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**Spirituality as a Potential  
Resource for Coping with  
Trauma**

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**What is Trauma?**

- ▶ Trauma events occur when a person faces
- ▶ A potential threat to life
- ▶ A threatening and dangerous experience outside the usual human experience that are overwhelming and make people feel powerless and afraid.
- ▶ Have the power to inspire helplessness and terror

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### Traumatic events

- ▶ Can be a single event or part of an ongoing pattern of events and actions of others
- ▶ Sadly the numbers of people experiencing violence and threats of various types make the trauma experience quite widespread.
- ▶ Social workers frequently encounter this in our clients—risk of vicarious trauma

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### How is trauma experienced

- ▶ Bodies
- ▶ Minds
- ▶ Emotions
- ▶ Interpersonal life
- ▶ Spiritual life
- ▶ Integration of these systems

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### Impact of trauma of our bodies

- ▶ Potential physical damage created by the event
- ▶ Body memory of the trauma
- ▶ Sense of loss of body integrity
- ▶ Rush of stress related hormones
- ▶ Neuro biological impact that influences emotional, cognitive, and behavioral coping

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### Neurodevelopment of children and trauma

- ▶ Traumatized child experiences over activations of important neural systems during sensitive time of development (Perry et al, 1995)—the response pattern persists.
- ▶ These systems are reactivated when child is exposed to reminders of the traumatic event—stress responses activated even when child not in danger.
- ▶ Child lives in constant state of fear, reacts to ordinary events as if being terrorized

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### Developmental Issues Impact of trauma of children

- ▶ Experience can change the mature brain—but experience during the critical periods of early childhood organizes the brain systems (Perry, Pollard, Blakeley, Baker, & Vigilante, 1995)
- ▶ Trauma in the young child can influence the trajectory of a person's life by determining the functioning capacity of the person's brain (Anda, Felitti, Bremmer, Walker, Whitfield, Perry, Dube & Giles, 2006)

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### Children and Trauma

Impact of trauma on the brain development and process deregulates other aspects of the person —can result in hyperactivity, anxiety, impulsivity  
Trauma reflected in dysregulation of the sympathetic nervous system, increased cortisol (stress response), and norepinephrine levels  
Studies link pathways to long term behavior, health, and social problems (Anda, et al, 2006)

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### Children and Trauma

- ▶ Children who have been traumatized frequently are at a base-line of low-level fear
- ▶ Responding by either hyper arousal or dissociated adaptation
- ▶ Brain is organized through genetics and life experience
- ▶ Brain is use dependent—develops its functions and organization in a process reflecting survival needs. Trauma the organizing framework.

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### Neurobiological Impact of Trauma on Adults

- ▶ Changes in the hippocampus and the cortex create problems in integrating, synthesizing, and communicating traumatic events—difficulty in remembering and communicating a coherent picture of what occurred

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### Impact of Trauma on Cognitions

- ▶ Traumatic events destroy the victim's fundamental assumptions about the safety of the world, the positive value of the self, and the meaningful order of creation," (Herman, 1997,p. 51—see the world as a dangerous place

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### Impact of Trauma on Cognitions con't

- ▶ Impact on sense of meaning of life, world
- ▶ Disrupts trust in the fairness of life, in God, on other people
- ▶ Raises the question of "Why me?"
- ▶ Raises the issues of self blame or lack of self worth—believing that one is deserving of punishment or mistreatment—damaged goods
- ▶ Children especially likely to experienced self blame

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### Impact on cognitions con't

- ▶ Disrupts memories  
no memories, fragmented memories
- ▶ Difficulty processing and describing traumatic event in an organized manner
- ▶ Vacillation between intrusive memories and lack of memories for logical narrative
- ▶ Altered state of consciousness—dissociation from body, and situation—trance like

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### Impact on emotions

- ▶ Threat of annihilation
- ▶ Sense of fear, helplessness, being out of control
- ▶ Agitated state—what will happen next
- ▶ Numbing—sense of just going through the motions
- ▶ New traumas can prompt prior traumatic symptoms to reoccur
- ▶ Flight/fight response (emotions, body reponse)

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### Impact on Interpersonal Life

- ▶ Great variation in terms of response
- ▶ Can call into question basic human relationship—sense of trust and connection
- ▶ People tend to seek a first resource for comfort and protection (parents/God)—Sense of abandonment
- ▶ Distrust of other people
- ▶ Withdraw from close relationships—seek them desperately

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### Impact on Interpersonal con't

- ▶ Fear abandonment or attack
- ▶ Fear inability to control own anger
- ▶ Feel without value in relationships
- ▶ Children traumatized early problems in establishing basic trust and sense of self worth

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*Can find comfort, can feel abandoned  
Can ask questions about the meaning of life  
Can search for new meanings and purpose in their life  
Can search for new meanings and purpose in life  
Can feel violated in the very core of their being—sense of spirit*

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### Role of Healing

- ▶ The process of becoming whole or finding a new way to adapt and compensate for losses.
- ▶ Recognizes that people can heal emotionally and spiritually even though they cannot redo the traumatic event that occurred.
- ▶ Faith offers support when pushed to realize basic vulnerability

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### Spirituality resources con't

- ▶ SAFE, COMFORTING, UNDERSTANDING RELATIONSHIPS through leaders/counselors to counter hurtful ones
- ▶ HELPING OTHERS, ALTRUIS, GIVING BACK in the context of being made helpless and giving a sense of meaning and purpose
- ▶ RITUALS/PRACTICES that help access meaning and power
- ▶ HOPE FOR LIFE CONTINUING AFTER DEATH in some form that offers comfort to family members

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### How can spirituality help deal with trauma

- ▶ HOPE in the context of hopeless—findings a sense of meaning, of belief in a power outside of one's self, draw upon the power of God, Higher power
- ▶ Sense of POWER in partnership ("God is on my side." with the divine and growth in person strength to counter sense of helplessness, vulnerability, powerlessness
- ▶ Sense of WORTH and BEING CARED FOR to counter being devalued and dehumanized and the crushing of one's spirit
- ▶ Path toward PERSONAL PURIFICATION in a context of damage to worth of the self (religious purification)
- ▶ SUPPORT—emotional and practical support from a community in context of feeling abandoned and devalued

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### Positive spiritual coping strategies

- ▶ Looked for a stronger connection with God (spiritual connection)
- ▶ Sought God's love and care (spiritual support)
- ▶ Sought help in letting go of my anger (forgiveness)
- ▶ Tried to put my plans into action together with God (collaborative religious coping)
- ▶ Tried to see how God might try to strengthen me in this situation (Benevolent religious reappraisal)
- ▶ Asked God for forgiveness (religious purification)
- ▶ Focused on religion to stop worrying about my problem (religious focus)

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### Negative Religious Coping

- ▶ Wondered if God had abandoned me
- ▶ Questioned God's love for me
- ▶ Decided the Devil made this happen
- ▶ These thoughts increase the sense of being abandoned, being without support, being a worthless person
- ▶ Religious leaders to view traumatic events (for the individual, the community) as part of God's judgment further sense of blame

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### Helping clients access spiritual resources

#### Opening the door

- ▶ Inquiry regarding spiritual meaning for life event
- ▶ Counselor be prepared to walk with client down this path of pain and struggle
- ▶ Counselor awareness of own spirituality - facilitator, not director
- ▶ Awareness of different spiritual traditions
- ▶ Counselors take care of themselves-protect against compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma

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### Helping clients with trauma

- ▶ Providing safety—physical safety, a safe haven relationships—caring and acceptance offers spiritual support
- ▶ Normalizing people’s trauma responses
- ▶ Asking clients if they want to include spirituality in the counseling
- ▶ Tailoring our intervention to the client
- ▶ Functional spiritual assessment

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### Possible Intervention Strategies

- ▶ Identifying potential sources of emotional and practice support within the spiritual community
- ▶ Empowering clients with knowledge
  - Identifying spiritual coping strategies
  - Identifying trauma inflicted self-blame
  - Cognitive Behavior techniques to examine negative self beliefs
  - Identifying client strengths, esp re violence and its impact

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### Possible Intervention Strategies

- ▶ Explore earlier life experiences of trauma and their impact on the current event
- ▶ Use of creative arts (music, stories, )to find spiritual resource—esp children
- ▶ Involvement of parents and caretakers of children
- ▶ Helping clients find ways to contribute to others
- ▶ Forgiveness (can forgive without reconciliation)
- ▶ a process and only client can make this decision

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### Description of Treatment Models

- ▶ Basic Themes that tap love and knowledge
- ▶ 1. Initial exploration re the role of spirituality in their life and interest in including it
- ▶ 2. Counselor's respect for spiritual and religious diversity—tailor interventions to spiritual tradition
- ▶ 3. Psychoeducational component that helps people understand the impact of trauma and normalize reactions

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### Elements of treatment models con't

- ▶ Efforts to alter the negative cognitions of people regarding themselves, the world around them, and their power
- ▶ Efforts to help people feel comfortable in having reciprocal relationships with others people
- ▶ Help in developing and maintaining more effective strategies in coping with the impact of trauma

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- ▶ Establish a safe and trusting relationship with the counselor that helps promote self worth and safe relationships with others

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