

Ethics in Social Work Practice: Evangelism, Prayer, Value Conflicts, and Other Issues in the Ethical Integration of Personal Beliefs and Professional Practice

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“Integration of faith and practice” is easy to misunderstand.


It is NOT:


- A uniquely Christian form of social work.
- Learning how to impose our beliefs and values on clients or to evangelize.



“Integration of faith and practice” has at least three different senses.

All social workers, regardless of beliefs should be doing the first two, and few social workers, including few Christians, will likely be doing the third.

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1. "Integration of faith and practice" is critical understanding of our own beliefs, values, and worldview and how that affects our professional perceptions and actions.




“Professional Use of Self” in Dealing with Spirituality & Religion

- No “value-free” or “objective” social workers.
- Only question: How to deal with my values, assumptions, and beliefs in an ethical and competent way?
- With clients similar to me and radically different.



Critical Self-Awareness

- What are my core assumptions, values, beliefs?
- How do they affect my work with clients?
- This can be spiritual, religious, ideological, or theoretical - Any "meta-narrative" we use to make sense out of our experience of life



“Hello, my name is David and I ’m a
Christian”

- Or, “I ’m a Buddhist,” “I ’m an agnostic,”
“I ’m a logical positivist,” “I ’m a
behaviorist”
- Or, “I ’m a liberal Democrat,” “I ’m a truly
conservative Republican”




“I’m a Marxist, and I teach from a Marxist perspective” (Jeff Galper)

Test:

How conscientious was he in not imposing this view on his students?

His willingness to permit or even facilitate disagreement?



2. "Integration of faith and practice" is deliberate, skillful taking into account the spiritual and religious beliefs of clients and other relevant systems in social work practice.




Competent Social Workers Will Deal With Spirituality and Religion

- We will do it well or badly!
- So we ought to prepare to do it ethically and skillfully




Common Fallacies

- “I’m not spiritual or religious myself, so I can be objective about this.”
- “Since I’m not religious (or my religion is different), I have no business getting into this stuff.” Avoid or refer.
- “Since my client has the same religion as I do, this will be easy.”




Addressing Spiritual & Religious Issues is Part of Normative, Holistic Practice

- Just like dealing with any other potentially important (or unimportant) dimension of a client's life.
- Interactive with meaning and purpose, values, goals, behavior, gender, sexuality, strengths/resources, barriers/challenges, community and societal structures.



3. "Integration of faith and practice" is developing a particularly spiritual or religious form of practice.



Explicit incorporation of theological concepts and spiritual or religious practices.

Would require:

- Informed consent
- Appropriate auspices
- Accountability structures beyond yourself (I would argue)



Critical Issue:

Respecting the rights and freedom of our clients while maintaining personal integrity with our own beliefs.



Not simple, but guidance is available:

- Bible, Christian Theology
- NASW Code of Ethics



Professional Mandate: Code of Ethics

“Social workers also should be aware of the impact on ethical decision making of their clients’ and their own personal values and cultural and religious beliefs and practices. They should be aware of any conflicts between personal and professional values and deal with them responsibly.”



1.05: Cultural Competence and Social Diversity

- a) Social workers should understand culture and its function in human behavior and society, recognizing the strengths that exist in all cultures.




1.05: Cultural Competence and Social Diversity

- b) Social workers should have a knowledge base of their clients' cultures and be able to demonstrate competence in the provision of services that are sensitive to clients' cultures and to differences among people and cultural groups.



1.05: Cultural Competence and Social Diversity

- c) Social workers should obtain education about and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression with respect to race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, political belief, religion, and mental or physical disability.



Deliberately Avoiding spiritual and Religious Issues is Professional Incompetence

- In what other important area of clients' lives would social workers condone a policy of avoidance, withdrawal, or referral?
- Can't be evangelism or imposing values.
- Must be client-focused and client-led.



Spirituality

- A Broad Concept: The human sense of and search for transcendence, meaning, and connectedness beyond the self.
- Canda: “The basic human drive for meaning, purpose, and moral relatedness among people, with the universe, and with the ground of our being” (1989, p. 573).



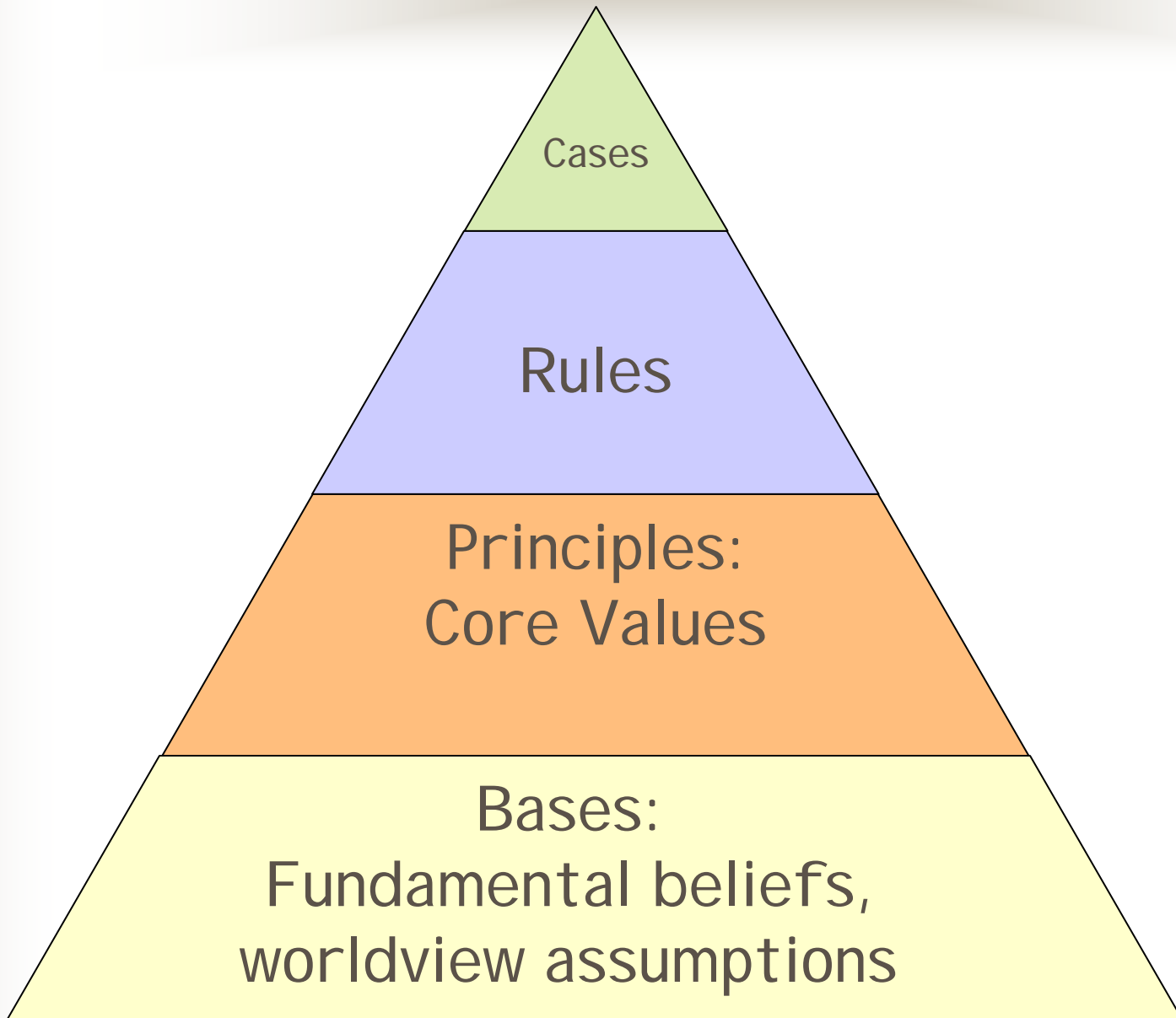
Religion

- More Particular and Structured: The more formal organization and embodiment of spirituality into relatively specific belief systems, practices, and organizational structures.
- Canda: “An institutionally patterned system of beliefs, values, and rituals” (1989, p. 573).



The “Practice/Principle Pyramid”

- A way that helps me think about the relationship between worldview assumptions, core values, codes of ethics, and specific cases.
- Greater agreement on basic values at conceptual level; greater room for conscientious and practical disagreement as we become increasingly more specific in regard to policies, programs, and practice decisions.





Bases

- Fundamental beliefs, worldview assumptions.
- What is the nature of the universe, the world we live in?
- What does it mean to be a person?
- What is the nature of values, the “good”?
- What can we know and how do we know it?
- E.g., my Christian faith interacts very much with my worldview, shaping it and being shaped by it



Principles

- “Core Values”: e.g., the “exceptionless absolutes” of Love and Justice which apply to every situation.
- Code of Ethics: Service, Social Justice, Dignity and worth of the Person, Importance of Human Relationships, Integrity, Competence.




Rules

- Deontological rules derived from the principles which guide the application of the principles in various areas of life. E.g., the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount.
- Code of Ethics: Specific standards and guidelines relating to responsibilities to clients, practice settings, as professionals, the profession, and the broader society. E.g., Confidentiality, Dual Relationships.



Cases

- Specific practice situations where the rules can (and do) come into tension or conflict with one another.
- E.g., Confidentiality vs. duty to warn.
- Any actual course of action available will advance some of our values at the expense of some of our other values (and the rules that go with them).



Sherwood's Maxim:

"You can't maximize all values simultaneously."

- Corollary: "But you have to come as close as you can."
- So: We are always having to make judgments or take actions which prioritize our values.
- Ethical judgments are required because legitimate values come into conflict.



Whether We Like It or Not

- Every actual policy, program, practice intervention is a sort of “compromise” which represents a balancing of competing legitimate (but not always equally important) values.
- Our best judgment at the time.



How Do We Prioritize?

1. Make a judgment about the relative centrality of the various values at stake to our core principles (e.g., love and justice).
2. Make a judgment about the perceived consequences of the available options.




Differences at the Case Level

- Affected both by worldview and interpretation of the situation.
- E.g., your concept of what it means to be a person will affect your attitude toward abortion, euthanasia, and the relative value of personal freedom vs. the common good and social responsibility.



Differences at the Case Level

- Even when we have done our best: We are fallen and finite.
- Our limited ability to gain relevant knowledge or “facts” and make good judgments.
- Our limited ability to predict the intended and unintended consequences of the choices available.




Uses and Limits of the Code of Ethics (and the Bible)

- Critical guidance and direction, but not prescriptive formulas.
- Case level judgments because not all of the values can be fully achieved and not all of the rules can be completely followed.
- Practice is always approximation, but we must choose and act.




Code of Ethics Says I t Very Well


“Core values, and the principles that flow from them, must be balanced within the context and complexity of human experience...The Code offers a set of values, principles, and standards to guide decision making and conduct when ethical issues arise. It does not provide a set of rules that prescribe how social workers should act in all situations. Specific applications of the Code must take into account the context in which it is being considered and the possibility of conflicts among the Code’s values, principles, and standards.”



“Further, the NASW Code of Ethics does not specify which values, principles, and standards are most important and ought to outweigh others in instances when they conflict. Reasonable differences of opinion can and do exist among social workers with respect to the ways in which values, ethical principles, and ethical standards should be rank ordered when they conflict. Ethical decision making in a given situation must apply the informed judgment of the individual social worker...”




“Ethical decision making is a process. There are many instances in social work where simple answers are not available to resolve complex ethical issues. Social workers should take into consideration all the values, principles, and standards in this Code that are relevant to any situation in which ethical judgment is warranted. Social workers’ decisions and actions should be consistent with the spirit as well as the letter of this Code.”
(1999, pp. 1, 2-3)




Good Ethics are Ultimately a Matter of Good Character

“A code of ethics cannot guarantee ethical behavior. Moreover, a code of ethics cannot resolve all ethical issues or disputes or capture the richness and complexity involved in striving to make responsible choices within a moral community. Rather, a code of ethics sets forth values, ethical principles, and ethical standards to which professionals aspire and by which their actions can be judged.”



“Social workers’ ethical behavior should result from their personal commitment to engage in ethical practice. The NASW Code of Ethics reflects the commitment of all social workers to uphold the profession’s values and to act ethically. **Principles and standards must be applied by individuals of good character who discern moral questions, and, in good faith, seek to make reliable ethical judgments.**” (Emphasis added, Sherwood)



Why Is “Evangelism” Usually Unethical?

I mean evangelism of ALL kinds:

- Religious
- Political
- Ideological



What Are Some Core Values and Ethical Principles That Apply?

1. The Great Commission
2. My Calling and Role
3. Self-Determination
4. Informed Consent
5. Integrity



1. The Great Commission (Matthew 28:19)

- Bearing testimony to the good news about Jesus' healing and saving work on behalf of humankind is in some sense the call of all of us who are disciples of Jesus Christ.
- If the gospel of Christ is true, what could be more important for people to hear?
- This value is real to us and explains why we struggle with the question of evangelism in our professional roles.



Proclamation vs. Demonstration of the Gospel

A perhaps simplistic, but none-the-less useful distinction is this:


It is always ethical and appropriate to *demonstrate* the gospel to our clients, but it is seldom ethical to *proclaim* the gospel in our professional roles as social workers.



Demonstration: The calling of every Christian

Ephesians 5:1-2: "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us."

I John 3:16-17: "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods, and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help."



Social work provides unique opportunities to demonstrate the gospel of Christ, preparing the soil for the good seed of the gospel proclaimed


To give clients grace-filled gifts of knowing what it feels like:

- To be treated with love and justice
- To be treated with respect and dignity as a person with God-given value
- To be in a respectful, non-exploitive relationship
- To experience caring, grace forgiveness, trustworthiness, honesty, and fairness



2. My Calling and Role


- We don't all have the same part to play in a person's life.
- The New Testament refers to varieties of gifts among the various parts of the body of Christ, and evangelism is one (Rom. 12:3-8; I Cor. 12:4-31, Eph. 4:11-16).
- I Cor. 3:5-6 says, "What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth."



Paul said that faith was the gift of the Spirit, which is true, but what we can do as social workers—and we do have a wonderful opportunity to do so—is to show such love and forgivingness that a confused and desperate person can understand the Spirit’s message when it comes.

A consideration of the Parable of the Sower may be helpful here. The seed only grows to maturity when there is good ground to receive it. But stony or even shallow ground can be converted to good ground by the addition of nutrients (love) or ploughing (facing reality) or breaking up of clots (getting rid of blocks) and perhaps what social workers can do for the most part is to be tillers of the ground, rather than the Sower, who must in the long run be God Himself.

Alan Keith-Lucas. (1985), *So you want to be a social worker: A primer for the Christian student*. Botsford, CT: NACSW, p. 28.



Professional Role/Agency Auspice and Function

Bluntly put:

- If you are convinced your calling from God is evangelism in the sense of proclamation, then you should be an evangelist, not a social worker (or nurse, or car salesman, or loan officer).
- If your “calling” is to convert your clients religiously, politically, or ideologically, you need to be in a role and auspice that validates and advertises that fact, which is not most social work direct practice settings.



A Personal Story

My father-in-law for many years demonstrated the grace and love of Christ in his role as a bank teller at the Potter's Bank and Trust in East Liverpool, Ohio, including taking money out of his own pocket to make sure certain poor customers were able to get at least a little cash at the end of the month. But he could not, and did not, use his position to hand them tracts with the cash, much less invite them to his church while discussing terms for a loan. As a social worker you may at times find appropriate to share your faith directly, but most of the time you won't.




3. Self-Determination


- Theologically, Christians (speaking for myself) are committed to the value of self-determination.
- The Bible presents a paradox and mystery (on our level of understanding) of God's sovereignty and our freedom, a picture of human beings endowed with the gift and responsibility of choice with consequences.
- God is depicted as calling us, but not coercing, warning but not protecting. Conscience and commitment cannot be compelled.



NASW Code of Ethics

- Code of Ethics: Self-determination is a standard growing out of the principle of the inherent dignity and worth of the person.
- “Social workers respect and promote the right of clients to self-determination and assist clients in their efforts to identify and clarify their goals.”


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- If ever a social work value stood on a theological foundation, it is belief in the inherent dignity and worth of every person.
 - God grants us the fearful dignity of self-determination.
 - We can hardly try to deny it to our clients, explicitly or implicitly.

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- While I may have my perceptions of what might be best for my clients, I have no right to compel or manipulate them to that end.
 - I do have a responsibility to help facilitate their ability to exercise their self-determination, including the exploration of available alternatives and their possible consequences, so that their choices are as informed as possible.



4. Informed Consent


- Informed consent essentially means that people should know what they are getting into and agree to it.
- Why are clients coming to your agency or to you? What expectations do they have?

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- Are they coming to you to get their minds changed religiously, politically, or ideologically? (Danger of well-intentioned “consciousness-raising”)
 - Is there anything upfront that would lead them to understand that the sharing of your beliefs would be a likely part of their experience with you?
 - Even in explicitly faith-based agencies there are surprisingly few times when direct evangelism is the appropriate focus or outcome of interaction with clients.



5. Integrity

- Core faith-based and Social Work Value.
- Ten Commandments: “Rules” such as truth-telling, trustworthiness, keeping agreements.
- Code of Ethics: “Conflicts of Interest.”
“Social workers should be alert to and avoid conflicts of interest that interfere with the exercise of professional discretion and impartial judgment.”

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- Code of Ethics speaks about the importance of setting clear, appropriate, and culturally sensitive boundaries and being careful of dual or multiple relationships with clients.
 - “Social workers should not take unfair advantage of any professional relationship or exploit others to further their personal, religious, political, or business interests.”



Bottom-Line Judgment

Evangelism almost always involves the risk of exploitation of a vulnerable relationship. It usually involves taking advantage of our professional role and relationship with our clients. It lacks the integrity of informed consent.



Bottom-Line Judgment


Even when there seems to be a certain consent or even request from the client to go through the evangelistic door, it is the social worker's responsibility to be the boundary keeper. The social worker, acting in the professional capacity, bears a heavy weight of responsibility to avoid taking advantage of the client's vulnerability.



Case Example: Client Coming to a Public Rape Crisis Center

She is in a physically and emotionally vulnerable situation, there is nothing about the sign on the door that would lead you to believe that her coming is even giving implied consent to evangelism, and she is trusting you for specific kinds of help. The nature of your role and relationship means that you have a special responsibility not to exploit that role. What you can most certainly do with her is give her the opportunity to experience what it is like to receive "grace," love and justice; what it is like to experience respect, caring, support, trustworthiness, honesty; what it is like not to be taken advantage of.

It would also probably be going much too far to ask her, "Are you a Christian?" Even if she said no, and you quietly moved on, the question would hang in the air, coming from a representative of the Rape Crisis Center to a person in a state of vulnerability who had a very particular reason for coming to this agency. How would she read that? How would it affect her response?



However, it might be quite competent and ethical professional practice to use a more appropriate probe which could be stated in “non-religious” terms—“This must be hard. Is there anything in your life that helps you get through things like this?” Then, if she mentions something about her spiritual or religious beliefs, you are in a position to make a better judgment about how you might help her, even perhaps engaging spiritual and religious resources. That could be good “spiritually-sensitive” social work practice.

Even then, you would be faced with the necessity of using good assessment skills, discernment, and judgment. For example, you would think that praying with clients in Christian agencies would be obviously the right thing to do. However, some clients are “religious” manipulators, and consciously or unconsciously use the appearance of spirituality to avoid dealing with hard issues. When a client says, “Let’s just pray about that,” or “I think we just have to trust the Lord,” you have to try to discern whether doing that is helpful or their way of avoiding dealing with their anger, fear, abusive behavior, or whatever else they may need to face.




Assessing and Utilizing Spiritual and Religious Resources in Practice



Guidelines

1. Explore, be open to the relevance of spiritual and religious issues, but don't force it. They may come up a little, a lot, or not at all. As always—professional judgment is involved. No “one-size-fits-all.”
2. Try to be informed, but above all let your clients be your guides. The power of “not knowing.”
3. Treat spiritual and religious issues like you would other issues—explore meaning/relevance, help clients articulate options, identify strengths/resources as well as challenges/barriers.




Guidelines (Continued)

4. Be on the alert to how your own beliefs and values might influence your responses—when you agree and when you disagree.
5. Develop a sense of your limits. Refer appropriately, but not prematurely.
6. Consult with your colleagues.




Guidelines (Continued)

7. Be clear how practice auspice (public/private/"faith-based") and agency function are key variables affecting the assumptions and expectations of clients.
8. Self-disclosure should be sparing, and follow the client's lead.
"Self-disclosure is on some level a request for agreement and appropriation by the client"
(Doherty)



Guidelines (Continued)

9. Collaborative consultation, with informed consent. Be careful, just as you would with any request for advice. Facilitate the client's genuine request for help with resources. If you are familiar with the client's spiritual language and faith tradition, and if the client is interested in using this language and calling on this faith tradition, then you might serve as a spiritual consultant and co-explorer (Doherty, 1999).
10. Spiritual and religious issues can be raised across religious diversity by non-religious language.
11. Conflicts over different spiritual beliefs or religious traditions can be lessened by looking for overlap areas and common ground.



Degrees of intensity of ethical, religious, and spiritual consultation in therapy

“The most intense forms of spiritual discourse are best reserved for extreme cases and require a good degree of emphatic connection beforehand”


(Doherty, 1999, p. 191)



The following material draws heavily on the work of William J. Doherty:


Doherty, William J. (1999). Morality and spirituality in therapy. In Froma Walsh (Ed.), *Spiritual resources in family therapy*, pp. 179-192. New York: Guilford Press.

Doherty, William J. (1996). *Soul searching: Why psychotherapy must promote moral responsibility*. New York: Basic Books.




1. Acknowledge the client's spontaneous statements of spiritual beliefs.

- Validate rather than ignore.
- Woman wanting to save her marriage: "The heart of God would be sad if I ended this marriage right now." "That sounds important to you, like you have some real values behind what you're trying to do."




2. Inquire about the client's spiritual beliefs and practices.


- Part of sensitive assessment.
- At some point it might seem relevant to explore whether spirituality or religion are important in clients lives, important in their thinking about their problems and how to get past them--resources or barriers.
- "Do you have any beliefs that help you deal with things like this?" If the answer is "No" you move on.



3. Inquire about how the client connects the spiritual, clinical, and moral dimensions of his or her life or problems.


- Explore perceptions, connections that the client is making. How the client thinks beliefs and practices ought to relate.
- Woman who is caregiver for demented husband: “What role does your faith play in your decision to keep your husband at home as long as possible?”

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4. Express agreement with the client's spiritual beliefs or sensibilities when such self-disclosure could be therapeutic.
- Only if it can be done authentically. If you believe in an afterlife you can assent when a grieving father says his son is with God now.
 - Guilt-ridden client says, weakly: "I guess God loves me, no matter what." Worker: "I agree that God loves you more than you will ever know."
 - Without common belief, worker can sensitively ask client to explore the meaning and power of the client's belief that she is going to be miraculously healed.




5. Articulate the client's dilemma without giving your own position.

- Particularly if one side of the dilemma is implicit and you think it would be helpful to make it more explicit.
- Parents of a gay son who are considering rejecting him permanently: "I can appreciate the terrible dilemma you are in. On the one hand, you have strong religious beliefs that homosexuality is wrong and you wonder if you can be true to your beliefs and keep your son in your life. On the other hand, you clearly have a powerful love for your son and want to be there for him as long as you live. And that love is based on your religious values as well. I'm sure this is a heartbreaking situation for you."



6. Point out or help clients explore the contradictions between the client's spiritual beliefs, or between spiritual beliefs and clinical realities, or moral issues.

- What will take priority? What kind of compromise is possible?
- "It sounds like you will have to choose which of those teachings you think is closer to the heart of God, the one about sexual behavior or the one about being committed to your children. Or is there some way you could feel like you were being honest about your own beliefs and still stay involved in his life?"



7. Challenge the client's way of handling moral or spiritual beliefs on the basis of your own spiritual, moral, or clinical beliefs.

- This is a serious step, but there are respectful ways to do it. It would be simpler to say you should never do this, but it would not be truthful.
- Respectful but firm "I" statement. "I appreciate how painful this dilemma is for you, and I am not living in your shoes. But before we finish this conversation, and since this may be the last time we meet, I want to give you a sense of how I feel about this kind of decision. Again, I cannot make the decision for you, but my own belief is that the highest calling we have from God is to be faithful to our children, even when they do things we believe are wrong. My religious beliefs almost always lead me to come down on the side of maintaining family commitments rather than severing them."