

Spiritually-Influenced Social Work: A Review of Recent Literature

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- A review of the recent literature on spiritually-sensitive social work (2004-2007) reveals that a great deal of the discussion appears to be focused on specific intervention techniques, models and possibilities for practice.

- Within the field of spiritually influenced social work practice a significant number of articles have been written on the topic of cultural competence and more specifically upon a particular sub-set or family of culture i.e. spiritual and religious groups.

The need for spiritual assessment

- Gilligan and Furness (2006) note that social work education needs to focus more attention on both the importance of spiritual and religious beliefs in the lives of many service users and on the potential usefulness of religious and spiritual interventions.
- The authors join a chorus of voices calling for an expansion of the notion of “culturally competent practice” to include an understanding and appreciation of the impact of faith and belief.

Spiritual Assessment

- Hodge (2006) notes that the largest health care accreditation body in the United States, the joint Commission on Accreditation of Health Care Organizations (JCAHO), now requires the administration of a spiritual assessment.
- Although most practitioners endorse the concept of spiritual assessment, studies suggest that social workers have received little training in this area, Hodge (2006).

- To address this gap, Hodge (2006) reviews the JCAHO requirements for conducting a spiritual assessment and provides practitioners with guidelines for its proper implementation.

Eco-Spirituality:

- Others have noted that while the recent literature has included a call for social work to incorporate spirituality as part of its knowledge base and practice foundation, there is a danger that the understanding of spirituality will be confined to the level of the individual and that the profound connection with the environment will be missed (Zapf, 2005).

Cultural competence and eco-spiritualism

- Zapf notes that western social work may have much to learn from helping approaches that begin with a spiritual sense of inter-connectedness.
- Eco-spirituality in particular, informed by traditional forms of knowledge, provides an alternative perspective on the relationship between the individual and the environment and the energies associated with particular locations (Zapf 2005 a, b).

Cultural Competence and Indigenous perspectives

- An emerging voice in the field of social work and eco-spiritualism calls for the radical re-thinking of the foundational beliefs of the social work profession, and an acceptance of indigenous perspectives, and traditional forms of helping and healing (Coates, Gray, and Hetherington, 2006, 2007).
- The issue of cultural competence and spirituality in social work is somewhat contentious.

- Gray et al comment on how interventions based on concepts such as individualism, objectivity, and professional distance inherent in Western conceptualizations of social work practice would not be as effective and may possibly be alienating to indigenous populations.
- They are critical of the perceived equation of cultural competence and globalization the latter of which is understood by indigenous peoples as simply the latest wave of colonization

Cultural competence: a Postmodern view

- In addressing the issue of cultural competence with particular respect to Indigenous voices in mainstream social work, Gray, Coates, and Hetherington (2007) comment on the historical role social work has had in the past of fostering a Western, modernist view and silencing indigenous voices through cultural transmission.
- Gray et al present a critical view of the concept of cultural competence which they argue is a modernist one, predicated as it is on the idea that one can become competent in the culture of another.

Cultural competence: a Postmodern view

- They present the post-modernist view which questions the notion that one can become competent at something as complex as another's culture. Culture, they argue, defies simple translation and is something in which individuals are embedded.
- According to Gray et al cultures are to be understood historically as dynamic, "densely interdependent" and overlapped interact and are negotiated (Tully 1995, Gray et al 2007) among member sub-cultures, not as static and monolithic and taken- for-granted.

- The authors suggest that social workers shift the emphasis in their efforts at embracing anti-oppressive practices, from attempts at becoming competent in another's culture, to simply being open minded and attempting to understand indigenous cultures by learning from the perspectives of individual members, seen as experts in their own right.

Tools for cultural/spiritual assessment

- Notwithstanding the foregoing cautionary notes, various tools and recommendations for cultural/spiritual assessment have been proposed in the recent literature.
- As a means of understanding different facets of clients' spiritual lives, five recently developed spiritual assessment approaches are discussed by Hodge (2005), including a verbal model, spiritual histories, and four visual or diagrammatic approaches; spiritual life maps, spiritual genograms, spiritual eco-maps, and spiritual eco-grams.

Spiritual Lifemaps

- Spiritual life-maps are a practice described by Hodge (2005) in which social workers co-facilitate consumers' spiritual autobiographies using a pictorial means representing their spiritual life journeys.
- Spiritual life maps are a process in which potential hierarchical relationships that privilege the social worker are de-emphasized in favour of a more egalitarian alliance in which clients are considered to be experts on their own situation. Using spiritual life maps, therapeutic goals are co-constructed and consumers' strengths are seen as central to the clinical process.

Spiritual Lifemaps

- In the “spiritual life maps” model,
 - Individuals are supported in the process of using pictorial means to create a visual autobiography and cosmography, in a manner analogous but not identical to the art therapy process.
 - Culturally-sensitive icons are used in the support of client creativity and self-expression.
 - The client is a pro-active, self-directed, fully engaged participant in the therapeutic process.
 - Resistance and anxiety may be reduced through the use of a non-verbal pictorial medium.
 - Respecting consumers’ spiritual reality on a par with the dominant materialistic framework can help foster an environment in which spiritual interventions can be productively explored.

Autobiography as a Spiritual Practice

- Autobiography as a spiritual practice and form of making-meaning is defined by Staude (2005) as “a dialogue of the self with itself in the present about the past for the sake of self-understanding.”
- Staude suggests that spiritual autobiography enhances spiritual growth and can be therapeutic.
- Staude reviews the history of spiritual autobiography as a whole and then discusses four approaches to autobiography: the structured life interview, the guided autobiography, the intensive journal workbook, and autobiographical work in the twelve step programs.

Spiritual Genograms

- As Hartman (1995), in Hodge (2005) observes, in addition to being immersed in a network of existential relationships in the here and now, each individual is also part of a family story that stretches across a number of generations. Spiritual genograms (Hodge, 2005) depict this historical influence across time.

Spiritual Eco-maps

- Spiritual ecological maps or eco-maps, (Hodge, 2000; Hodge and Williams, 2002) can be used to portray spiritual strengths and influences in a diagrammatic form. Hodge continued to develop his assessments, combining geno-grams and eco-maps in a single diagrammatic instrument, spiritual eco-grams (Hodge, 2005) which depict the connections between past and present functioning.

Assessment and language: spiritual/religious beliefs

- Although the distinction between spirituality and religion is addressed by most contributors to the literature concerning spirituality and social work there remains some confusion about terminology.
- A case in point is Hodge's (2005) reference to theories of assessment in "spiritual life maps" which address the question of "Relationship with God".
- Lehr (2006) questions this apparent over-sight that many spiritual traditions and many spiritual beliefs exist without any concept of a supreme being and that a culturally competent approach to assessing the role of spirituality in individual or cultural life needs to take that into account.

Spiritual life-maps and Indigenous spirituality

- In a further evolution of spiritual assessment tools, an adaptation of spiritual life-maps has been developed for working with Native Americans (Limb and Hodge, 2007)
- use of icons and metaphors compatible with Native American natural symbology.
- the metaphor of journey is represented by a pictorial representation of a roadway, path, circle or direction.
- In addition to drawing the spiritual life map, the assessment tool comes with a question set, broken down into four areas: 1) relationship with a Higher Power"; 2) spiritual beliefs; 3) spiritual rituals; and 4) social support.

- The instrument was pre-tested at the American Indian Alaskan Native Social Work Educators Association Meeting, modified on the basis of feedback received, and then further tested with a sampling of 50 Native American experts from a wide range of tribes, diverse geographic regions of the U.S. and various spiritual;/religious backgrounds, via an electronic survey.

- Although feedback was mixed, Limb and Hodge (2007) concluded that the instrument was generally perceived as a step in the right direction and was generally consistent with Native American culture particularly its emphasis on a relational rather than linear world view, but that further research and development should be undertaken with the participation of a larger number and more diverse group of Native American experts.

The spiritual competence scale

- An eight-item scale, the Spiritual Competence Scale (Hodge, 2007) was developed as a new measure to assess cultural competence in the area of spiritual and religious cultures. The scale measures respondents perceptions of spiritual competence at the programmatic level.
- Hodge proposes that this scale is a valid and reliable measure of the “values” dimension of spiritual competence.
- Although developed to assess spiritual competence in educational programs, it is possible that it may be modified for application in clinical settings or for individual self-assessment.

Cultural Competence and Spiritual/Religious Discrimination

- Another topic of considerable debate in the literature on cultural competence is that of spiritual/religious discrimination (Hall, 2006; Hodge, Baughman, 2006; Hodge, 2007). Hodge (2007) comments that social workers disproportionately identify with less traditional faith traditions, and that many had personally experienced discrimination based on these religious beliefs. He argues that cultural competence should include an understanding and acceptance of faith based values as well less traditional forms of spirituality.

Spiritual/religious discrimination

- In a critical review of 71 influential social work textbooks, Hodge, Bauman, and Cummings (2006) found that Faith groups were virtually invisible as populations worthy of students' directions, and further noted that when faith groups were discussed they tended to be characterized in a biased, spiritually insensitive manner.
- Hall and Livingston (2006) note in the aftermath of September 11th, 2001, research on Arab families today is all but non-existent. They argue that the inclusion or acknowledgement of spiritualism is critical to mental health practice regarding Arab families.

Discrimination?

- While fundamentalism means various things and can be a part of a myriad of belief systems, the discussion within social work has focused primarily on Christian fundamentalism and evangelical Christian beliefs.
- Melcher offers some possibilities for new perspectives and dialogue, drawing on Fowler's theory of faith development and on win-win approaches to problem solving.

Discrimination?

- In another example, Todd and Coholic (in press, 2007) discuss how Christian fundamentalist religious beliefs, expressed by social work students, challenge social work educators.
- They explore how an anti-oppressive pedagogical approach can have the effect of silencing, marginalizing, and even excluding those whose values and beliefs do not fit within secular, anti-oppressive social work pedagogy.
- At the same time, they consider how fundamentalist views can harm students and educators, and perpetuate patriarchal and heterosexist belief systems, wondering whether there is a reasonable limit on inclusivity. T
- They draw on Mullaly's (1997) notion of oppression to argue that not all oppressions are created equal, and that the welfare of the students as a whole outweighs the individual right to classroom discussions that could harm students who are experiencing and/or have experienced systematic oppression.

Issues of Discrimination/Oppression

- However, some means of responding to students who struggle with the interface of their personal beliefs with professional social work values is required.
- In Todd & Coholic's experiences, individual conversations with students increase dialogue within schools of social work. They state that while this is not sufficient, it is a starting point.
- They also contend that we need to be clear about the limits of classroom discussions and design assignments and exercises that allow students to see themselves as complex, yet accountable to a code of ethics that prioritizes systemic oppression to individual discomfort.
- One important question that faces our profession today is if students and practitioners with Fundamentalist values can separate these beliefs from their professional practice with clients.

Cultural competence: African American women

- In an examination of the role of spirituality in providing resilience among vulnerable populations, Banerjee, Mahaswata and Pyles (2004) conducted 8 interviews with women of colour participating in a welfare to-work program. Participants in the study articulated their meaning of spirituality, spiritual practices, spiritual experiences with material hardships, and how spirituality helped them cope with poverty and welfare reform.
- Similarly, Manning, Cornelius and Okundaye (2004) explore concepts vis a vis culturally competent approaches from an Afrocentric perspective.

Cultural competence: Hindu Americans

- In a discussion of the significant spiritual beliefs, practices and values of Hindus, Hodge (2004) discusses the need for guidance to assist practitioners in avoiding possible conflicts emanating from the lack of congruence between the values of Hindu consumers derived from the Dharma – the sacred moral order – and the values of social workers derived from a Western Enlightenment discourse.
- For example, Hodge states that Hindu clients expect a more directive approach from their counsellors while Western social workers are more comfortable with a client-centered approach.

Spirituality in Social Work with the Aged/Palliative Care

- Investigations of age differences point to the likelihood that spirituality tends to increase during later adulthood (Moberg, 2005)
- It has important positive relationships with various measures of life satisfaction, psychosocial well-being, and both physical and mental health.
- Moberg notes that it benefits therapy for recovery of illness and is a source of meaning in life. Spiritual interventions help to relieve psychological distress and death anxiety, as well as the stresses of care-giving (Moberg, 2005).
- Moberg notes that due to its therapeutic value, prayer can be an important resource for coping with problems experienced during the life course.

Spirituality in Social Work with the Aged/Palliative Care: Education

- In terms of social work education Birkenmaier, Behrman, and Ber-Weger (2005) note that recognizing and utilizing spiritual and religious traditions is of particular significance when preparing students to serve older adult populations.
- Birkenmaier et al present a teaching model developed for social work practical students and their field instructors entitled “Reflections on Spirituality and Aging (ROSA)” which attempts to increase skills, expand the knowledge base and increase student sensitivity about the role of spirituality and religion in serving older individuals and their families.

Spirituality in Social Work with the Aged/Palliative Care

- Commenting on factors contributing to a positive aging experience, Seicol (2005) attributes a greater importance to spiritual well-being than to physical capacity itself.
- Seicol notes that social workers providing counselling for the aged population should take into account and utilize and awareness of the opportunities provided by spiritually-influenced approaches, such as a balanced perspective on life issues, a sense of humour, counter-factual thinking, a focus on current strengths rather than losses, and the capacity for viewing challenges as opportunities for growth.

Spirituality in Social Work with the Aged/Palliative Care:

- The role of spirituality in coping with life challenges among older adults is increasingly being recognized. Holly Nelson-Becker (2005, 2007) discusses social work's historical roots, the distinction between religion and spirituality for older adults, and presents data showing how older European Americans and African American adults employ religious strategies to cope with life challenges and offers suggestions on how social workers and those in other helping occupations can support religious coping among older adults.
- In examining the role of spirituality on quality of life issues among the aged, Marty Pentz (2005) conducted in-depth interviews with 13 older adults with cancer along with a focus group of three oncology social workers. The role of social support in spirituality/faith (Belief in God, Hope and Helping Others) in coping strategies for older adults and their caregivers is discussed

Spirituality in Social Work with the Aged/Palliative Care:

- With a special focus on spirituality within palliative and end-of-life care, Sinclair, Pereira, and Raffin (2006) provide a descriptive review of the literature related to spirituality and health in particular they identified six major themes in the literature related to spirituality and palliative care:
 - 1) general discussion of spirituality in palliative care;
 - 2) the unique spiritual needs of palliative care patients;
 - 3) the nature of hope in palliative care;
 - 4) tools and therapies related to treatment;
 - 5) effects of religion on palliative care; and
 - 6) spirituality and palliative care professionals.

Spirituality in Social Work with the Aged/Palliative Care

- Sinclair et al comment in their summary of the literature to date, that spirituality is emerging largely as a concept devoid of religion, valued in terms of its utilitarian potential in the improvement of health care and quality of life.
- They suggest that while this is a good beginning, a more integral approach needs to be developed that elicits the experiential nature of spirituality as an interpersonal shared dimension connecting patients, family members, and health care professionals alike.

Spirituality in Social Work with the Aged/Palliative Care:

- Including and acknowledging the spiritual dimension in social work with the aged benefits the well-being, efficacy, professional and personal development of caregivers as well as the people whom they serve.
- Leonie Nowitz (2005) notes that geriatric care managers helping families negotiate challenges of caring for frail elders can enhance the quality of their care by acknowledging the spiritual dimension of care giving, as being fully present to the suffering of families can enhance their own spiritual growth as well as their ability to help others at the same time.

Spirituality in Social Work with the Aged/Palliative Care: Mindfulness

- Bruce and Davies (2005) explored the experience of mindfulness among hospice caregivers who regularly practiced mindfulness meditation at a Zen hospice. They concluded that mindfulness fosters openness and supports letting-go, and helps workers cultivate both internal and external environments in which direct experience is increasingly held without judgment and creates a helpful space for being with the living and dying process.

“Postcards to God”

- In working with older adults Brennan, Laditka and Cohen (2005) examined the helpfulness of a visual process of making-meaning called “Postcards to God”. Brennan et al described a process in which nineteen older disabled adults were encouraged to create visual postcards as a means of expressing their spirituality. The authors then reviewed the cards produced for content and construction, and coded and analyzed them using qualitative methods.
- They found that postcards were used for expressions of spirituality and prayer across all levels of self-reported religiousness, concluding that the postcards were an effective way of promoting spiritual expression in a variety of older and frail populations.

Spirituality in Social Work with the Aged/Palliative Care:

- In the special journal issue On Fostering Social Work Gerontology Competence, Tompkins and Rosen (2007) present a collection of articles which discuss the affects of religiousness, spirituality, and social support on the psychological well-being of older adults in rural locations.
- The journal articles address a dual process model of grief counselling, a framework for assessing the role of spirituality in elder persons' lives, provision of mental health services for the rural aged population, community collaboration, social work education approaches, and ways of improving culturally competent aging-related knowledge among social workers.

Applications of spiritually-influenced social work practice to specialized areas of concern

- In the context of working with people with mental illness, Hodge (2004) provides suggestions for spiritually competent practice, including guidelines for discerning authentic spiritual experiences from manifestations of mental illness that reflect spiritual content, and reviews a number of spiritual interventions that may flow from a spiritual assessment.

Spiritually modified cognitive therapy

- In a review of the literature on the effectiveness of spiritually modified cognitive therapy, in diverse settings with a variety of faith groups addressing various mood disorders, Hodge (2006) concluded that only in the area of depression does spiritually modified cognitive therapy generally meet the American Psychological Association's criteria as a well established, empirically validated treatment.
- Edwards (2006) notes that cognitive therapy and cognitive behaviour therapy are particularly appropriate as therapeutic tools in working with clients with a strong religious orientation.

Spirituality and substance abuse treatment

- In the field of substance abuse treatment it is generally recognized that treatment completion is a key contributor to successful outcome of substance abuse treatment (Wolf-Branigan and Duke 2007).
- Wolf-Branigan and Duke use Bayesian analysis to determine the relationship between participants' involvement in spiritually-based programs at a substance abuse centre and their length of stay or successful completion of the treatment program.
- Results of their analysis of the outcome data indicated that the likelihood of involvement in spiritual activities and completing the program was 62.7%, while the likelihood of not being involved in spiritual activities and completing the program was 4.7%. Wolf-Branigan and Duke concluded that the availability of a spiritual component in treatment provided a valuable attractor for persons completing treatment.

Spirituality and substance abuse treatment: Integral therapy

- Expanding on the biopsychosocial model, Amodia, Cano and Eliason (2005) adapt the work of Ken Wilber in developing an integral approach to understanding substance abuse, etiology and treatment from a four-quadrant perspective. Amodia et al explore the implications of Wilber's integral theory model for the treatment of substance abuse.

Dream Work

- Coholic and LeBreton (2007) discuss how dream interpretation is used in spiritually-influenced group work, how the participants found it helpful, and how they connected their dreams with their spiritual perspectives.
- In their practice-based research, group participants reported that working with their dreams led to increased self-awareness, which then aided them to make informed choices. The process of learning dream interpretation also provided them with a technique that they could take with them into their life, and continue to utilize for the purposes of self-discovery and growth.
- The authors conclude that dream interpretation can be an effective and fun way to help people develop their self-awareness.
- Also, both dreams and spirituality are highly personal domains. Thus, when these issues are raised, they can serve to strengthen the therapeutic alliance and group connection with others.

Dream Work and Spirituality

- Furthermore, the group participants often linked their dreams with their spiritual perspectives, such as beliefs that dreams contained messages from God or premonitions of things to come, or they provided an avenue to connect with people who had died.
- When the spiritual dimension is considered, clients can be fully engaged in a consideration of existential and spiritual issues, for example, is our fate predetermined?
- Furthermore, although the literature in the area of spirituality and social work is quickly developing, the matter of dream work and the links between dream work and spirituality remain virtually unexplored. Thus, there are many areas for potential research and development.

Yogic approaches to substance abuse treatment

- Although the impact of mindfulness meditation techniques and their various permutations on an array of general stress, social, mental health and substance abuse related concerns has been the subject of much recent investigation across a wide range of disciplines, there is less available information on the potential helpfulness of Yogic/Vedic breathing and meditation techniques on the above disorders.
- Shannahof-Khalsa (2004) describes the use of an array of Kundalini yoga techniques to treat obsessive compulsive disorders, anxiety disorders, anger management, dealing with mental challenges and turning adversity into opportunities for growth and positive change.

Post-abortion grief

- In a study of the helpfulness of spiritually-based approaches to post-abortion grief intervention programs, Layer, Roberts, Cleora, Wild, and Kelli (2004) noted that over 80% of a sample of 35 female participants believed that their religious beliefs and spiritual intervention played a very significant role in the benefit they received from group therapy resulting in significantly reduced feelings of shame.

Adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse

- Spirituality may play a role in adaptation for some adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse (Gall (2006)).
- Gall developed several coping scales to measure key religious spiritual functions with an attendant four subscales that tapped into methods for gaining control in the situation.
- Results of the study suggest that there may, in fact be two general forms of spiritual coping: helpful and harmful (Pargament and Brant, 1998, cited in Gall, 2006).

Adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse

- Gall suggests that in cases where survivors feel spirituality is relevant to their lives that interventions are focused on rebuilding a sense of connectedness with a higher power much like therapeutic work on other attachment issues.
- positive forms of spiritual coping such as seeking spiritual support from others or a loving God and religious forgiveness may serve as important resources for survivors coping with stress.
- Social workers working with this population need to be aware of the potential for value inherent in acknowledging and supporting the spiritual dimension of the issues facing this population group.

Applications of Mindfulness Meditation to Social Work Practice

- Mindfulness meditation practice continues to receive much attention in psychology and medicine for a wide range of populations and problems; however interest in mindfulness in social work applications continues to grow.
- Mindfulness meditation practice is a process rooted in spirituality and adapted from Buddhism for application in diverse clinical practices in the west (Kabat-Zinn, 1990).
- Mindfulness meditation has been seen as “a process of regulating attention in order to bring a quality of non-elaborative awareness to current experience and a quality of relating to one’s experience within an orientation of curiosity, experiential openness, and acceptance.” (Bishop et al 2004 pg 234)

- Mindfulness based meditation has been applied to the treatment of co-occurring addictive and mental health disorders (Hoppes, 2006). Hoppes proposes that mindfulness meditation practices can help individuals develop a stronger degree of affect regulation and detachment from triggering emotional states, thoughts and sensations which in turn may help reduce the risk of relapse.

- In an intervention involving group work with eight adult women with a history of substance abuse an array of spiritually influenced helping techniques was used to help participants develop their self-awareness and self-esteem (Coholic, 2005).
- The group involved the use of such experiential exercises as meditation, mindfulness practice, dreamwork, stream of consciousness writing, the shadow self and other arts based processes. While participants disclosed that they found various aspects of the group spiritual, there was consensus among participants that making-meaning was a spiritually sensitive process.

Vipassana meditation and substance abuse treatment

- As an alternative to the various substance abuse treatments available to practitioners, Vipassana meditation (VM), a Buddhist mindfulness based practice may be an option for individuals who do not wish to attend or have not had success with traditional addiction treatments (Bowen and Witkiewicz 2006).
- Bowen and Witkiewicz evaluated the effectiveness of a VM course on substance use and psychosocial symptoms in an incarcerated population, with results indicating that after release from jail, participants in the intervention showed significant reduction in alcohol, marijuana and crack cocaine use compared to those exposed to traditional substance abuse treatment.

- In an investigation of the impact of a home-based spirituality group and mindfulness based meditation on stress reduction and the alleviation of mood disturbances, Moritz, Quan, Rickhi, Liu and Ar (2006) concluded that a significant percentage of those participants in the spirituality group scored highest in their ability to improve stress reduction/alleviation of mood disturbances.

Meditation and mood disorders: literature reviews

- Early data on the helpfulness of mindfulness based meditation on a variety of mood disorders is inconclusive.
- A literature review of studies examining the impact two major genres of meditation – concentrative meditation and mindfulness meditation - on the treatment of patients with a diagnosis of anxiety disorders was conducted by Krisanaprakornkit, T., Krisanaprakornkit, W., Piyavhatkul and Laopaiboon (2006).
- One study in the review focused on Transcendental Meditation (a form of concentrative meditation using a mantra) showed a reduction in anxiety symptoms in an electromyography score similar to biofeedback and relaxation therapy.
- Another study compared Kundalini Yoga with relaxation/mindfulness meditation with results reflected in the Yale-Brown Obsessive Compulsive Scale with no statistically significant differences between the two groups.

Meditation and mood disorders: literature reviews

- Similarly, Nguyen and Toneatto (2007) conducted a recent review of the literature on the impact of mindfulness meditation on depression and anxiety.
- The authors found that the relationship between practicing mindfulness and changes in depression and anxiety were equivocal and therefore concluded that mindfulness based stress reduction does not have a reliable effect on depression and anxiety.

- Nguyen and Toneatto suggest that the high variability in the benefit people derive from meditation may be due to the fact that the majority of the researchers in the studies they reviewed did not address the issues of peoples' adherence to the mindfulness program or the nature of the individual meditation experience itself.
- They suggest that there may be a need for more individualized guidance to help improve the delivery of mindfulness instruction in order to strengthen the overall intervention.

Mindfulness meditation and oncology

- A number of studies have been conducted on the healthfulness of mindfulness meditation on oncology patients.
- In a review of the literature discussing the usefulness of mindfulness meditation for oncology patients in clinic-based group settings, Ott, Norris, and Bauer-Wu (2006) concluded that consistent benefits such as improved psychological functioning, reduction of stress symptoms, enhanced coping and well-being of cancer patients were found.
- Ott et al, suggest that mindfulness meditation has clinically relevant implications for relieving psychological and physical suffering of persons living with cancer.

Mindfulness-based art therapy

- A form of mindfulness-based art therapy (MBAT) was used for treatment of distress among women with cancer (Monti, Peterson, Kunkel, Hauck, Pequignot, Rhodes, and Brainard, 2006). In the study, the group involved in MBAT demonstrated a significant decrease in symptoms of distress, as well as significant improvements in key aspects of health related quality of life, suggesting a possible future role for MBAT as a psychosocial treatment option for cancer patients.

Mindfulness-based stress reduction

- Similarly, improvements in the quality of life of cancer patients were attributed to mindfulness based stress reduction (MBSR) by MacKenzie, Carlson, Munoz and Spec (2007).
- Using Grounded Theory Analysis data from semi-structured interviews with 9 cancer patients who participated in an eight week MBSR program revealed several themes.
- Participants stated that adding meditation to their lives enhanced their ability to develop openness to change, greater self-control, shared experiences or connectedness with others, personal growth, and greater sense of spirituality.

Mindfulness and parenting skills

- Since parent-child transactions are understood to provide an important social context for the development of adaptive and problem behaviours in young children with autism, Singh, Lancioni, Winton, Fisher, Wahler, McAleavy, Singh, and Sabaawi, (2006) developed a program in which three mothers of children with autism were taught the philosophy and practice of mindfulness meditation over a twelve week course, with a view to ascertaining the impact this might have on their children's behaviour.
- Results showed that the mothers' mindful parenting decreased their children's aggression, non-compliance and self-injury and increased the mothers' satisfaction with their parenting skills and interactions with their children.

Mindfulness and adolescent aggression

- In a subsequent study, Singh, Lancioni, and Joy, (2007) applied the use of mindfulness meditation in a clinical setting to address the aggressive behaviour of three adolescents at risk of expulsion from their school, and found large decreases in the aggression of all three individuals.

Mindfulness and adolescent aggression

- In a related area, Liora Birnbaum, 2005 discusses the relationship between adolescent aggression and differentiation of self and the potential helpfulness of guided mindfulness meditation as a technique for facilitating healing and growth towards autonomy by helping adolescents connect to their inner voice.
- Birnbaum suggests that this technique may be especially useful in the adolescents' search for self-awareness, meaning, and life purpose.

Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy and suicidal behaviour

- Other studies have focused on the usefulness of integrating mindfulness meditation with cognitive and behavioural therapies, (Lau, McMain, 2005) and on mindfulness based cognitive therapy for the prevention of recurrence of suicidal behaviour, (William, Duggan, Crane and Fennell, 2006).
- William et al discuss mindfulness based therapy as a means of teaching participants to develop moment to moment awareness, to approach ongoing experience with an attitude of non-judgment and acceptance, thereby defusing thoughts that might otherwise spiral into suicidal ideation and behavioural crisis.

Assessment of Mindfulness

- As a means of developing baseline data for mindfulness studies, two instruments of measurement have recently been developed; The Toronto Mindfulness Scale, (Lau, Bishop, Segal, Buis, Anderson, Carlson, Shaprio, and Carmody (2006), and the Freiburg Mindfulness Inventory, (Walach, Buchheld, Buttenmuller, Kleinknecht, and Schmidt, 2006).

Self-Care and Ethical Guidelines

- With the increased interest in the spiritually-influenced approaches to social work, questions about ethics and boundaries between personal spiritual beliefs and practice are an emerging concern.
- Canda, Nakashima, and Furman (2004) conducted a mixed method survey of two thousand and sixty-nine National Association of Social Work members examining their ethical concerns regarding religious and non-religious spiritual issues in clinical practice settings.

- Results: while most respondents deal with spirituality in practice and use general ethical principles to do so, there is a need to develop guidelines for systematic ethical decision-making about the use of spiritually-oriented activities in practice. Canda et al suggest ways in which social work educators can provide ethical guidelines and case examples for spiritually oriented activities in both educational and direct practice contexts.

Ethical issues: Personal/professional boundaries

- On the subject of ethical guidelines and the treatment of boundaries between personal spirituality and professional social work practice, Beres (2004) offers a personal reflection paper on the manner in which she negotiated the relationship between her personal spirituality and the application of post modern theory to her social work practice. Her paper comments on the manner in which she found the application of a Foucauldian perspective of reflecting upon “taken for granteds” to be a useful process for seeing ourselves and others as socially constructed and therefore being more respectful of difference.

Ethical issues: mainstream social work and faith-based human services

- Applying the metaphor of eco-systems, Tangenberg (2005) addresses the challenges to professional social work presented by faith-based human services initiatives. Tangenberg explores ways in which a theoretical integration of eco-systems and structuration perspectives may help social workers navigate complex ethical and practical implications associated with referrals, and collaborations between mainstream social work and faith-related service providers.

Ethical dilemmas

- In order to investigate the dominant role of caregivers' spirituality in dealing with ethical dilemmas, Koenig (2005), conducted in-depth interviews with thirteen ethnically diverse caregivers, recruited from a home health agency and its parent hospital. Koenig's study suggests that in addressing dilemmas caregiver's used spirituality as a philosophy of life, making-meaning, and an aid to decision making through the use of prayer.

Ethical issues: Personal/professional boundaries

- Adding to the discourse on the challenges inherent in negotiating the highly personalized concept of spirituality within the sphere of professional-patient interaction, Pesut and Thorne (2007) suggest that health care professionals need to be able to balance three potentially competing identities to spiritual care in their interactions with patients:
 - 1) that of professionals working with a public trust in health promotion and restoration,
 - 2) as citizens of a liberal society where non-judgmental pluralism as it relates to spirituality is enshrined,
 - 3) as individuals with their own personal beliefs and values about spirituality.

- The authors discuss the ethical risks associated with identifying exclusively in either one of the above roles, and review the work of Martin Buber as a potentially model which acknowledges competing identities and presents a vision of spirituality and spiritual care based on relational reciprocity.

Spirituality and genuineness in practice

- Incorporating spirituality as an element of one's personal practice can help develop integrity and genuineness in social workers' relationships and ways of working with people by strengthening the connections between social work and social justice and by providing hope, stress management and a sustainable approach to work (Nash and Stewart, 2005).

Spirituality and self-care

- Spirituality in one's personal practice as a form of self-care may help prevent burn-out and apathy in social caregivers (Faver, 2004). Faver describes a qualitative study of fifty female services providers and social reformers in which a series of interviews explored the extent to which a sense of relatedness to other people and to sources of meaning beyond self-interest produces joy and vitality, which in turn sustains the capacity to care. Faver makes suggestions as to how workers can foster a greater sense of connectedness or relatedness to others and thus sustain the capacity for social caregiving.

Spirituality and self-care

- In a study exploring how spiritual practice might help volunteers working with dying hospice patients deal with anxiety and fear of death, Scherwitz, Pullman, McHenry, and Gao (2006) conducted a one year longitudinal study involving 46 individual hospice volunteers in a 40 hour training program stressing compassion, equanimity, mindfulness and practical bedside care. The study concluded that such spiritually influenced training and support can foster emotional well-being and spiritual growth in caregivers.