

An Introduction to Spirit and Soul

What is spirituality? Is it the same as religion?

Spirituality is a broad concept with many definitions. Entire books have been written on the subject.^{1,2} Spirituality often involves the following:

- Determining what gives you a sense of meaning in life
- Connecting with something “bigger than us”

The writer and professor Frederic Craigie says it simply: spirituality is “what life is about.”³

Religion and spirituality are discussed together, but they are not the same. Religion is a system of beliefs and practices that is often defined by a specific community or social group. Examples of major religions include Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism.

Religion may include spirituality. But, spirituality doesn’t have to involve religion. People of the same religion may also experience spirituality in different ways.

Spirituality is our experience of how we relate to whatever is greater than ourselves and gives meaning to our lives. It is an experience unique to each person. At the same time, it also involves how we are connected to one another.

What does spirituality have to do with health?

Research has found that religion and spirituality may affect a range of health issues.^{4,5}

- **Physical health.** People who attend weekly services with a supportive community have longer life spans.⁶ Research has found that religious people smoke less, exercise more, eat more healthy foods, and engage in less risky sexual practices, on average.
- **Mental health.** Spirituality can mean building meaning and connection. Meaning and connection are central to mental health. Having them can build optimism and reduce depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress. Spirituality can help individuals manage problems like chronic pain, heart disease, diabetes, arthritis, and stroke. For example, having a spiritual practice (like praying or working with forgiveness) can help people tolerate pain and function better.⁷ Spirituality can give people more strength to handle stress, loss, and the effects of war.

What are some ways to have a spiritual connection?

Spirituality can take a variety of different forms. Consider the six examples of spiritual connection described below.³ Do any of them resonate with you? These are just some ways to think about how we experience spirituality. You may find you relate to more than one.

1. **Connection to a higher power.** This may involve a relationship with a higher power, such as God, as taught by a specific religion.
2. **Connection to humankind.** This may involve love, being kind and serving other people.
3. **Connection to nature.** This might include the wonder you feel when walking in the woods, watching a sunrise, or listening to the ocean waves.
4. **Connection to life experience.** This may include what we learn through our life events and stories.
5. **Connection to the cosmos.** This might include feeling the vastness of the universe, for example, while looking at a sky full of stars.
6. **Connection to mystery.** This may involve feeling peace with the fact that there is much that we simply cannot know. This may involve allowing space for what we do not fully understand.

How can I explore my spirituality and how it connects to my health?

To start with, consider the following questions. If you like, take a few minutes to write down your responses.

What gives me a sense of meaning and purpose?

What really matters to me in life?

What helps me when times are hard? What gives me hope or peace of mind?

How do my answers to the questions above connect to what I am dealing with in my health right now?

What does spirituality mean to me? Do I have any spiritual practices that are important in my life?

Did my experiences in the military affect my spiritual or religious beliefs? If so, how?

How do I want members of my care team to approach this topic of spirituality and/or religion? Do I prefer that they bring it up, or rather they did not?

How you answer the above questions can help guide you with creating your personal health plan. There may be aspects that evolve and change over time, or remain more constant. Thinking about what is most important to you and how that relates to your health is central to Whole Health.

What resources can I use to learn more about spirituality and health?

Check out the University of Wisconsin Integrative Health program handouts related to "[Spirit and Soul](#)" and "[Personal Development](#)."

Spirit and Soul handouts

- "Deciding What You Need for Spiritual Health"
- "How Do You Know That? Defining Your Truth"
- "Spiritual Anchors"

Personal Development handouts

- "The Healing Power of Hope and Optimism"
- "Create a Gratitude Practice"
- "Forgiveness"
- "What Matters Most? Exploring Your Values"
- "Laughter Heals"

If any of them stick out to you, consider sharing them with your care team.

Who on my care team can support me in exploring spirituality and health?

- **Chaplains.** Chaplains are part of the health care team. Chaplains receive extensive training to work with people from diverse backgrounds with a variety of spiritual needs. They can provide valuable support to you, as well as to friends and family.⁸
- **Doctors and nurses.** Communicating with your doctors and nurses about what is important to you can help them better understand you as a person. This can be helpful

as you work together to reach your health goals. This may include topics ranging from starting a new medication to planning for end-of-life care.

- **Mental health providers.** Spiritual health and mental health are closely joined. Talking openly about spirituality may help you learn ways to cope with stress and recover from mental illness.

For you to consider:

- Did anything surprise you as you worked your way through this handout? If so, what surprised you?
- Do you want to focus on spirit and soul further? If so, what will be your first step?
- Do you want to meet with someone about spirit and soul issues? If yes, do you want to meet with a peer or a professional? Whom will you contact?

The information in this handout is general. **Please work with your health care team to use the information in the best way possible to promote your health and happiness.**

For more information:

ORGANIZATION	RESOURCES	WEBSITE
University of Wisconsin Integrative Health Program	A variety of handouts on Spirit and Soul Personal Development	https://www.fammed.wisc.edu/integrative/resources/modules/

This handout was adapted for the University of Wisconsin Integrative Health Program from the original written for the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) by Jonathan Takahashi MD, MPH, Academic Integrative Health Fellow, Integrative Health Program, University of Wisconsin Department of Family Medicine and Community Health. It is based in part on two documents for clinicians written by J. Adam Rindfleisch, MPhil, MD, "Passport to Whole Health: A Personal Health Planning Reference Manual", and "Spirit and Soul: Educational Overview."

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