

# The Unbound Heart: Spirituality and Purpose in Life among Formerly Incarcerated Substance Users

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# Purpose of the Study

To identify contributors to a spirituality-oriented sense of purpose in life among people who have abused substances and been incarcerated.

# Substance Abuse Treatment and Spirituality

- Substance abuse treatment has commonly included components related to spirituality. Self-help groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) hold as a central tenet that reliance on a “higher power” is key to modification of use (AA, 1976).
- The concept of drawing on a force larger than oneself has been one of the strategies utilized to counteract thought patterns and behaviors that may disregard harm to self or others, a change of values which seemingly contributes to diminished use (Green, Fullilove, & Fullilove, 1998; Khantzian & Mack, 1994).

# Substance Abuse and Stressful Experiences

- A fair number of studies have revealed a significant relationship between substance abuse and stressful or traumatic life experiences (e.g., Boyd, Hill, Holmes, & Purnell, 1998; Fullilove, Lown, & Fullilove, 1992; Kulka et al., 1990) as well as an increased risk of incurring legal sanctions (Harlow, 1999).
- The use of alcohol and drugs may reduce the negative physiological, affective, and cognitive conditions associated with highly stressful events (Stewart, 1996; van der Kolk & Fisler, 1994).
- There may be a threshold beyond which episodic and ongoing stressors can precipitate substance abuse and/or relapse (Brown, Vik, Patterson, Grant, & Shuckit, 1995).

# Hardship and Purpose in Life

- Those who are unable to draw meaning from their most difficult experiences may also have a harder time making other life adjustments (Draucker, 1995).
- Frankl (1946) observed that people are more likely to survive extreme hardship if they feel that there is some purpose to their suffering and that painful experiences can become opportunities for growth.
- Experiencing traumatic events can leave one with the desire to place those events within a correspondingly monumental context (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). One strategy for distilling meaning from otherwise incomprehensible situations is to nurture the belief that one has a personal relationship with a divine force or entity (Green et al., 1998).

# Substance Abuse and Purpose in Life

- Motives for abstinence have been shown to change over time and while “negative” or “avoidant” incentives such as fear of arrest, physical deterioration, family breakup, or job loss may characterize initial reasons for modification of substance use, they are subsequently eclipsed by more positive or “approach” motives such as a sense of purpose in life (Amodeo, Kurtz, & Cutter, 1992; Carroll, 1993).
- Clinebell (1963) postulated that a lowered sense of purpose in life might function as both the cause and effect of problematic drinking which in itself may be an attempt to experience the numinous or transcendent.

# Gaps in the Literature

- Previous studies have examined the relationship between the use of substances and quantitative measures of a sense of purpose in life but until now, there has been little research systematically examining the association between previous experiences, drug and alcohol use, and specific purpose-related aspirations.
- This research addresses the limitations of prior studies by investigating the contribution of psychosocial, environmental, and substance use-related variables to spirituality-oriented goals.

# Study Design and Sampling Plan

- A cross-sectional, exploratory, survey design was utilized.
- A purposive sample of 68 men and women was drawn from an abstinence-based substance abuse treatment program in San Francisco to which the majority of clients were referred by the criminal justice system.
- The majority of respondents were recruited through in-house meetings at the treatment program.
- There was a low to moderate response rate, with about one-third of those solicited consenting to be interviewed.
- Financial incentives were not offered, however participation in the research contributed to the fulfillment of in-house community service hours required by the program.

# Procedures

- Consent forms were read out loud, then signed by all participants prior to the interview.
- Face-to-face interviews were conducted based on a semi-structured questionnaire including both closed and open-ended items.
- All interviews were conducted by the researcher and lasted a mean of 2.5 hours (SD = .90, range: 1 - 4.5).

# Measures

- Variety of Stressful Events before the age of 18
- Variety of Stressful Events at or after the age of 18
- Childhood Stress Scale  
(Likert 1: Not stressful at all – 4: Extremely stressful)
- Adult Stress Scale  
(Likert 1: Not stressful at all – 4: Extremely stressful)
- Consequences of Alcohol Use Index (Kulka et al., 1990)
- Consequences of Drug Use Index (Kulka et al., 1990)
- Purpose in Life Scale (modified from Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1962; Hablas & Hutzell, 1982) (Likert 1: Strongly disagree – 5: Strongly agree)  
*The Purpose in Life Scale yielded a Cronbach alpha coefficient of .76.*

# Qualitative Data Analysis

- Qualitative data were analyzed using the inductive “grounded” theory methodology of constant comparisons (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in which initial memoing and open coding results were incorporated into an axial matrix.
- Narratives related to stressful experiences, substance use, and the point at which respondents gained awareness of their purpose enriched understanding of the quantitative variables.
- Verbatim quotes are included as exemplars of theoretical tendencies.

# Quantitative Data Analysis

- Based on the literature, quantitative variables were selected for inclusion in bivariate analyses with the categories of purpose in life coded from the participants' narratives.
- Variables found significant at  $p < .05$  were employed independently in a series of discriminant analyses to determine whether the spirituality and comparison groups differed significantly with regard to the mean of each variable.

# Demographics

(N = 68)

<u>Gender:</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>(%)</u>
Male	51	(75%)
Female	17	(25%)

<u>Ethnicity:</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>(%)</u>
African American (Black, non Hispanic)	35	(52%)
White	17	(25%)
Multiethnic	8	(12%)
Hispanic/Latino	6	(9%)
Asian/Pac Islander	2	(3%)

Mean age: 40 (SD: 6.86, range: 24-54)

<u>Social/Family Status:</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>(%)</u>
Married/Living with a partner	13	(19%)
Have children	55	(81%)
Currently have contact with children	32	(47%)

<u>Economic Status:</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>(%)</u>
Homeless during last 5 years	51	(75%)
Have received public assistance	65	(96%)
GA	55	(81%)
SSI	17	(25%)

## Legal History

(N = 68)

	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Min.</u>	<u>Max.</u>	<u>SD</u>
Total number of arrests	29	3	150	26.7
Total number of incarcerations	20	1	80	15.4
Total months incarcerated during their lifetimes	103	6	300	73.5
Age at first arrest	17	9	37	6.2
Age at first incarceration	18	10	40	7.0

33 (48.5%) were last convicted for drug offenses.

33 (48.5%) had been incarcerated with the juvenile authority.

## Stressful Events: Childhood (< 18) (N = 68)

	<u>n</u>	<u>(%)</u>
Felt ignored or neglected	50	(74%)
Physically abused	48	(71%)
Parents divorced or separated	44	(65%)
Witnessed somebody injured/killed	40	(59%)
Sexually abused	33	(49%)
Had father who died	6	(9%)
Had mother who died	4	(6%)

## Stressors in the Household (< 18) (N = 68)

	<u>n</u>	<u>(%)</u>
Household member/s with medical illness	28	(41%)
Household member/s with psychological problems	41	(60%)
Household member/s abused alcohol	51	(75%)
Parent/s abused alcohol	47	(69%)
Household member/s abused drugs	36	(53%)
Parent/s abused drugs	24	(35%)
Household member/s spent time in prison/jail	21	(31%)
Parent/s spent time in prison/jail	15	(22%)

## Stressful Events: Adult Life (>= 18): (N = 68)

	<u>n</u>	<u>(%)</u>
Physically abused	31	(46%)
Sexually abused	22	(32%)
Had father who died	22	(32%)
Witnessed somebody severely injured or killed	20	(29%)
Had mother who died	15	(22%)
Had child/ren placed in foster care	14	(21%)
Served in a combat position	3	(4%)
Felt as if they had lived through conditions akin to war (lifetime)	48	(70%)

## Consequences of Alcohol Use:

- 36 (52%) felt guilty about what happened while drinking
- 27 (40%) had experienced problems at work
- 44 (65%) had problems with family, partners, or friends
- 47 (69%) had gotten into fights while drinking
- 41 (60%) had been stopped or arrested by the police
- 9 (13%) had been sick enough to go to a hospital
  
- Mean number of consequences: 3.00 (SD=1.79, range: 0-6)
- 29 (43%) said they had felt dependent on alcohol.

## Consequences of Drug Use:

- 51 (75%) felt guilty about what happened while using drugs
- 45 (66%) had experienced problems at work
- 64 (94%) had problems with family, partners, or friends
- 46 (46%) had gotten into fights while using drugs
- 49 (72%) had been stopped or arrested by the police
- 44 (65%) had been sick enough to go to a hospital
- 44 (65%) had experienced specific health problems (e.g., seizures, infections, overdoses, etc.)
  
- Mean number of consequences: 4.78 (SD=1.66, range: 1-6)
- 61 (90%) said they had felt dependent on drugs.

## Treatment (N = 68)

	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>Range</u>
Months in treatment (current episode)	2.84	2.97	.25-18
Number of treatment episodes	3.67	3.73	1-20
Months in treatment (lifetime)	16.04	21.87	.25-120

52 % had attended at least one Alcoholics Anonymous meeting

59 % had attended at least one Narcotics Anonymous meeting

## Religious or Spiritual Beliefs (N = 68)

92% of the respondents professed to having a religious or spiritual set of beliefs.

Protestant:	18%
Catholic:	9%
Muslim:	7%
Buddhist:	1%

Over half (n = 38) said that although they held a set of spiritual beliefs, they did not identify with any specific denomination.

## Purpose in Life: (N = 68)

The 62 respondents who answered “agree” or strongly agree” to the last item on the Purpose in Life Scale, “I have discovered a mission or purpose to my life,” were then asked:

*“What do you believe is your purpose in life?”*

	<u>n</u>	<u>(%)</u>
Serve the community and others outside of the immediate family	52	(76%)
Enhance their sense of self/	42	(62%)
Improve the quality of their own lives		
Express their spirituality	34	(50%)
Help their immediate family	20	(29%)

These categories were then coded dichotomously (no/yes) and utilized as dependent variables in the quantitative analyses.

# Definition of “Spirituality”

- “Spirituality” was conceptualized as an internal, experiential relationship with God (Hodge, Cardenas & Montoya, 2001), a transcendent entity, or a metaphysical spirit or set of forces.
- *It should be noted that not all of the respondents saying that they held religious or spiritual beliefs endorsed a spirituality-oriented sense of purpose in life.*

# Qualitative Results: Purpose in Life

## *To express spirituality*

- Half of the study participants (n = 34) stated that their purpose in life was to serve God, engage in a spiritual quest, follow a spiritual path, or make life choices that would improve their chances of going to heaven.
- Some expressed the belief that their transgressions had been so egregious that all that was left to them was to renegotiate a relationship with God. They voiced the hope that a divine being might be able to fully comprehend their own suffering, and to redeem them for the pain that they had inflicted on others.
- Some posited that after facing one potentially lethal situation after another, their lives had been spared by divine intervention and their purpose was to repay that debt.

One man in this group said that during his days of using drugs, he felt as if “death was creeping around every corner.” In explaining how it was that he had not died along with so many of his friends and loved ones, he said:

“God, he knows everybody’s heart. He knows everybody’s thinking. And he knows I’m not a bad person and that I’ve just been dealt some bad cards in life. And that one day I’m gonna see the light and straighten up my life and come to God and jus’ do what’s right.”

Some respondents sought a larger than human context for their suffering. One man said that his purpose was to seek an understanding of the ways in which God operates in order to draw meaning from the painful events that had shaped his life. He reported that he began drinking at the age of seven, on the day on which his younger brother drowned, a tragedy for which he felt responsible:

“That was the first time I ever seen anybody die and it happened to be my little brother. And I was told to watch him and I didn’t. I find myself drinkin’ even more, an’ smokin’ more weed. Next thing, I started doin’ cocaine. . . I watched my whole neighborhood gettin’ hooked on this and we all started losin’ weight and that left me to stealin’ out my mom’s house. . . I didn’t have a job, so I started breakin’ into houses, cars, ‘cause I never had no money. . . I used to ask myself why? Why is this all happenin’ to me?”

Some of these study participants explained that subsequent to the many disappointments and betrayals they had endured at the hands of others, they believed that God was all they could count on. One man disclosed that throughout his childhood he had been neglected and physically abused by his alcoholic mother and had later, after his wife left him, become involved in drug use and crime. He stated that his purpose in life was to deepen his relationship with God:

“God, he’s the only one been there for me. *The only one*. He’s the only one I can talk to, you know. I can’t call on no human, no.”

Some within this group associated remaining abstinent or self-transformation with feeling connected to their own spirituality. One man explained that being abused by his father had left him with more than just physical injuries:

“My daddy scarred me so viciously mentally that I became totally disturbed psychologically. It got to the point where I became vicious like a dog, violent. I became so corrupted in the mind where I, I was plannin’ to kill my daddy. . .But he got to remember he made me like this. You take a dog, an innocent, harmless puppy, don’t know no better, and beat him, kick him, and starve him, what you think he gonna be?”

This man went on to say that during his most recent episode of incarceration, he had turned to God for assistance in changing his attitudes about himself and others:

“Had to reprogram my mind, you know, so that I wouldn’t get on death row, spend the rest of my life in prison. I did a lot of work with myself. I got down on my knees when I was in prison; I asked God to give me love, like touch me. God - I respected him. I got to the point where I didn’t care no more about human beings but I had a belief in God. And in my mind, I think God touched me and I said to myself, it’s time to stay in society and act like a civilized human being. And I did it. I start controllin’ my anger, through the grace of God.”

In return, this man asserted that his purpose in life was to act in accordance with what he perceived to be God’s wishes.

Some respondents suggested that at least one facet of their purpose was to become active at a specific place of worship. One man reflected that some of the most valuable gains of treatment resulted from being given the opportunity to go to church:

“One of the greatest things they give me, they restored my faith in God. ‘Cause I was raised in the church but, you know, it was hard for me to believe what I didn’t see, okay? And I made a connection real early, God and recovery go hand and hand . . . So I used to go to church every Sunday and that helped me not to be so ugly. . . And I started having empathy for people. That was a new word for me. ‘Cause I remember how I was when I come up in there. I would be isolating over to the side, I guess ‘cause I was scared [*he lowered his voice*]. Bottom line, I was scared somebody going to see who I really was.”

# Quantitative Results: Purpose in Life

*To express spirituality*

(N = 68)

Eight variables were entered into the final discriminant model:

- A greater variety of stressful experiences < 18 [F(1, 66) = 12.49, p < .001, r = .56]
- Having witnessed someone being severely injured or killed [F(1, 66) = 5.35, p < .024, r = .36]
- Having experienced conditions akin to war [F(1, 66) = 5.90, p < .018, r = .38].
- Being younger when starting to use the substance of choice [F(1,66) = 5.03, p < .028, r = -.35]
- Greater quantities of alcohol used during the 6 months previous to their most recent episode of treatment or incarceration [F(1, 66) = 5.68, p < .020, r = .38]
- A greater variety of adverse consequences attributed to their lifetime drinking [F(1, 66) = 5.70, p < .020, r = .38]
- More likely to have felt dependent on alcohol [F(1, 66) = 11.60, p < .001, r = .54]
- Higher scores on the Purpose in Life Scale [F(1, 66) = 10.08, p < .002, r = .50]

# Quantitative Results: Purpose in Life

*To express spirituality:*

(N = 68)

- Group centroids: Comparison =  $-.770$  versus Spirituality =  $.770$
- Chi-square [8] 29.58,  $p < .0001$
- Wilks' Lambda =  $.621$
- Canonical correlation =  $.616$

# Classification Results for the Spirituality Group

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<i>Predicted group membership</i>						
				<i>Comparison</i>	<i>Spirituality</i>	<i>Total</i>
<b><i>Original grouped cases</i></b>	Count	<i>Comparison</i>	27 (79.4%)	7 (20.6%)	34 (100%)	
		<i>Spirituality</i>	7 (20.6%)	27 (79.4%)	34 (100%)	
<b><i>Cross-validated cases</i></b>	Count	<i>Comparison</i>	25 (73.5%)	9 (26.5%)	34 (100%)	
		<i>Spirituality</i>	9 (26.5%)	25 (73.5%)	34 (100%)	

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Percentage of originally grouped cases correctly classified = 79.4% (compared to 34.0% that would have been correctly classified by chance alone).

Percentage of cross-validated grouped cases correctly classified = 73.5%

# Limitations

- Cross sectional design and a modestly sized sample.
- Random selection was not employed, leading to potential self-selection bias and a lack of generalizability.
- Some of the instruments were created or modified by the researcher and not previously evaluated for reliability and validity.
- The validity of self-reported data on substance abuse, stress, and legal history has been questioned.
- Multiple coders were not used to identify themes, thus intercoder reliability could not be established.
- The research did not account for the relationship between a range of treatment modalities. Thus, distinctions that may have been specific to a particular program could not be assessed.

# Summary

Those endorsing spirituality-related goals reported the most extensive history of stressful events before age 18, and had more likely experienced warlike conditions or witnessed the injury or death of another person. They reported drinking in greater quantities and with a wider variety of consequences, were more likely to have felt dependent on alcohol, and initiated use of their substance of choice at an earlier age. They also scored higher on the Purpose in Life Scale

# Implications for Social Work Practice

- Social workers should be attuned to spiritual leanings among those who experienced stressful events during childhood, as well as those who have lived through war-like conditions or witnessed serious harm come to others. Among such clients, proactively exploring spiritual topics could be of benefit. This reframing of past events may contribute to more positive outcomes (Draucker, 1995; Janoff-Bulman, 1992) and strengthen future resiliency to stress (Pardini et al., 2000). Enhancing a sense of spirituality can serve as a buffer against negative emotions, thus reducing the risk of substance-use relapses (Warfield & Goldstein, 1996).
- Social workers should be aware of the roles that religious and spiritual engagement have played in community organizing, political resistance, and affirmation of one's humanity in the face oppression (Planas, 1986; Roberts, 1994).

- Clients exhibiting hesitancy to enter into relationships with others but who express interest in attending religious services, engaging in rituals or activities consonant with their faith, or communicating with religious or spiritual leaders might use these activities as a bridge back to social engagement. As Piedmont (2004) suggested, spirituality's therapeutic effect may lay in part in its ability to reintroduce those who have abused substances to a meaningful set of roles within the broader community, highlighting their value despite their sense of having been damaged by previous hardships. Thus, social workers should develop knowledge of spirituality-oriented community resources and gain comfort in consulting and making referrals.

- Children whose early lives have been marked by trauma might be assisted in drawing a sense of meaning from these experiences as this has been shown to contribute to resiliency (Benard, 1991).
- In addition, spiritual and religious engagement may inhibit substance abuse among adolescents (Wallace & Williams, 1997; Hodge et al., 2001) in part by diminishing the impact of stress (Wills, Yaeger, & Sandy, 2003).
- Clinebell's (1963) assertion that problematic drinkers may be seeking a sense of transcendence also suggests that for those seeking the numinous, providing alternatives to substance use might prove protective.

- At the initiation of treatment, participants' narratives should be mined for purpose-related themes. To affirm from the outset that each life has a purpose might help in making the arduous changes alluded to by these respondents seem worth the effort.
- Using spiritually-oriented principles to “reprogram” previously conditioned thought patterns might serve as an adjunct to other cognitively based interventions.
- Practitioners should be sensitive to the ways in which their clients' values, sense of identity, and previous life experiences might impact the incorporation of spirituality into their interventions.

- Particular attention should be paid to the relationship between stressful experiences and spirituality-oriented goals as they seem to represent both a way of coping with painful events and utilizing them as a fulcrum for growth. In this manner, social workers can help their clients reintegrate the “lost” years of addiction and incarceration through the use of a spiritually explanatory context.
- Further research should be conducted on the variety of functions and potentials related to spirituality, however clients similar to the respondents in this study would likely benefit from increased knowledge and facility among social workers in addressing spiritually-oriented topics.

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Thank you!