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# Families and Spirituality: Therapists as Facilitators

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*Family therapists often encounter issues of spirituality in working with families. Instead of avoiding them, therapists can use the spiritual and religious orientations of families as resources for growth. This article will describe how therapists can help families work through spiritual problems and maximize the benefits that spirituality brings to family functioning.*

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Historically, there seems to have been an attitude in the profession that religion and spirituality are separate entities from therapy. The notion that one's issues in counseling cannot be related to concerns over one's religious beliefs suggests the secular focus that has existed within the therapeutic community. However, there has been an interesting evolution of thought in the area of spirituality and religion in counseling that most recently stems from the focus on diversity—diversity as it relates to ethnicity, gender, race, culture, sexual orientation, and, aptly, religion and spirituality. Kelly (1995) found, in a survey of members of the American Counseling Association, that

64% of the respondents believe in a personal God while another 25% believe in a transcendent or spiritual dimension to reality. Approximately 70% expressed some degree of affiliation with organized religion, with almost 45% indicating that they were highly active or regularly participate in religion. (p. 37)

As is the case with counselors, the general population also has indicated an emphasis on spiritual and religious beliefs. Quoting again from Kelly (1995),

In a 1993 Gallup poll, 59% of those interviewed said that religion was very important to them, down from a high of 75% in 1952 but up from a low of 52% with the same view in 1978. (p. 34)

In a 1992 Gallup survey (as cited in Kelly, 1995) two thirds of respondents indicated that if faced with a serious problem,

they would seek the help of a counselor who held spiritual beliefs and values, and 81% preferred to have their own values and beliefs integrated into the process.

One caution offered by Kelly (1995) is that there appears to be a gap between knowledge and behavior in the reporting of spirituality in that people's professions of faith appear to be greater than their actual practice. In fact, we could conclude that it is the incongruence between people's belief systems and their behavior that often brings them to counselor offices. Counselors would be well advised to explore not only the stated beliefs but also how the clients practice their faith.

There have been several definitions of religion and spirituality presented in the literature. For the sake of this article we have decided to quote Kelly (1995), not to define, but to contrast the terms. He indicates that

a typical distinction between religion and spirituality is found in a demarcation between spirituality as a personal affirmation of a transcendent connectedness in the universe and religion as the creedal, institutional, and ritual expression of spirituality that is associated with world religions and denominations. (p. 4)

Whether we reference religion and/or spirituality, we are always reflecting people's belief systems or faiths.

Although the literature and research would suggest that we as human beings are more alike than different, we have discovered that those differences, as small as they may be, are often the focus of our concerns. Indeed, those slight differences very well may be related to our spiritual beliefs, which are a powerful influence in our lives. Spirituality cannot be denied in that we are all spiritual in our own ways.

## FAMILIES AND SPIRITUALITY

The family unit is at the center of most religious systems. The great religions of the world, including Christianity,

Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism, all specifically join family life and religion. Spirituality is strongly connected with the mental health of individuals and the overall functioning of families. But spirituality and religion are not always benefits to families. In discriminating between healthy and unhealthy faith, Allport suggests the terms *intrinsic religiosity* and *extrinsic religiosity*, respectively (see Kelly, 1995, pp. 60-62). Intrinsic religiosity is religious belief that relates to all of life and is unprejudiced, tolerant, mature, integrative, unifying, and meaning-endowing. This is in contrast to extrinsic religiosity, which is compartmentalized, prejudiced, exclusionary, immature, utilitarian (used to gain comfort and status), and self-serving. Extrinsic religiosity is used as a defense against anxiety, whereas intrinsic religiosity makes for growth and wellness.

Intrinsic spirituality and religion can have a very positive effect on the overall mental health of individuals and families. Emotional healing and development are often significant byproducts of spiritual growth and maturity. A review of research completed in the last decade on the relationship between mental health and religion (Worthington, Kuru, McCullough, & Sandage, 1996) reveals that people with strong religious faith (especially intrinsic) report higher levels of life satisfaction, greater personal happiness, greater social support from friends, higher levels of empathy, lower levels of depressive symptoms, lower blood pressure, lower hostility, and less narcissistic exploitation of others. In addition, parents with high religious scores correlated with more favorable parenting practices.

A strong faith system helps families and individuals make meaning out of life. Spirituality is "an essential meaning-making activity whereby individuals grapple with the purpose and value of human life in general, and of their own lives in particular" (Cook & Kelly, 1998, p. 3). Common beliefs and values provide stability and coherence for families. Spirituality also provides a framework of moral principles that are necessary for all healthy social groups. Faith development can be an essential component to overall family wellness.

Families also can be affected adversely by spirituality and religion. Sloat (1990) suggests that many of the problems of dysfunctional religious families resemble alcoholic families. Adult children of dysfunctional religious families have similar characteristics to those of adult children of alcoholics. Family rules that frequently are found in both environments are "Don't talk," "Don't trust," "Don't feel," and "Don't want." Overly rigid rules and family structures can be detrimental to the development of family members. Spirituality and religion can be used to manipulate and control other family members. Instead of facilitating growth, spirituality can foster irrational guilt or confusion.

Many adults have had negative childhood experiences with spirituality and religion. Rigid rules and authoritarian

parenting styles justified by religious beliefs can be counterproductive to the emotional, relational, and spiritual growth of family members. Spirituality that is used to control instead of nurture can be destructive. In this way, spirituality becomes a manipulative tool to keep family members in line instead of a path to a higher plane of development.

## CASE STUDY

Winner of three academy awards in 1971, the musical *Fiddler on the Roof* (Joseph Stein) provides an interesting case for discussing families and spirituality. After commenting on the precariousness of a fiddler playing on a rooftop, Tevye, the patriarch of a poor Jewish family, states that "every one of us is a fiddler on the roof trying to scratch out a pleasant, simple tune without breaking his neck." In the village of Anatevka in Czarist Russia during a great period of change, keeping your balance comes through one word—tradition. Adherence to cultural and religion tradition helps people "know who they are and what God expects them to do." Faith and custom are the fabric of family and societal coherence. Religious rituals, such as wedding ceremonies and keeping the Sabbath, give life meaning in addition to marking significant life events.

Tevye and his wife, Golde, have five daughters with family roles and responsibilities defined by a rich heritage. Religious tradition dictated that fathers choose grooms for their daughters. The village matchmaker presents possible candidates for the father to consider. When he gives his permission, he then blesses the union. In this family, troubles begin when the three oldest daughters decide to break with tradition and find husbands on their own. During his many conversations with God and quoting frequently from the "Good Book," Tevye is struggling with his faith, his daughters' independence, and the dizzying changes that are taking place in the village. He reluctantly gives his permission to his two oldest daughters but refuses to bless the marriage of his third daughter, who wishes to marry a gentile. An outraged Tevye cannot accommodate his daughter's choice and therefore disowns her. She is no longer considered a part of the family.

Perhaps a counselor could have helped this family. A Jewish girl's marriage to a gentile was a serious religious and family problem. The counselor would have to be very sensitive and facilitate dialogue within the family. Perhaps there could have been a way for the daughter to have her wish and still maintain relations with the family. Creative problem solving possibly could have found a way for all parties to be reasonably satisfied while upholding religious integrity. If a compromise could not be reached, the counselor could help the family process the "loss" of the family member and the realignment of relationships. In both cases, the counselor must respect and integrate religious beliefs into the therapeutic process.

## DISCUSSION

Marriage and family counselors must be prepared to work with the spirituality of families. Kelly (1992) suggests the following three ways that counselors may interact with the spirituality of families: (a) becoming aware, (b) encouraging, and (c) reworking. First, counselors must become aware of how religious and spiritual values affect family life. "The family therapist is encouraged to adopt an open-minded sensitivity toward clients' religious background, beliefs, and practices" (Kelly, 1992, p. 198). Becoming aware of one's own beliefs and understanding how faith interacts with life and relationships is a prerequisite to understanding the faith of clients. If counselors are comfortable and value their own spirituality, they will be more likely to allow spirituality to be a part of the therapeutic process.

Second, family counselors can encourage the development of healthy, intrinsic faith. Helping families articulate their spiritual views and live consistently with them can be a great service to clients. During times of crisis and struggle, individuals and families often turn to their faith for strength. In one survey, 63% of respondents reported "that religion can answer all or most of today's problems" (Smith, 1992, p. 367). Spiritual resources, such as prayer, consultation with religious leaders, reading of religious literature, rituals, and so forth may be helpful for families who are struggling.

Religious communities often can be a source of strength and guidance for families that are going through difficult transitions and struggles. Because of the mobility of our culture, churches and synagogues can become the extended family for transplanted couples and their children. Many religious organizations offer resources such as parent training classes, marriage enrichment retreats, youth programs, support and 12-step groups, and so forth. Often, there are opportunities for community service in which the whole family can participate. Counselors may encourage families to take advantage of one of the many resources that faith communities have to offer.

Third, counselors can help rework families' spiritual orientations if they are having negative effects on any member or on the family as a whole. Kelly (1992) notes that when certain spiritual beliefs or practices

become damaging to the family, the therapist should not simply dismiss the religious element but rather help the family to explore differences between beneficial and detrimental expressions of religious belief. (p. 200)

Although this may seem intimidating at first, counselors are well prepared to facilitate problem-solving interventions, even with spiritual problems.

Counselors can help families examine their beliefs and how they may contribute to family problems. Because spirituality is a sacred topic, it must be approached with gentleness and respect. Counselors would be well advised to take a "one-down" position and adopt the posture of "learners" as

opposed to "teachers." Once the family understands how spirituality may be causing problems, they can discuss if there are any changes that can be made to meet the needs of family members without denying core spiritual beliefs and practice. When the problematic spiritual beliefs and/or practices have been reworked, counselors then can encourage more positive spiritual development.

## CONCLUSION

There appears to be a dearth of articles referencing religion and spirituality in marriage and family journals. In a chapter in *Religion and the Family: When God Helps*, edited by Laurel Arthur Burton (1992), Kelly presents the findings of a review of the family literature over the past several years and concludes that only 1.3% of 3,615 articles addressed religion. As important as religion and spirituality appear to be for both the general public and practicing counselors, there needs to be a greater emphasis on this topic in the literature. Overlooking or ignoring religion and spirituality in working with families diminishes the significance of this influential piece of family life. If therapists are not aware of the benefits as well as the harm that certain beliefs can bring, then they are functioning in a vacuum and may, in fact, be practicing unethically.

Kelly (1992) says that

family therapy research and practice can benefit by clearly distinguishing between religious faith that enhances personal and family life and distorted forms of religiosity that impede personal and social growth. (p. 197)

This article has presented only a brief observation of the importance of religion and spirituality in family therapy. You are encouraged to continue to evaluate your own religious and spiritual beliefs and to become sensitive to the beliefs of your client population.

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