

CHAPTER

2A

Focus On: Cultivating
Your Spiritual Health

Overview

Spirituality is one of the six key dimensions of health. And, just as individuals exercise to improve physical fitness, specific activities can strengthen the spiritual dimension of health as well. In this chapter, students begin to understand what spirituality is and how it is similar to and different from religion. Students learn that spirituality has three interconnected facets, and that spirituality contributes to physical health, psychosocial health, and reduced stress. Students learn how to focus on their spiritual health by being in tune with themselves and their surroundings, training their bodies, expanding their minds, and reaching out to others.

Learning Outcomes

1. Define spirituality, describe its three facets, and distinguish between religion and spirituality.
2. Discuss the evidence that spiritual health has physical benefits, has psychological benefits, and lowers stress.
3. Describe three ways you can develop your spiritual health.

Lecture Outline

1. In the fall of 2014, of those surveyed, nearly 36 percent of incoming college freshman related themselves as above average in spirituality.
2. Spiritual health is one of the six key dimensions of health.

I. What Is Spirituality?

- A. At some point, we come to realize that acquiring new possessions and striving to keep up with others does not necessarily make us happy or improve our sense of self-worth.
- B. Spirituality is the personal quest for understanding answers to ultimate questions about life, about meaning, and about our relationship with the sacred or transcendent.
 1. Many who become interested in spirituality seek out mentorship from a spiritual teacher, or a person who is versed in the nature of spirituality and spiritual practice who can help people achieve a deeper recognition of what spirituality means to them.
- C. Spirituality means different things to different people; it is about learning to accept life on its own terms.
- D. Spirituality and Religion
 1. Spirituality may or may not lead to participation in organized religion.

2. Even though spirituality and religion share some common elements, they are not the same thing.
 - a. Table 1 identifies some characteristics you can use to distinguish religion and spirituality.

E. Spirituality Integrates Three Facets

1. Three facets of human experience constitute the core of human spirituality.
 - a. Relationships
 - b. Values: the fundamental rules by which we conduct our lives.
 - c. Meaningful purpose in life

F. Spiritual Intelligence

1. Our relationships, values, and sense of purpose together contribute to our overall spiritual intelligence (SI).
 - a. SI helps us use meanings, values, and purposes to live a richer and more creative life.
 - b. See the Assess Yourself box to find out your own spiritual IQ.

Key Terms: spirituality, spiritual teacher, values, conscious living, spiritual intelligence (SI)

Table and Figure:

Table 1

Characteristics Distinguishing Religion and Spirituality

Figure 1

Three Facets of Spirituality

II. The Benefits of Spiritual Health

A. Physical Benefits

1. Evidence supports a positive influence of spirituality on health.
 - a. Connection may be due to improved immune function, cardiovascular function, or a combination of physiological changes.
2. When we get sick, spiritual or religious well-being may help restore health and restore quality of life in the following ways:
 - a. By decreasing anxiety, depression, anger, discomfort, and feelings of isolation
 - b. By decreasing alcohol and drug abuse
 - c. By decreasing blood pressure and the risk of heart disease
 - d. By increasing a person's ability to cope with the effects of illness and with medical treatments
 - e. By increasing feelings of hope and optimism, freedom from regret, satisfaction with life, and inner peace

B. Psychological Benefits

1. Studies have found a benefit of spirituality in reducing levels of anxiety and depression.
 - a. It may also protect against academic burnout.
2. People who have found a spiritual community also benefit from increased social support among members.
3. Stress reduction is one probable mechanism among spiritually healthy people for improved health and longevity and for better coping with illness.

Key Term: spiritual community

III. Cultivating Your Spiritual Health

1. Enhancing your spiritual side takes just as much work as becoming physically fit.

A. Tune In to Yourself and Your Surroundings

1. Inner wisdom is perpetually available to us, but if we fail to tune our “receiver,” we will not be able to hear it for all the “static” of our daily lives.
2. Four ancient practices still used throughout the world can help you to tune into yourself and your surroundings.
 - a. Contemplation (studying): the practice of concentrating the mind on a spiritual or ethical question or subject, a view of the natural world, or an icon or other image representative of divinity
 - b. Mindfulness (observing): a practice of focused, nonjudgmental observation in which we are fully present in the moment.
 - c. Meditation (quieting): practice of cultivating a still or quiet mind.
 - d. Prayer (communing with the divine): communication with a transcendent Presence

B. Train Your Body

1. Traditional forms of yoga include controlled breathing and physical postures as well as meditation, chanting, and other practices believed to cultivate unity with the *Atman*, or spiritual life principle of the universe.
2. There are several types of yoga including, but not limited to, hatha yoga and ashtanga yoga. Each type of yoga has its own unique techniques and you can explore classes on campus, at the YMCA, or at a dedicated yoga center.
3. Eastern meditative movement practices like tai chi or qigong can also increase physical activity and mental focus.
4. Training your body to improve your spiritual health does not necessarily require you to engage in a formal practice.
 - a. Any exercise you do every day can contribute to your spiritual health.

C. Expand Your Mind

1. For many people, psychological counseling is a first step toward improving their spiritual health.
2. Another way to expand your mind is to study the sacred texts of the world’s major religions and spiritual practices.
3. Expand your awareness of different spiritual practices by exploring on-campus meditation or service-oriented groups, taking classes in spiritual or religious subjects, attending religious meetings or services, attending public lectures, or checking websites of various spiritual and religious organizations.

D. Reach Out to Others

1. Altruism, the giving of oneself out of genuine concern for others, is a key aspect of a spiritually healthy lifestyle.
 - a. Volunteering to help others, working for a nonprofit organization, and donating money or other resources to a food bank or other program are all ways to serve others and simultaneously enhance your own spiritual health.

Key Terms: contemplation, mindfulness, meditation, prayer, yoga, altruism

 **See It! Video:** Meditation Becoming More Popular Among Teens

Discussion Questions

1. What are the differences between spirituality and religion? Why is this distinction important?
2. What is environmental mindfulness? Do you think it is important for each individual to become environmentally mindful? Describe one change you could make to become more environmentally mindful.
3. What are the differences between the various forms of meditation, such as mantra meditation, breath meditation, color meditation, and candle meditation?
4. What evidence supports the statement that spirituality and religion are not the same thing?
5. What is the role of altruism in a spiritually healthy lifestyle?

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Do you consider yourself a spiritual person? A religious person? How can a person be both spiritual and religious? In what ways do spirituality and religion play out in your life?
2. Which of the three facets of spirituality—relationships, values, and purpose in life—have you explored in your life? What prompted you to explore this aspect of your spirituality?
3. Have you ever used contemplation, mindfulness, meditation, or prayer in a situation from your life that was stressful or emotionally difficult? How did it help you deal with the situation? What are the benefits of these techniques?
4. Which of the qualities of mindfulness illustrated in Figure 2 do you possess? What can you do to improve your qualities of mindfulness? Provide two strategies that you could use to improve qualities of mindfulness in your life.
5. Have you ever experienced a “helpers high” after volunteering? Why do you think altruism is a key component of spiritual health?

Student Activities

Individual

1. Practice mindfulness while completing an everyday task or activity. Record your feelings and observations in a journal.
2. Use the Internet to explore one of the types of meditation discussed in the chapter. Practice that type of meditation for two weeks to a month, and keep a journal about the way the meditation made you feel. Did you feel more relaxed? More peaceful? More focused? What were the tangible and intangible changes in your life?
3. Use the Internet to explore the many and varying yoga philosophies that are the foundation of the practices commonly offered in yoga studios and on campus. Describe how these spiritual philosophies contribute to yoga as a spiritual practice.

Community

1. What kind of spiritual and/or religious programs and/or services are offered on your campus? Do these campus services have any connections to similar services offered in the community? Have you ever taken advantage of these programs or services?
2. What types of yoga classes are available on your campus? Attend a yoga class to see if this form of spirituality is appropriate for you. Talk with the instructor and other class participants to find out the benefits they gain from yoga.
3. Find out what kind of spiritual retreat centers are offered in your community or in your area. What services—meditation, yoga, or other—are offered at the center? How do you register to attend the center?

Diverse Population/Nontraditional

1. Use the Internet to research aspects of spirituality in a different culture or country. How does that concept of spirituality compare to the concept in the United States?
2. Find books and sacred texts for a religion that interests you. Take the time to read these books and understand their approach to spiritual fulfillment.

Additional References

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For Further Information

Beliefnet

www.beliefnet.com

University of Maryland Medical Center

Spirituality

www.umm.edu/altmed/articles/spirituality-000360.htm

University of California at Riverside

Spiritual Wellness

http://wellness.ucr.edu/spiritual_wellness.html

UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center

<http://marc.ucla.edu>

Additional Media

Mindfulness, Stress Reduction and Healing, 1 hour and 14 minutes

A Google TechTalks presentation by Jon Kabat-Zinn, from the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=rSU8ftmmhmw

Yoga Meditation Exercises: Guided Meditation for Yoga Exercises, 3 minutes

An ExpertVillage video in which Jennifer Kostel leads the viewer through guided meditation.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=k_G4o0EaR58

Yoga Meditation Exercises: Using Mantras for Yoga Meditation, 2 minutes

An ExpertVillage video in which Jennifer Kostel teaches the viewer about mantras.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=JU2e5n1FeMU

Yoga Meditation Exercises: Yoga Breathing for Meditation, 2 minutes

An ExpertVillage video in which Jennifer Kostel leads the viewer through yoga breathing for meditation.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ljVqV5IDTo