercise such as tai chi
- Drawing on existing strong traditions that are relevant to our clients' recovery goals, such as 12 Step, while being open to supporting choices and options that are most apt to fit the particular needs of an individual at a specific point in the journey of change and recovery
- Demystifying spirituality through tangible, everyday practices that people can observe, participate in, and take up for themselves
- Finding the ways it already happens in others, recognizing and celebrating it

