

Spirituality, religion and mental illness

Religion and spirituality can play an important role in many people's lives. This factsheet looks at spirituality and religion generally and also more specifically at spirituality and religion in relation to mental health.

 KEY POINTS

- Broadly speaking, spirituality is the meaning that people seek in their lives.
- Religion and spirituality are not necessarily the same.
- Health professionals are paying more attention to the role that spirituality can play in mental health. Researchers are also looking into spirituality and mental health.
- Some people find that spirituality can be helpful during mental illness. You may find that it provides hope and support during these times.
- Some religious beliefs about mental illness can be negative. People with mental illness may be vulnerable and may be influenced by certain beliefs and people.
- Mental health services do not always include spirituality as much they could. It may be something that is important to you, but is not covered very well in your care plan. If this is the case, then you could speak to one of your healthcare professionals about this.

This factsheet covers -

1. [What is spirituality?](#)
2. [Are spirituality and religion the same?](#)
3. [When can spirituality be helpful during mental illness?](#)
4. [Can spirituality be harmful during mental illness?](#)
5. [Ways to discuss spirituality and your spiritual needs](#)

1. What is spirituality?

One way of thinking about spirituality is the meaning and purpose that you seek within your life. Ideally it should give you a sense of your own worth and value. Spirituality can help you to develop inner strength and peace. Hope and optimism are important in spirituality.

Spiritual practices may include -

- Belonging to a faith community
- Meditation and prayer
- Living by a set of codes; for example, in your personal relationships with family and friends or how you treat others generally
- Emphasis on spiritual values such as honesty, kindness, hope and compassion.

Healthcare professionals are increasingly researching and discussing the role that spirituality can have for people with mental health problems. The research by organisations such as the Special Interest Group on Spirituality (Royal College of Psychiatrists) is increasing awareness of spirituality and mental health. You can find more information about mental health and spirituality on the website below -

Special Interest Group on Spirituality -

<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/workinpsychiatry/specialinterestgroups/spirituality.aspx>

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2. Are spirituality and religion the same?

No - spirituality is more general and inclusive in its nature. Religion is more specific and linked with a particular faith tradition or institution and usually a belief in a god.

You can have spirituality in your life without specific guidance, such as by living by codes that are personally important to you.

If you follow a religion, this usually involves accepting some guidance or practices about its god(s) or deities. For example, you cannot eat certain foods in some religions. You may also have to take part in set actions at set times (for example attending mass on a Sunday or saying prayers at certain time of the day).

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3. When can spirituality be helpful during mental illness?

Research has found some links between spirituality and improved mental health. However, researchers do not fully understand how this link works.¹

There are a few ways that spirituality could help your mental health.

Being part of a spiritual community can bring support and friendship. Spirituality can help you feel connected to something bigger than yourself. It may help you to make sense of your experiences.²

Spirituality can also help you with your beliefs about why you have a mental illness. You may believe that you are ill or have developed your illness because of sins or 'sinful acts' from your past.

Health professionals may have said you were experiencing psychosis when you expressed spiritual experiences (for example, believing in angels or hearing your god). Whether or not experiences like these are symptoms of psychosis, professional staff should respond sensitively if you describe these kind of experiences. They should be open minded and show respect for your spiritual beliefs.³

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4. Can spirituality be harmful during mental illness?

Certain sorts of religion and religious beliefs are not always helpful to people with mental illness. They can sometimes lead to people with mental illness being rejected or feared.

Some sections of religion see people with mental illness as possessed by demons or evil spirits, or by good but powerful spirits. Some believe that people have a mental illness because of sins that they have committed.

People with these beliefs may have advised you not to accept professional help but rather to look inwardly at yourself, or in extreme circumstances to exorcism. These are not positive ways of dealing with mental illness and may actually harm you further.

If you have a mental illness you may be vulnerable. This may mean that members of faith communities could exploit you. You may be more open to people who want to impose their views on you. Even if you do not have a mental illness you can also be vulnerable in times of difficulty and emotional distress.

Extreme religious groups may seek out vulnerable people and draw them into their within the cult or sect environment. These groups may then get people to join in with their practices and adapt to their set ways of thinking. Cults and sects are extreme and unusual.

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5. Ways to discuss spirituality and your spiritual needs

If you want to begin thinking or talking about yours or other people's spiritual needs, you could ask questions like -

'What keeps you going in times of difficulty?'

'What do you think life is all about?'

It is also good to discuss your sense of belonging and personal values. This can also be good for indicating feelings, beliefs and attitudes towards spirituality.

Healthcare professionals can do spiritual assessments to understand your spiritual needs. This could also help them to understand how your beliefs could affect how you make decisions in your life.

'Healing from within: A guide for assessing the religious and spiritual aspects of people's lives' (Culliford & Johnson, 2003) is a leaflet that can help health professionals talk to you about your spiritual needs. You can find it at:

<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/pdf/CullifordJohnsonHealing.pdf>

You may feel that spirituality is important to you but that your care plan or treatment does not take it into account enough. If so, you could raise this with your health care professional (care coordinator, psychiatrist, care support worker etc).

The Mental Health Foundation has produced a booklet called 'Making space for spirituality'. It is aimed towards professionals and gives practical advice on how to support and respond to spiritual needs of service users. You can find download this for free here:

http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/content/assets/PDF/publications/making_space.pdf. You can buy a hard copy by calling 020 7803 1101.

Some organisations work specifically to support the faith-based or spiritual needs of people with mental health problems. These are the details we have been able to find. This list is by no means exhaustive.

CHRISTIAN -

Being Alongside (the operating name of [Association for Pastoral Care in Mental Health](#))

A national Christian-based voluntary association that recognises the importance of spiritual values and support in mental health.

Tel: 020 3397 2497

Address: Association for Pastoral Care in Mental Health, The National APCMH Secretary, c/o St Paul's Church, 5 Rossmore Road, Marylebone, London, NW1 6NJ

Email: apcmh@pastoral.org.uk

Web: www.pastoral.org.uk

JEWISH -

Chizuk (The Mental Health Organisation of the Orthodox Jewish Community) is an organisation set up to meet the needs of strictly Orthodox Jewish men and women with mental health problems. Drop-in with separate sessions for men and women, a home befriending service, hospital visiting, groups and advocacy.



Tel - 020 8800 7494
Chizuk, 91-93 Stamford Hill, London, N16 5TP
Fax - 020 8802 5677
Email - info@chizuk.org.uk

Jewish Association for the Mentally Ill (JAMI) provides care, support, education and training of Jewish people with mental illness and to provide help to relatives and carers.

Tel - 020 8458 2223
JAMI, Olympia House, Armitage Road, Golders Green, London, NW11 8RQ
Fax - 020 8731 7395
Email - Via website
Web - www.jamiuk.org

Jewish Care offers an extensive network of services for Jewish people who are experiencing emotional difficulties and distress or coping with mental health problems. This includes residential facilities, rehabilitation centres, employment and training initiatives and mental health outreach work.

Tel - 020 8922 2000 (Central Office) or 020 8922 2222 (Direct Helpline)
Jewish Care, Amélie House, Maurice and Vivienne Wohl Campus, 221 Golders Green Road, London, NW11 9DQ
Email: jcdirect@jcare.org
Web: <http://www.jewishcare.org>

The MIYAD Crisis Helpline is manned by professionally trained counsellors who provide a non-judgemental listening ear for Jewish individuals.

Tel - 0800 6529249. Open Sunday-Thursday 12 noon-12 midnight, Friday 12 noon-3pm (winter), 12 noon-6pm (summer)
Web: www.jewishhelpline.co.uk

ISLAMIC -

The **North London Muslim Community Centre** has a **Muslim Mental Health Care Project**. The project aims to provide support to local community members who have mental illnesses such as schizophrenia, depression and anxiety. It offers services including emotional support and befriending, support for families and carers, home visits, advocacy and translation and referrals to local mental health teams where appropriate.

Tel - 020 8806 1147 (to contact the Mental Health Liaison Officer, Javed Isrolia)
Email: javed@nlmcc.org.uk
Web: www.nlmcc.org.uk

Union of Muslim Families offers one to one advice and support to families. Advice on health problems, afternoon language courses and advice and support in domestic and marriage problems.

Tel - 020 7226 0934
Union of Muslim Families, 55 Balfour Road, London, N5 2HD
Fax - 020 7226 0934

SPIRITUALITY (NON-FAITH BASED) -

Spirituality in Mental Health North East

The organisation is involved in promoting spiritual wellbeing which may be integral to an individual's recovery from mental ill health.

Tel: 01325 552045

Spirituality in Mental Health North East

Colin Jay, Chaplaincy Co-ordinator

Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Foundation Trust

West Park Hospital, Edward Pease Way

Darlington

DL2 2TS

United Kingdom

Email: chairperson@simhne.co.uk

Web: <http://www.simhne.co.uk/>

Spirituality Forum

This forum brings together the main faith communities throughout the country, with the world of mental health.

Spirituality Forum,

PO Box 62247,

London,

N8 1BG

Email: info@mhspirituality.org.uk

Web: <http://mhspirituality.org.uk/about.html>

¹ Dein, S., Cook, C.C.H., Powell, A., & Egger, S (2010). Religion, Spirituality and Mental Health. *The Psychiatrist*, 34, 63-64

² Web: Mental Health Foundation. *Spirituality*. Available at: <http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/help-information/mental-health-a-z/S/spirituality/> [Accessed 28th May 2013]

³ Mental Health Foundation (2007) *Making space for Spirituality: how to support service users*. As accessed at: http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/content/assets/PDF/publications/making_space.pdf [Accessed 28th May 2013]



This is available in large print

Rethink Mental Illness

Phone 0300 5000 927
Monday to Friday, 10am to 2pm

Email advice@rethink.org

Did this help?

We'd love to know if this information helped you.

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or write to us at Rethink Mental Illness:

Feedback
PO Box 68795
London SE1 4PN

or call us on 0300 5000 927.

We're open 9am to 5.30pm, Monday to Friday.



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on Rethink Mental Illness
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Email info@rethink.org

www.rethink.org

Need more help?

Go to www.rethink.org for information on symptoms, treatments, money and benefits and your rights. Or talk to others about your problem at www.rethink.org/talk.

Don't have access to the web?

Call us on 0300 5000 927. We are open 9am to 5.30pm, Monday to Friday and we will send you the information you need in the post.

Need to talk to an adviser?

If you need practical advice, call us between 10am and 2pm, Monday to Friday. Our specialist advisers can help you with queries like how to apply for benefits, get access to care or make a complaint.

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