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**RESILIENCY AND SPIRITUALITY: A FRAMEWORK FOR ASSESSING  
AND HELPING**

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## Resiliency and Spirituality: A framework for Assessing and Helping Mary Van Hook

None of us has to read the newspaper headlines or look at the TV news to realize that life can be tough with times of heart ache. Our clients also bring to us lives that have been touched with abuse, poverty, illness, family problems. We hear a great deal today about resiliency—this person, family, or community is resilient. They will get through this difficult time.

**Resiliency:** Resiliency means more than a grit your teeth coping—a just getting by to live and struggle another day. When we talking about bouncing back, resiliency refers to the process by which people manage not only to endure hardships but also to create and sustain lives that have meaning and contribute to those around them. It is the process by which people are able to be successful in life despite hardships.

There has been extensive research in terms of what contributes to resiliency in the lives of individuals and families as well as the community context. In this presentation, the emphasis will be on how can spirituality and religion play a role in promoting resiliency (protective factors) as well as some of the potential risk factors present in the spiritual dimension of life. Incorporating this aspect of life in the assessment and intervention with individuals, families, larger communities can be strength affirming because it can potentially tap a powerful resource. It is always important to remember, that any strong element in life with the potential for healing can also have the potential for contributing to hardship.

**Spirituality:** Spirituality refers to the aspects of life that give a sense of meaning to life, a guide to morality, a relationship to the world and the transcendent. In the context of a world in which people are often valued for what they produce rather than who they are, spirituality can provide an important sense of meaning and purpose. For many people, spirituality is further embedded within a religious framework that has a sense of community, a shared sense of basic beliefs, and a sense of a relationship with some type of transcendent person, deity.

The picture of how people seek comfort and the role of spirituality in this process is a complex one. Studies have indicated that many people from a wide variety of spiritual and religious traditions view spirituality as a potential resource in dealing with life challenges. For example, a national study conducted following Sept 11 revealed that turning to spirituality, religion (prayer, religious or spiritual feelings) was the second most common way of coping (90%). (Schulster et al, 2001, as cited y Peres, Moreira-Almeida, Nasello, & Koenig, 2007). A longitudinal study of poor young people on Kauai from a variety of ethnic groups and religious traditions revealed that religion strengthened their families as they coped with adversity through giving them a sense of purpose and mission (Walsh, 1999, p. 38).. Women who had been sexually abused reported this important form of healing (Valentine & Feinauer, 1993). Older adults coping with HIV/AIDS were comforted and supported with a sense of belonging, a personal relations with God, reduction of the fear of death, improved self-acceptance, and a sense of meaning through their spiritual and religious beliefs and practices (Siegel & Schrimshaw, 2002). Housebound lonely older adults with a sense of spirituality were less likely to become depressed (Han & Richardson, 2010). African-American women struggling with

poverty (Banerjee & Canda, 2009) and serious health problems (Clay, Talley & Young, 2010) reported the strength they gained from their religious faith and spirituality. During the devastating 2005 hurricanes on the US Gulf Coast some of the survivors described the greater purpose that they felt was taking place as a result of this event. For others, however, the tragedy of the hurricane created a major crisis in their spiritual life. They asked if God really loves us, why did he let my family and others die (MHum, Bell, Pyles, & Runnels, 2012) This questioning is echoed in studies of people experiencing other tragedies.

Pargament and Brandt (1998) suggest that religious coping is effective because it offers a response to the “problems of human insufficiency”. When people are pushed beyond the limits of their resources and realize their fundamental vulnerability, religion offers some solutions in the form of spiritual support, explanations for puzzling and difficult life events, and a sense of control.

Social work process: When we look at ways in which spirituality can promote resiliency in the social work process, it is also important to look at the role of spirituality in terms of the social worker. Canda and Furman (1999) describe spirituality as “the heart of helping—the heart of empathy and care, the pulse of compassion, the vital flow of practice wisdom, and the driving force of action for service.”) Thus social workers draw upon their own sense of spirituality in terms of giving themselves and their clients, and their actions with clients a sense of meaning and purpose, and a moral guide.

As we seek to assess the role of spirituality within the lives of clients in terms of their ability to cope with difficult life circumstances, to become resilient, it is important to remember that we are not doing so as the client’s spiritual experts—we are partners on the clients’ journey. We must be aware of our own spiritual journey so that they we do not impose this unrealistically and unethically on others.

Healing: The concept of healing is an important context for understanding spirituality in terms of resiliency. Healing is described by Walsh (1999) as the core of a resiliency based practice. Healing is the process of becoming whole. It recognizes that while people can experience physical healing without emotional healing, it is also possible to experience emotional healing even though the past cannot be undone (the abuse did occur) and the physical pain cannot be eliminated (cancer is a present reality). Spirituality can contribute to healing in several ways. It can aid in meaning making, perseverance, connection to others. It can give one a sense that there is a purpose in what is happening, and can help people find solace and comfort.

In summary, spirituality can strengthen resiliency by promoting a sense of coherence, hope, transcendent beliefs that promote a sense of meaning, and social support within a spiritual community. On the other hand, spirituality/religion can also decrease resiliency if it is associated with a sense of demoralization, negative aspects of spirituality (what a terrible, unworthy person I am, I am abandoned by God, lack of social support and even condemnation within the spiritual community), and fatalistic views (there is nothing I can do, God is beyond my reaching out to). As indicated by the 2005 hurricane, faith for some helped people cope while for others the flooding called their religious life into question.

Resiliency and Spirituality: Research in terms of spirituality/religion in terms of resiliency suggests the importance of the following themes in terms of promoting resiliency or creating further burdens on people. This research has been primarily with individuals within the Christian tradition. This research helps identify aspects of spirituality/religion that can be useful to include in the assessment process. Important elements here include beliefs, the ability to carryout rituals that are supportive, and support systems within the spiritual community. These elements include both individual and community dimensions.

Beliefs:

- In a just and loving God that helps provide a basis for self-worth (child of God) as well as a benign framework for the context of life events.
- View of God as a supportive partner in the context of a personal relationship with God (eg. Tevye in Fiddler on the Roof who demonstrates that a partnership has room for questioning also)

Rituals: The ability to carryout important religious rituals (varies depending on the cultural and religious tradition of the person)

Support system: Members and leaders within the spiritual and religious tradition who are supportive of the individual/family/community. (For example, identified as very important for refugees from various faith traditions)

Spirituality/religion are also more effective if they are part of an ongoing aspect of the person's life—not just a sudden crisis response.

The following themes of spiritual/religious coping are reflected in studies conducted by Pargament (2002)and subsequently by others. These themes include both those that promote resiliency and those that create further burdens.

Protective:

Looked for a stronger connection with God (spiritual connection)

Sought God's love and care (Seeking spiritual support)

Sought help from God in letting go of my anger (Religious forgiveness)

Tried to put my plans into action together with God (Collaborative religious coping)

Tried to see how God might be trying to strengthen me in this situation (Benevolent religious reappraisal)

Asked forgiveness for my sins (Religious purification)

Focused on religion to stop worrying about my problems (Religious focus).

(Perez, Moreira-Almeida, Nasello & Koenig, 2007) .

The following aspects of spirituality/religion create additional distress.

Beliefs

God has abandoned me/us,

A sense of being punished by God, and accompanying guilt and fear.

Perceiving God as punitive .

### Rituals:

Inability to participate in supportive rituals (as a result of one's own beliefs or conditions that make this impossible)

### Supportive system:

A sense of alienation and feeling of condemnation from one's spiritual support group

Inability to access a support community.

As a result, an assessment of the protective of risk factors in terms one's spiritual/religious life can include the following dimensions. (Hodge, 2003) The following is merely a list of potential areas and must be tailored in terms of the list and the language to the individuals and the situation involved (Hodge, 2003, 2013). Some people are more comfortable with a language of religion while others with a more global spirituality as well as in terms of explicit or a more implicit understanding..

- Are there any spiritual/religious beliefs that are important either currently or in the past to the individual/family that are relevant to the situation at hand
- How if any way do people's beliefs give meaning to the issues facing the family and their options for addressing them (for example, the meaning of an illness, death of a child, etc)
- Have the individuals/family members sought to address their issue in part through their concept of spirituality –and with what results (can tap both resources and sense of alienation)—shared with others in my spiritual community and felt understood—or felt that others are now turning their back on me
- Are there any rituals associated with your religious or spiritual tradition that you/family members view as helpful (can tap potential as well as things that are blocking use of these rituals)
- Are there any resources within your spiritual or religious tradition (beliefs, practices, community) that might be helpful in dealing with your current situation. This can tap whether people think that they can avail themselves of these situations.
- Are there any deep wounds that have had an impact on the spiritual life of the individual or family members

These explorations requires sensitivity and a recognition of the complex nature of spirituality/religion and the human condition. Sometimes spiritual issues can have a very complex meaning and one must peel beyond this level in the person to understand the true picture. The answers to the role of spirituality become evident in subtle ways.

Ex of Miss S. who taught me this lesson. She was a single woman who lived with her parents in a community characterized by a rather conservative form of Christianity.. She contacted our agency after having been hospitalized for severe depression and an obsession that she had committed the unpardonable sin and thus was condemned by God with no hope (one of the beliefs in her tradition—although people who had in reality committed this sin would not be worried about it). Following her discharge, she continued treatment with our center. While less depressed, her obsession remained undiminished. As I came to learn more about her story, I realized the role that this obsession had in her life and how difficult it would be for her to let this go. Her

father generally ignored his children and would listen to religious broadcasts when he had free time. Her older sister had developed a catatonic mental illness as a teenager and has remained severely ill. Her mother has been preoccupied with care of this child. Recently, her brother had been arrested for attempted murder. With this final blow to the family, Miss S developed her obsession. During our sessions, Miss S would look at magazines and point of pictures—but I failed to pick up on this potential resource—being caught up myself in her symptoms which remained stubbornly intractable. I finally began to realize the nature of this hold on her—what else did she have that people would want to relate to her. Without her obsession that she had committed the unpardonable sin, she would be nothing—a very desperate belief. Finally picking up on the magazines, I began to talk about the pictures that she showed me, our shared interests and pretty things, and gave her the homework of looking for at least 3 items of beauty during the week that we could talk about. As she began to experience herself as a person with more to offer others than her symptom, the power of her religious obsession began to subside and fade away and her other life began to blossom. New recipes replaced talk of the unpardonable sin. She began to invest herself in work and relationships with others. As a result, understanding the role of religion within the interpersonal and emotional economy of her life was important in the social work process.

With the understanding that we have gained through our exploration of the role of spirituality/religion in the life of the individuals, families, and groups that we serve, what can this mean in terms of our interventions.

**Belief systems:** Is there a sense of strength and healing that we can help our clients draw on in terms of their belief systems—a sense of being cared for, of purpose, or are people struggling with a sense of being abandoned or being punished? The path is easier when the answer to the first question is a positive one and one can help people identify and draw on this sense of comfort and strength. It becomes more complex when clients are feeling abandoned or punished in terms of their spiritual/religious life.

While respecting the client's basic spiritual belief system, there are possible avenues that the counselor can use to help people reexamine some of their views. For example, Mr. R was struggling financially with his farm (during a very difficult time for the rural economy). He began to think that God was punishing him because he had sworn at his animals and family when he was very frustrated. With the advantage of working and living in a small community, the counselor was able to compare his situation with that of his married brother who had been engaged in an extra marital relationship with another woman and had not experienced any dire consequences from the community, his job, or elsewhere. Using a traditional cognitive strategy, the client was then asked if his religious beliefs would lead him to tell someone like himself that he had been singled out for punishment in contrast with his brother. Another client who again believed that she was being singled out for punishment was asked what she would tell people in another community who had just lost their homes due to floods if they were being punished by God. Framing the issue in this way helped these individuals consider if other options than punishment from God might be possible explanations.

Some of our clients have had painful early life experiences that have shaped their concept of the divine. The words Heavenly Father do not connote love when one's father was an abusive tyrant. From an object relations perspective, the social worker can help

people begin to find ways to separate their own unique life experience from their concepts of the divine. As adults, they can begin to broaden their awareness of their own unique situation and begin to question their assumptions.

When I was a student social worker, Mrs. J helped me understand how helpful caring people within the religious tradition of a client can be in enabling people to begin to question their religious conclusions in a very healing manner. She had grown up in a strong Italian Catholic family. She had divorced her first husband (prior to Vatican II) without authorization from the church. She subsequently remarried (outside of the church). She was unable to take the ritual of Reconciliation and always felt that God was going to punish her. In effect, she was just waiting until such a day should come. When her baby son was born without eyes, she was sure that this was God's punishment for her and she was responsible for her child's blindness. As a result, she was not only distressed by her child's disability but burdened and depressed by her sense of blame and guilt. Fortunately, my supervisor (herself Catholic) knew of a group of Catholic sisters who ran a program for children with disabilities. With Mrs J's permission, we arranged for her to meet with these women. They assured her that God would not punish her child in this way, offered their support, and arranged for the child and the family to receive services. The healing impact of this visit in terms of the subsequent change in her beliefs regarding herself and God and her emotional state were profound. The power of their words coming from within her religious tradition as well as the love that they conveyed were invaluable.

**Rituals:** Understanding the nature of the rituals within a spiritual tradition that can be important and healing can help identify some sources of resiliency—for example, prayer, service of reconciliation, baptism, offerings of thanks and praise, etc. Again, the challenge comes when people feel that they are blocked from being able to access them. Helping people with transportation or assisting them by enlisting a people from the religious tradition to help provide such can be important. Research indicates how important having access to the rituals of their religious tradition and their religious leaders can be to communities of refugees from various faith traditions. Some individuals are struggling with their own difficulties in accessing important rituals.

Mr. R sought counseling due to severe symptoms of anxiety and a medical exam failed to find any reason for his anxiety symptoms. Several years ago he had engaged in a brief extra marital affair. He subsequently ended the affair and was invested in repairing his marriage. His wife did not know of the affair. Out of his sense of guilt, he had stayed away from confession and the sacrament of reconciliation. In the course of the assessment, it became clear that his symptoms paralleled his struggle with his marriage and his guilt regarding his actions and his separation from his church. With this linkage in mind, he contacted a local priest and was able to become reconciled to the church. His symptoms of anxiety subsided markedly when he was able to again access his faith and this important ritual.

**Spiritual or religious community** can be a source of great support or isolation. Research with people facing a variety of life circumstances reveals the importance of this source of help or the pain when people are ostracized or made to feel cut off from this circle. Spiritual and faith communities can host groups that offer support to people

facing a variety of life issues—for example, grief and loss, Alanon, single parents, that can be helpful not only to their members but to others as well.

While we can help link clients with potential groups within the spiritual or religious community, the challenge for social workers extends beyond our work with individuals and families to the fabric of the spiritual and religious community. How do we help people and groups understand the true role of love and acceptance, of the concept of all people as children of God, of God's grace for all of us? The sense of lack of support and concern can be especially hurtful and damaging when it comes from members of one's spiritual and faith community. What can we say to groups and individuals within our faith community, what can we write in church materials that can expand the circle of support and care within the community? These are important questions to answer and move us beyond our intervention focus on individuals and families to the community context.

The following is an example of how one's man's story of his own faith struggle helped open the door of healing for others. Through the story of his own pain, anger toward God, and vulnerability, he set in motion a chain of healing. K was a retired army chaplain who was working as a pastor for a local mental health program. When he and his wife returned from a trip, they were met with the news that their 15 year old son had accidentally electrocuted himself in the bathtub. They were devastated. K found himself very angry with God for letting this happen to his son. He went to the beach one day to "have it out with God" regardless of the cost of his own soul. As he shouted his anger to God,--not sure what happen—he experienced a profound silence of God's acceptance of his pain and anger. This enabled him to restore his relationship with God. He subsequently shared his story with a large group of supporters of our mental health program. Listening in the audience was one of our board members.—Mr. M. He too was harboring his own silent anger toward God and feeling very guilty about it. His pregnant teenage daughter and her husband were living with the family. One night the young husband did not come home. When Mr M went looking for him, he found him dead in a wrecked car. He felt a deep anger toward God for leaving his daughter a young widow. He also felt very guilty for his anger. The story that Mr. K told him gave him permission to experience both his anger toward God and a sense of God's acceptance of his pain. He was subsequently visiting with an elderly widow in the church who had recently lost her only son. When Mr.M shared his own story, the widow broke into tears because she too had been struggling with anger and guilt and had not dared share this anyone because she felt that she was such a bad person.

While this is only a story of three people, it represents the chain of pain and healing that can be supported by helping members of faith communities realize the reality of anger and pain and the importance of sharing concern for those with these struggles.

### **Forgiveness and Self forgiveness:**

Forgiveness and self forgiveness can also be paths toward healing.

Forgiveness: Personal relationships can become distorted and hurt by anger and feelings of betrayal within the family circle or in the wider context of relationships. People can find it difficult to forgive others as well as themselves. It is certainly not the place of the social worker to make decisions regarding forgiveness for our clients. We also need to be

aware of unrealistic pressure on family members to forgive that can be imposed by others. At the same time, forgiveness has been shown to have great healing power (Canda & Furman, 1999, 2009; Friedman's study as cited in Frame, 2003). The mother of one of the teenagers slain in Ohio in a recent school shooting gave a very moving account of her forgiveness of the troubled teenager who had killed her son. She indicated that she could not live with the poison of this hatred and it would also not be an appropriate testimony to the life of her son.

The concepts and obligations of forgiveness have different meanings within diverse religious traditions. For example, the Amish community who experienced the tragedy of their children being shot in the school and forgave the shooter and embraced his family is a powerful example of a religious culture with a message of forgiveness. Within the Jewish tradition, for example, the role of forgiveness is limited to the persons who were injured. It is valuable for the counselor to understand the meanings of forgiveness within the family's tradition (Friedman, 2003). Honoring the essential tenet of client self-determination, if clients are agreeable and interested, it can be useful for them to identify some of the barriers to forgiving others and themselves and to recognize the corrosive impact of their ongoing resentments.

As people are exploring the possibility of forgiveness, they can be helped to understand that forgiveness does not necessarily mean reconciliation because reconciliation typically involves the offending party making some type of amends. Unlike reconciliation, forgiveness can occur regardless of the intentions of the other person. People can also be helped to understand that forgiveness does not require people to place themselves in ongoing harm's way. People who have been hurt by others certainly should not continue to put themselves in harm's way either physically or emotionally. If individuals and members of a family decide that they would like to build a bridge toward reconciliation, the counselor needs to help family members recognize that they are unable to control the response of the other person and can truly only be responsible for their own behavior. It is important to have the support systems in place when attempts of reconciliation are rebuffed.

Forgiveness does not mean glossing over the hurt that has occurred because part of the forgiveness process is recognizing the reality of the hurt that has occurred and the opportunity for expressing these feelings to others and experiencing validation for these feelings. As part of the process of forgiveness, people do need to give up revenge. They are helped to gain empathy for the offending party (Friedman's study as cited in Frame, 2003).

Individuals can also feel guilty for their actions toward others in the family and others. Sometimes people can be struggling unrealistically with guilt and counselors need to help them lift these feelings and work on the process of self-forgiveness. There are also situations in which feelings of guilt or remorse are legitimate and the appropriate response is for people to acknowledge what they have done wrong and to make amends. Counselors can be supportive of the strength involved in taking such steps.

**Social Work Relationship:** As described earlier, spirituality can be at the heart of the counseling relationships. Compassion means being willing to walk through dark valleys with people, to listen to pain without shutting people out to protect ourselves.

Such experiences can take a toll in the spiritual, emotional and physical life of the social worker. It is thus important to be aware of the danger of compassion fatigue and secondary trauma that can make people built up barriers to empathy and caring. It is important for social workers to find ways to nourish their own souls, their own emotional, physical, and spiritual lives in order to remain truly there for our clients and their heartaches.

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Nature of Resiliency

Nature of Spirituality

What role can spirituality play in the social work and counseling process