



Navigating the Intersection of Spirituality and Mental Health in Adolescence: A Holistic Approach to Counseling

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Abstract

Adolescence is a unique and critical developmental stage characterised by identity formation, emotional transitions, and the search for meaning and purpose. During this period, many adolescents experience psychological and social challenges that may affect their mental health and overall well-being. This paper examines the intersection between spirituality and mental health in adolescence and highlights the relevance of spirituality as a supportive framework for counselling and emotional resilience. The paper explores how spirituality contributes to coping mechanisms, resilience building, meaning-making, social connectedness, and psychological stability among adolescents. It further discusses common mental health challenges affecting adolescents and the various biological, environmental, and social factors influencing mental well-being. Emphasis is placed on the integration of spirituality into psychotherapy and counselling practices through culturally sensitive and holistic approaches. The paper advocates for counseling interventions that incorporate spiritual beliefs, values, and practices while respecting the diversity of adolescents' backgrounds and experiences. It concludes that a holistic counseling approach that integrates spirituality and mental health can enhance adolescents' resilience, emotional healing, self-discovery, and overall psychological well-being in contemporary society and counsellors must incorporate these into their services.

Keywords: Adolescence, spirituality, mental health, holistic counseling, psychological well-being

1. Introduction

Adolescence is a pivotal stage of life marked by exploration, self-discovery, and the formation of identity. During this time, many young people grapple with existential questions and a search for meaning often intertwined with their mental health experiences. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines an adolescent as any person between ages 10 and 19. The adolescence in many societies is also equated with puberty and the cycle of physical changes which culminate in reproductive maturity. In some other societies the understanding of adolescence is broader and taken to encompass psychological, social, moral and physical aspects of maturation. Many a times, the adolescent period gives rise to such issues of emotional and or physical separation from parents. Although, this sense of separation is a necessary step in the establishment of personal values, the transition to self-sufficiency forces an array of adjustments upon many adolescents. In addition, most adolescents rarely have clear roles of their own in society, instead, they occupy an ambiguous period between childhood and adulthood. These issues most often define adolescence and the response to them partly determines the nature of an individual's adult years.

Spirituality is the search for meaning, purpose, and connection to something greater than oneself. While spirituality may include religion, it doesn't necessarily have to. Spirituality is an expression of the transcendent ways to fulfill human potential and is a synonym for constructs such as hope, meaning, wholeness, and harmony (Salicru, 2022). Understanding spirituality is crucial to appreciating its impact on mental health across cultures. Though often viewed through the lens of religious beliefs, it also encompasses a broader search for connection and purpose and it can play a crucial role in the developmental phase of the adolescent. Therefore, as counselors, understanding the intersection of spirituality and mental health in adolescents is essential for fostering holistic healing and personal growth. Thus, this chapter explores the nuanced relationship between spirituality and mental health during adolescence and proposes a holistic approach to counseling that integrates both dimensions.

Mental health refers to a person's emotional, psychological, and social well-being, encompassing how individuals think, feel, act, and interact with others, as well as how they handle stress, make decisions, and relate to the world around them. Mental health is significant at every stage of life, from childhood and adolescence through adulthood and aging. Adolescence is a crucial period for developing social and emotional habits important for mental well-being. These include adopting healthy sleep patterns;

Oladipo, S.E., King-Oladipo, C. P. and Oarhe-Adekola, O. E. (2025). Navigating the Intersection of Spirituality and Mental Health in Adolescence: A Holistic Approach to Counseling. *Journal of Specialised and Professional Education (JOSPED)*, SP: Nov, 2025, pp. 136-140.

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exercising regularly; developing coping, problem-solving, and interpersonal skills; and learning to manage emotions. Protective and supportive environments in the family, at school and in the wider community are important. Multiple factors affect mental health, for example, the more risk factors adolescents are exposed to, the greater the potential impact on their mental health. Factors that can contribute to stress during adolescence include exposure to adversity, pressure to conform with peers and exploration of identity. Media influence and gender norms can exacerbate the disparity between an adolescent's lived reality and their perceptions or aspirations for the future. Other important determinants include the quality of their home life and relationships with peers. Violence (especially sexual violence and bullying), harsh parenting and severe socioeconomic problems are recognised risks to mental health.

Some adolescents are at greater risk of mental health conditions due to their living conditions, stigma, discrimination or exclusion, or lack of access to quality support and services. These include adolescents living in humanitarian and fragile settings; adolescents with chronic illness, autism spectrum disorder, an intellectual disability or other neurological condition; pregnant adolescents, adolescent parents, or those in early or forced marriages; orphans; and adolescents from minority ethnic or sexual backgrounds or other discriminated groups.

2. Key Components of Mental Health

Some of the key components of mental are discussed in the following:

1. *Emotional Well-being*: This involves the ability to manage one's emotions, cope with life's challenges, and experience a range of feelings, including joy, sadness, anger, and anxiety. Emotional well-being is essential for resilience and maintaining a positive outlook.

2. *Psychological Well-being*: This encompasses cognitive processes, including thought patterns and attitudes, as well as self-perception. Positive psychological well-being involves a sound sense of self, the ability to form fulfilling relationships, and the capacity to experience life with a sense of purpose.

3. *Social Well-being*: This aspect relates to how individuals interact with others and are integrated into community structures. Maintaining healthy relationships, having access to social support, and engaging with the community all contribute to the overall mental health of an individual.

3. Importance of Mental Health

1. *Overall Health*: Mental health is integral to overall health; suffice to mention that mental and physical health are interconnected. As such, a poor mental health can lead to physical health issues, and vice versa.

2. *Quality of Life*: Good mental health enhances quality of life and contributes to fulfilling relationships, productivity, and the ability to cope with stress. People's quality of life affects how they perform in daily activities and engage with others.

3. *Resilience*: Individuals with good mental health tend to have better coping strategies when faced with adversity or life's challenges, thereby fostering resilience.

4. Mental Health Disorders:

Mental health can be disrupted by various conditions or disorders that affect daily functioning. Common mental health disorders include but not limited to:

1. *Anxiety Disorders*: This disorder is characterised by excessive fear or anxiety that affects daily functioning and or activities (e.g., Generalised Anxiety Disorder, Social Anxiety Disorder).

2. *Mood Disorders*: Conditions that primarily affect emotional state, including depression and bipolar disorder.

3. *Psychotic Disorders*: Such as schizophrenia, where individuals may experience distorted thinking, perceiving reality differently.

4. *Personality Disorders*: Enduring patterns of behaviour and inner experiences that significantly deviate from cultural expectations.

5. *Eating Disorders*: Such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa, which are characterised by extreme, unhealthy eating behaviours.

5. Factors Influencing Mental Health

Numerous factors can influence mental health, including:

1. *Biological Factors*: Genetics, brain chemistry, and neurobiology can contribute to vulnerabilities to mental health conditions. It is not impossible to inherit mental health problems or conditions that predispose one to mental health problems.

2. *Personal History*: Trauma, abuse, and life experiences shape mental health and resilience. Exposure to trauma, abuse and unpleasant life experiences can all impact negatively on one's mental health.

3. *Environmental Factors*: Socioeconomic status, family dynamics, social networks, and cultural influences impact mental health.

4. *Lifestyle Choices*: Diet, exercise, sleep, and substance use play crucial roles in mental health. People who are not careful with their eating habits, do not exercise, do not have enough of good sleep and or abuse substances are at higher risk of developing mental health issues.

5. *Stress and Coping*: The ability to manage stress and adapt to change significantly impacts mental well-being. The tendencies are high for anyone who cannot cope well with stress to develop mental health issues and vice versa.

6. Promoting Mental Health

Promoting mental health involves strategies that enhance well-being, such as:

1. *Self-Care*: involves a conscious engagement in activities that promote physical and emotional health, such as exercise, mindfulness, and hobbies.

2. *Building Resilience*: has to do with active development of coping skills by individuals to handle stress effectively and bounce back from challenges they may face at different points in time in their lives.

3. *Seeking Support*: Utilising social connections, therapy, or support groups to foster emotional support and professional guidance.

4. *Education and Awareness*: Increasing awareness about mental health issues to reduce stigma and promote understanding of mental health conditions.

7. The Role of Spirituality in Mental Health

Studies have shown that individuals with a strong sense of spiritual well-being tend to experience better mental health outcomes and greater overall well-being (Saad et al., 2022). Spiritual practices such as prayer, forgiveness, gratitude, and contemplation have been linked to biological and psychological changes that promote mental and emotional resilience. Additionally, spiritual beliefs and practices can provide a sense of calm in times of stress or adversity, offering a sense of meaning, purpose, and connection to something greater than oneself (Saad et al., 2022). Spirituality can also play a role in mental health through:

Coping Mechanisms: In times of adversity, individuals often turn to their spiritual beliefs as a source of comfort and resilience. Practices such as prayer, meditation, and rituals offer a structured way to manage stress and anxiety. Studies link spiritual well-being to lower depression rates and enhanced life satisfaction, mediated by self-control in some cultures.

Community Support: Many spiritual traditions emphasise communal ties, providing a support network that can be invaluable during challenging times. Participation in religious or spiritual communities facilitates a sense of belonging and social connection, essential for mental well-being. Spirituality facilitates social connection which in a way helps faith communities and spiritual groups combat loneliness and offers peer support and mentorship.

Meaning and Purpose: Spirituality often provides a framework for understanding life's purpose and finding meaning in both joyous and difficult experiences. A strong sense of purpose can contribute to a positive

outlook and greater emotional stability.

Spirituality also aids in constructing a coherent self-narrative, particularly during crises like grief or trauma.

8. Integrating Spirituality in Psychotherapy

Using a therapy to incorporate spirituality helps in tackling clients' entire requirements, including the emotional, psychological, and spiritual spheres. By integrating several spiritual beliefs, practices, and values into therapy sessions, therapists can create a more holistic approach to healing and growth. This approach recognises the interconnectedness of mind, body, and spirit and acknowledges the importance of addressing spiritual concerns in the therapeutic process.

Within the therapeutic context, spirituality can be used to explore clients' spiritual beliefs and values. Therapists can be responsible in facilitating conversation around spirituality by using a spiritual intake at the beginning of therapy which touches floating questions about a client's religious traditions and spirituality in childhood. For example, a therapist may ask their client during intake, "how did your family express spiritual beliefs and values? How much does that background inform how you look at things now? Do you want to incorporate spirituality and religion into clinical care as we try to achieve your goals?" (Abrams, 2023). Therapists should create a safe and nonjudgmental space for clients to discuss these religious and spiritual backgrounds, the role of spirituality in their lives, and any existential questions or struggles they may be experiencing.

Spiritual practices such as mindfulness meditation, guided imagery, or prayer can be incorporated by therapists in therapy sessions to help clients cultivate inner peace, resilience, and self-awareness. Clients could also be asked by the therapists to reflect on particular aspects of their religious or spiritual traditions that cultivate hope and resilience. For example, many members of religious communities find inspiration from historical religious figures that faced adversity and hardship throughout their lives. Therapists may also encourage clients to reconnect with a religious or spiritual community that has previously provided support (Abrams, 2023). These practices can serve as valuable tools for managing stress, anxiety, and depression and for promoting emotional healing and personal growth.

Counsellors and therapists must also consider their biases around religion and spirituality and approach the topic of spirituality with sensitivity, respect, and cultural humility. They must be mindful of clients' diverse spiritual beliefs and backgrounds, and must avoid attempting to impose their own beliefs onto clients, and ensuring that clients feel empowered to explore and express their spirituality in a way that feels authentic and meaningful to them (Abrams, 2023).

Spirituality and mental health are intertwined for many people because they consider it as providing the framework for understanding and navigating life's challenges. Therefore, acknowledging spirituality within the therapeutic setting can be helpful for people who find spirituality important in their lives and ultimately, recognising and acknowledging different spiritual and cultural practices in therapy can enhance the therapeutic relationship and facilitate a more inclusive approach to well-being.

9. Engaging with Existential Questions

1. *Identity Formation*: One of the most critical aspects of adolescence is the struggle to define one's identity. Spirituality provides adolescents with a vehicle to process questions like "Who am I?" and "What values do I hold?" Through spiritual exploration, they can identify personal beliefs, interests, and ideals, forming a cohesive sense of self that integrates both their individual and social identities.

2. *Purpose and Direction*: The search for purpose is particularly pronounced among adolescents. Spirituality offers a framework through which they can explore their passions, aspirations, and moral compass. Questions such as "What is my purpose?" often emerge as they confront decisions about their future, relationships, and contributions to society. Spirituality can help guide their choices and motivate them to pursue meaningful paths aligned with their values.

3. *Coping Mechanisms*: The existential dilemmas faced during adolescence can create significant emotional turmoil. Spirituality can serve as a resource for coping with life's uncertainties. When faced with challenges—such as grief, loss, or social issues—an exploration of spirituality can offer consolation, perspective, and resilience. The belief that there is a greater purpose or plan can provide comfort and encouragement during difficult times.

10. The Intersection of Spirituality and Mental Health

Research has increasingly highlighted the positive correlation between spirituality and mental health. Spirituality can provide adolescents with coping mechanisms, a sense of community, and a framework for understanding life's challenges. Key factors include:

1. *Resilience Building*: Spiritual beliefs often enhance resilience, enabling adolescents to confront stressors more effectively. They may find solace in the idea that their struggles are temporary or part of a larger plan.

2. *Sense of Belonging*: Many adolescents find community within spiritual or religious groups, fostering connection and support, which are essential for mental well-being.

3. *Meaning-Making*: Spirituality can offer frameworks for understanding personal suffering, promoting emotional healing and growth. This meaning-making process is fundamental during adolescence when

identity formation is in full swing.

4. *Holistic Health*: Viewing health through a holistic lens intersects mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. Fostering this understanding can help adolescents develop a more integrated self-concept.

Despite these positive aspects, not all adolescents embrace spirituality, and some may experience spiritual struggles that can negatively impact their mental health. Counselors must remain sensitive to individual differences and support diverse spiritual perspectives.

11. Holistic Approaches to Counseling

To effectively navigate the intersection of spirituality and mental health, counselors can adopt a holistic approach that encompasses the following tenets:

1. *Cultural Competence*: Counselors should have a firm grasp of the adolescent's cultural background and the role spirituality plays within it. Rather than imposing their beliefs, counselors should encourage clients to express their spiritual views, crafting a personalised approach.

2. *Integrated Techniques*: Utilizing therapeutic modalities that incorporate spiritual components can be beneficial. Techniques like guided imagery, mindfulness, or narrative therapy can help adolescents articulate their spiritual beliefs and integrate them into their healing journey.

3. *Eclectic Strategies*: A blend of psychological paradigms, including cognitive-behavioural, humanistic, and existential approaches, can be applied. This diversification allows counselors to tailor interventions to meet the unique needs of each adolescent regarding their mental health and spirituality.

4. *Empowerment through Spiritual Practices*: Encouraging adolescents to engage in spiritual practices, such as meditation, journaling, or community service, supports their emotional well-being. These practices can foster self-reflection and promote coping skills.

5. *Family Involvement*: Including family in the counseling process can be an effective means of fostering understanding and support. Engaging families in conversations about spirituality can create a safe space for adolescents to express their beliefs and concerns.

6. *Collaboration with Spiritual Leaders*: Counseling does not exist in a vacuum. Collaborating with spiritual leaders or community organisations can provide adolescents with additional resources and reinforce their spiritual practices.

12. Conclusion

Navigating the intersection of spirituality and mental health in adolescence requires sensitivity, openness,

and integration of various therapeutic modalities. By adopting a holistic approach that respects and incorporates the spiritual dimension, counselors can enhance their effectiveness and promote resilience, healing, and empowerment among adolescent clients. As society continues to evolve, recognising the profound influence of spirituality on mental health will be paramount in supporting adolescents on their journeys toward self-discovery and well-being. Hence, it is recommended that counselors must remain lifelong learners, open to the dynamic interplay between spirituality and mental health, ensuring that their practices resonate with the diverse identities of the adolescents they serve.

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