

Spiritual Issues in Counseling and Psychotherapy: Toward Assessment and Treatment

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In the past few years a strange phenomena has occurred in the fields of psychology, counseling and psychiatric treatment. The topic of spirituality, once taboo in our field, has become nearly mainstream. Moreover, two of the accrediting agencies that regulate this industry in the United States now require that spirituality be included in the assessment and treatment of clients.

Both *The Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations* (JCAHO) and *Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities* (CARF) have new standards that call for the inclusion of spiritual issues and spirituality in the assessment and treatments of clients. The standards, however, are vague and ambiguous.

Hospitals and agencies have been left with the daunting task of defining spirituality, developing a method of assessing spirituality, and implementing a plan of “treatment” to address spiritual considerations. Of course, this task is immense and extremely complex. Behavioral health practitioners respond to this task with contrasting reactions. Some breathe a sigh of relief that finally the “powers that be” have acknowledged the need to include spirituality in treatment. Other professionals take the position that spirituality should be left to the realm of religious leaders. Many of us are left with a feeling that our training and expertise has left us unprepared to assess and treat spiritual issues. How do we begin? How do we take such a complex and sacred human experience and make it fit the language and practice of counseling and behavioral health treatment?

That being said, ask most clinicians if their work is inclusive of the human spirit and they are likely to respond with a vehement “Yes!” Helping to address psychological,

emotional, and mental wounds often intertwines with spiritual concerns. Many feel that daily encounters with clients touch on spiritual concerns such as love, hope, trust, and wisdom.

This consideration of spirituality is also an effort to look beneath the surface of symptoms. Psychological assessments are generally symptom or behavior based. While this is valuable, we know that similar symptoms can emerge from different origins both in the body and the psyche. Therefore, understanding underlying factors that may lead to various symptoms, should give us insight into treatment. Including spirituality acknowledges some of the deep taproots of difficulties that we might name as spiritual or, if you prefer, concerns of the soul. This is not meant to replace behavioral, social or biochemical maps of the person, but to complement them. It acknowledges that human well being is shaped by multiple factors, including spiritual issues and concerns.

Six Dimensions of Spirituality

Spirituality is vast and mysterious. It cannot be confined by words or diagnostic categories. But there are some ways that we can recognize its *movement* in our clients and in ourselves. In what follows we will offer an overview of six dimensions of spirituality that are relevant for assessment and treatment.

1. MEANING, PURPOSE AND TRUTH

Meaning and purpose in life shape one's actions and attitudes. The search for truth and meaning is part of what makes us fully human.

Have you ever been asked to do a task that you thought was pointless? Maybe a particular homework assignment when you were in school, or perhaps a demand from a boss that just seemed meaningless. Do you remember how it felt? You could feel your lack of agreement, your subtle resistance, maybe you procrastinated or just felt drained with the thought of it. Or maybe you just went through the motions without having any heart or soul behind it. Without a sense of meaning a task becomes just something to get

through. And when life as a whole has little meaning, it becomes a plod through a vast flatland; draining, hopeless, without much contour or color. Meaning is fundamental to well being. Just as our body needs food and water, our psyche needs meaning.

When a child is able to find meaning, there is energy to sustain him or her. Victor Frankl, physician and Nazi concentration camp survivor said it this way, “He [or she] who has a why can endure almost any how.”

Children have everyday questions and crises of meaning: “Why should I bother doing my math homework?” They also ask the big questions: “Who am I?” “What is life about?” “What am I here to do?” Theologian Paul Tillich called this search for meaning, purpose and truth *ultimate concerns*. Although a surprise to many of us, children’s openness, vulnerability, and tolerance for mystery enable them to entertain these big, perplexing and paradoxical questions—they are natural philosophers searching for and creating their worldview—the meaning and assumptions that are so central to guiding a life.

We can look for both little meaning that motivates and big meaning that inspires. One young teenager shows how central these questions are to well being.

I’m not sure that I really belong here. I know there is more to it [life], but no one is talking about it. I can’t be the only one who sees it. Everything seems like a game. Don’t they [adults] see the phoniness? They say one thing and do another. How can they be so dense? I just feel betrayed; the adults don’t seem to get it. How can they act like that? They are supposed to be adults. How can my family act like that? Since third grade I’ve kept a bag packed under my bed in case I’m ready to run away, but to where? Is it different anywhere else? Doesn’t anyone understand? What’s the point?”

This is a child hungry for meaning and truth. Unless the big questions are addressed genuinely, children may find little point for getting up in the morning. Confusion may lead to anxiety or hopelessness.

Our lives are organized around meaning. Answers to the big questions are often lived out in the little stories of our lives. Instead of simply disciplining him yet once again, Lawrence decided to sit down with TJ, who is described by his teacher as “a loud, cocky, and obnoxious seventeen-year-old who I would regularly have to reprimand and

remove from class. He had a way of just getting under my skin.” As he pulled TJ aside and sat down to talk, Lawrence asked, “What can I do to help you and what can you do to help me?” He says, “I did not think any real progress was made but the next week I did notice that he was a little quieter in class and actually brought his book and a notebook to class.” This next week TJ asked, if he remained quiet, whether he could draw a picture in response to a group project that required students to read and answer questions about their lesson on the Middle Ages. Lawrence agreed and it turned out that this unruly student communicated with clarity and virtuosity through his impressive artwork. TJ ended up drawing a creative and accurate solution to the question posed. Lawrence’s simple attempt to make contact with TJ resulted in an opening. In a subsequent conversation, Lawrence asked TJ to describe the most important person in his life. TJ spent several animated minutes describing his young brother. “He even said that keeping his brother safe and cared for is ‘my only goal in life.’ I asked him why he felt this way. ‘My brother is the only one who loves me just the way I am. [My mother] loves me because I bring home [money]. My grandma loves me because I help pay the bills. Tommy he just loves me because he wants to.’”

Meaning focuses a life.

The task as helpers is not to *give* a child meaning or truth, but to legitimize their natural search for it by taking their considerations seriously, asking them what their life is about, how they see the world, what their truth is, what gives them purpose in life, like TJ, and by pondering these questions with them. Their worldview is both revealed and shaped in these exchanges. We can discover how their inner life and outer symptoms are organized around this emerging worldview.

- *Who are you? What’s important to you?*
- *What is life about?*
- *What are you here for?*
- *What and who do you love deeply?*

2. CREATIVITY: FINDING VOICE

Through the drive to create and to express ourselves we join in and participate with the world. We find our voice—the power of self-expression— and bring our vision to life.

Throughout the world's wisdom traditions, spirit is described as the creative *life force*, that mysterious energy that animates and flows through all life. Philosopher Alfred North Whitehead said that this energy of creation is the “ultimate category, the category necessary to understand all others.” The divine becomes manifest in the moment of creation: the birth of an idea, a piece of art, conceiving a child. Psychiatrist Silvano Arietta suggests that creativity is “man's humble human counterpart” to the divine's creation.

If we have ever had an idea, a flash of insight, a desire to make or do or say something novel or beautiful, we've felt the bubbling vitality of creativity looking for a way to show itself. Children have an especially strong drive for creative expression. They love to draw, mix colors, build with blocks, sing songs, mold clay, play, invent words or stories, dance, make a world in a pile of sand. This natural abundance is not rationed out, but overflows.

If the child does not express himself or herself in creative ways, the energy of creation may back up within him or her causing agitation, anxiety or disappointment and isolation. For example, we see a distortion in the creative urge with young people who self-injure. The cutting is often described as simultaneously releasing tension—that pent up creative energy—and helping them to feel alive through feeling pain.

The therapeutic challenge is sometimes to help client's find their *voice*. By *voice* we mean the confidence, skill and power of creative expression. This includes expressing the unique ways in which the child sees the world—their perception and truth. Without an outlet, the life force does not flow through us; we live in isolation or pent up agitation.

The voice can be virtually anything: a new move on a skateboard, a fashion statement, a funny rhyme, a way of arranging a room, a story make up on the way to

school. Expressing the creative urge keeps the life force flowing, nourishing a comforting on some deep level.

8-year-old Austin had his hopes set on testing into the gifted program at school. He had seen some of his friends get in and he had built this up to be his ultimate goal. Several weeks after his assessment, his teacher handed him the letter, addressed to his mother, which would determine his fate. He couldn't wait and opened the letter himself on the school bus. He didn't make it in. When he arrived home he broke the news to his mother, who consoled him. But he would not talk about it and acted as if it didn't matter, although she knew how important this was to him. After dinner that night, his mother, upstairs at the time, heard Austin start to pluck at the piano. He had started lessons just a few weeks before. Within a few minutes Austin discovered the notes that would turn the piano into a blues instrument. He played the piano for half an hour (longer than he had ever practiced) and expressed his grief.

Austin's creative expression didn't change the outcome he so hoped for, but it helped to move the energy of grief, anger, disappointment and whatever else, through him. That's exactly the nature of the creative urge—movement. Without it, we find ourselves stuck.

Sometimes children have big ideas, longings, obsessions, talents; they have a dream or a discomfort, they perceive hypocrisy, injustice, phoniness, or just take in the world in a novel way. They then need to find a way to express this way of seeing the world—their vision.

As a child of 5 and 9, the great native America leader Black Elk had big dreams—remarkable visions—that would shape his life and the life of his tribe. But in and of themselves, the visions were not enough. Black Elk said, “For a person who has a vision, you do not get the power of that vision until you walk it out on the earth for people to see.”

How well and through what means do children express their vision, whether of hope or pain, beauty or insight? Does the child use their voice? What means can we help them to draw it out? What are the unique ways that this child sees the world?

When any of us find our voice and express our vision we receive the power or *medicine* of the vision, and simultaneously give that medicine to the world. Creating *is* the medicine.

- *What do you do when you're mad or sad?*
- *What do you do when you're happy?*
- *When you have a good idea, what do you do with it? Give an example.*
- *What unique or special thing do you offer the world?*

3. MEETING THE WORLD: BOUNDARIES AND CONNECTION

Understanding and regulating personal boundaries allows us to meet the world with less chance of being overwhelmed by it.

“Spirit is not in the I but between the I and you.” Theologian Martin Buber wrote. This is a relational understanding of spirituality that attends to the way we know and meet the world. And for Buber, “all real living *is* meeting”—a genuine and intimate contact with the world.

Every religion has considered the paradox of humans as both self-separate individuals and as interconnected, as part of the all, the One. This metaphysical dilemma comes into down-to-earth relief when we consider where one person intersects with the world around them—their personal boundaries and ability to connect

Personal boundaries may be thought of as being more or less permeable or, we could say, thick or thin. At the thin or more permeable end, there is increased sensitivity that enables empathy, that quality that has been described as the base of moral development and compassion. But such openness can also leave us vulnerable and confused, especially in children.

Feeling Everything

A great many children and adults have such thin boundaries that they end up feeling confused or tugged by feelings or thoughts of others, or just plain overwhelmed by the deluge of feelings that wash over them. If you're empathically sensitive, you may instantly recognize what I mean.

Sarah, 16, writes about a surprisingly typical circumstance of being a kind of psychic sponge: “I’m an empath, and I hate school. I walk around and people walk in and out of classes, and I get everything from them—their anger, frustration, even happiness or joy. But it’s no fun. I’m not a big fan of crowds. . .but I’m working on turning the empathy on and off.”

June, who said she was extremely sensitive to the “vibes” of others, dealt with this sense of being overwhelmed in her own way. Looking back on her youth, she said, “I became a loner. I didn’t understand why at the time. I was naturally tuning into so many things, and I didn’t know what I was tuning into or what to do with it, and I became a very moody child. I don’t know why I picked up all different people’s feelings but I did. Plenty of times I would be down and I didn’t understand why, and I then I’d realize I was picking up other people’s moods. My escape was sleep. I would sleep long hours to keep away from all those feelings. I didn’t know what else to do.”

A psychotherapist might have reasonably diagnosed June as depressed. It is hard to say how many depressed kids withdraw like June in order to compensate for their empathic sensitivity. Some youth turn to alcohol or drugs to try to numb this sensitivity. They don’t create an effective boundary; they just can’t feel as sharply. Without knowledge of what’s happening, deeply sensitive kids may grow up coping in destructive and numbing ways.

Along with moodiness, withdrawal, and feeling overwhelmed, some kids try to manage their sensitivity by creating a kind of barbed perimeter around them with a hostile personality or even aggressive behavior. The tough kid may be masking boundary violations of all sorts.

Kevin, who was described as an “impossibly unruly” child in a day-treatment program was given some chalk by his frustrated teacher while they were outside during recess. She asked him to draw a boundary around himself in the shape and size that was necessary for his comfort. He took the chalk and went around the entire paved area of the playground, around buildings and trees, around other children and teachers. He came back with a rather satisfied expression. “There!” he said. The teacher began to get a sense of how vulnerable and sensitive this child might be and also how violated he must feel when so much is within his perimeter. She then proceeded to work with him on

establishing boundaries in other ways besides driving others out of his space with hostility or simply reacting as if he was out of control. It was soon revealed that he had been abused, and his need for exaggerated personal space symbolically reflected this. Ending the abusive living situation, learning basic assertion skills, constructing safe spaces in his artwork and his imagery, and working through the violation in therapy helped this boy gain new control of his defenses. A few weeks later, he was outside during recess and asked his teacher if she had chalk that he could use. She handed a piece to him. He drew a line that went about three feet around him and then handed the chalk back with a knowing smirk on his face.

Especially for kids who are deeply empathic, it's hard to be in a home that doesn't feel safe. If there is undue conflict or lack of genuine attention and affection, it's hard to feel welcome. A hostile or inordinately chaotic environment causes a child to contract, act out the hostility in some way, or dissociate so they don't feel so much. On the other hand, consciousness does gravitate toward safety, beauty, caring, and gracious warmth.

We know that families operate as systems. If something is happening in one part of a system, the other parts will be affected. Children are often the emotional barometers of their parent's relationships. How might the child be manifesting the energy of the family? Are they taking on mom's depression or acting out the unspoken conflict between mom and dad? Does their lostness or hostility reflect the anger or hopelessness of the family? Are they working hard to be the "good child" in order to fulfill mom or dad's unfulfilled hope, or are they serving as a scapegoat to release tension in the system? Empathically sensitive children are particularly adept at filling the needs of the system at the cost of their own growth and freedom. We begin to unwind those unhealthy roles when family members attend to their conflicts and difficulties directly.

The other side of the coin of boundaries is connection. How does a child connect with the world? Who or what are they connected to? Paradoxically, having adept control of our boundaries may enable intimacy; we may be willing to risk allowing someone in, if we know we have the power to keep them out.

This opens up questions about the art of meeting the world: How does the child open to the world? How do they protect themselves? How do they process what they pick up?

- *How much space do you need to feel safe?*
- *Do you ever feel other people's thoughts or feelings?*
- *Who or what is closest to your heart?*
- *Is it hard for you to say no?*
- *Do you ever see, feel, hear, sense things that you don't think other people can?*
- *What bothers or scares you? What do you do about it?*

4. HOPE

Resilience requires hope—an idea that things might get better.

Faith is associated with spirituality. We even call one's religion their "faith." Faith, as we are using it here, is not so much a belief in something, as it is suspending disbelief and pessimism for a moment in order to entertain the dream of a brighter possibility—hope. In the heart of darkness—a difficult family, poverty, a deep wounding—hope is a flicker of light that can help a child see through a difficult time and look toward the future.

Hope can live as *dreams* of a future that is better than the present. Such images can serve as a comforting ideal or be translated into intermediate goals. "If you want to have a life like that, what are the steps that will take you nearer?" If we can't see an image of a better world it may be hard to ever get there. The imagination can be our bridge to a better life.

Eleanor Roosevelt had a very gray and angry childhood. Both her parents, who were largely unavailable to her to begin with, died before she was 9. She was withdrawn, hostile, and isolated, yet she kept a fantasy alive that provided the clue and the hope to her life. She wrote, "I carried on a day-to-day story, which was the realist thing in my life." Eleanor's story involved her imagining that she was the mistress of her father's large household and a companion in his travels. This imagination provided hope and direction, even a sign of her life's calling of a devotion to the welfare of others, as James Hillman suggests that "Imagination acted as a teacher, giving instruction for the large ministering tasks of caring for the welfare of a complex family, of a crippled husband, of

the state of New York as the Governor's wife, the United States as its first lady, and even of the United Nations.

One way hope takes form is in the guise of *heros and heras*. Those real or imagined figures that serve as role models or an idealized or trustworthy image of what we might be. These figures can be internalized and called upon in demanding situations: "What would _____ (Jesus, Spiderman, my big sister, etc.) do in this situation?" These can be powerful guideposts for moral and healing decisions.

Heros can be a projection of our own latent potential. As Jungian analyst Robert Johnson says, we may project our own *alchemical gold*—the seeds of those qualities that we can't yet find or accept within us—and have another person (a hero, a love, etc.) hold them for us. When we see wisdom, power, beauty or whatever in another it is because this seed already exists inside us, in our own capacity for these qualities. Uncovering heros, uncovers our self. In time, we may own and integrate our own power, beauty or wisdom.

Transcendence

One way we can notice the capacity for hope is the impulse toward transcendence. Transcendence is not just of the mystical variety, but instead of going beyond limits in athletics, the arts, relationships, school, or nearly anything. Transcendence means willingness and drive to go beyond one's perceived limits, to take healthy risks. Does a teen risk asking someone out for a date? Do we tell our parents the truth? Are we willing to risk failure by trying our hardest? Do we risk being honest with ourselves? Destructive risks—a suicide attempt, dangerous behavior—are distortions of the drive for transcendence. They are instead acts of dissociation not of transcendence. The paradox of transcending something is that we have to march through the center of it. We accept the challenge; we speak our truth; we face our fear. Simply finding and naming the urge to go beyond our present experience is a marker of hope. Finding and taking constructive risks is the art transcendence.

A history of sanity

Hope and optimism can emerge from within. While as therapists we spend considerable time wrestling with problems (after all that's why our clients come to us in the first place), a kind of inner hope is uncovered when we help our clients find their

history of sanity and success, not only pathology and pain. Take some deep breaths, close your eyes if you feel comfortable, “Can you remember a moment when you felt whole, safe, confident, in love, at peace, special, etc.? What does it feel like, look like, taste like? Is there an image or symbol—a talisman—that comes to mind that can help you remember this?” That’s the point of the talisman of ancient shaman, to call upon this energy or spirit when we need it, in a heated moment or a dark night.

Recalling a moment of competence, inspiration or well being literally shifts our physiology and our consciousness. This does not serve as an escape from present difficulties but instead serves as a touchstone for our well being.

Ecstasy

Sometimes those moments open all the way to awe, wonder and ecstasy. We have an innate capacity for ecstasy—which means an exultation of spirit. But today, ecstasy is generally met with suspicion, disbelief, and hostility rather than welcomed as a gift as the ancients understood it to be. It doesn’t fit neatly into busy schedules or predetermined answers. Busy, controlled schedules close off mystery; the daydreamer is made to pay attention; fast-food style stimulation (TV, video games, etc.) overwhelms stillness. If ecstasy is denied and repressed, this natural longing begins to take the form of depression, anxiety, and addiction. The addiction may be to alcohol, work, food, illicit drugs, material possessions, dangerous sports, driving fast, impulsive sexual activity, and extreme emotions like rage. These activities temporarily change our consciousness. They either juice us up through an adrenalin rush and break through the typical haze of everyday life, or, like excessive work, bind our anxiety in constant activity and mind chatter. The trouble is they never deeply satisfy—it’s never enough. Whatever temporary high or reduction in tension we feel, we still need more. The result is never fulfillment, joy, or profound appreciation, but a greater hunger. The shadow of ecstasy is addiction. Addiction in contemporary society is epidemic. The more we are able to allow a clearing for soul-sustaining ecstasy, the less the shadow of addictive behavior will loom in our society.

Childhood moments of ecstasy are not just momentary reveries. They shape the way a child sees and understands the world and often form the absolute core of their

spiritual identity, morality and mission in life. Remembering a moment of unity, joy or wonder is a source of profound hope.

- *What will you be like as an adult; what will you be doing?*
- *Who do you look up to?*
- *Do you have a hero/ her?*
- *Have you ever had a moment of great joy or wonder or felt whole?*

5. SOURCES OF COMFORT, WISDOM AND GUIDANCE

A small opening or space within our minds or in our outward lives may serve as a wellspring for comfort and counsel.

Where does a child draw comfort and guidance? What are the sources both within and without that provide wisdom? On what basis does he or she make choices that nourish and heal?

Outside

Resilient children—kids who have grown up in very difficult, abusive or neglectful situations but who have thrived nonetheless—often have had a *leg-up person*, someone who made a difference in their life, who saw a spark in them, who noticed them, who offered a kind word, or took genuine interest.

—A neighbor who takes a child to the library when she takes her own child.

—The elderly friend who provides a soft cookie and an even softer ear.

—The coach or teacher who notices a child's effort and who, by simply saying "Nice job today," affirms the child's worth and maybe his or her very existence.

—The friend who sees that a child is capable of more and shapes the child's character by expecting more—good manners, kindness, having their homework done.

—The relative who is honest with a child and thereby teaches them how to be truthful.

—The teacher who treats the child like a person by asking for the child's ideas and opinions about important topics.

These are spiritual friends who validate, comfort and provide a leg up.

Sometimes comfort emerges from a special place. Do you remember a special spot you had as a child where you went in person or in your imagination? Children sometimes find a special place of spiritual sustenance in their own backyard or bookshelf—a *Bliss Station*, as Joseph Campbell called it. Karla found the steps outside her house to be a place where she could escape the conflicts of her parents and watch the seasons pass. Sam never fights going to bed at night; he says he loves to travel in his dreams. Margaret's special place has become a stable and the horse she loves so tenderly.

Inside

The Bliss Station is not simply a favorite tree or spot beside a stream, but a place within us—a gateway in our consciousness that opens into the depths of mystery and to the still small voice within that mystics and sages throughout history have recognized as a source of spiritual guidance.

Rumi, the 13th Century Sufi mystical poet, offers an image of the inner source:

There is another kind of tablet, one
already completed and preserved inside you.
A spring overflowing its springbox. A freshness
in the center of the chest. This other intelligence
does not turn yellow or stagnate. It's fluid,
and it doesn't move from the outside to inside
through the conduits of plumbing-learning.
The second knowing is a fountainhead
from within you, moving out.

Throughout the world's spiritual traditions, contemplative practice—prayer, meditation, etc.—is designed to open to that still place. Through silence, day dreaming, spinning, even sports, children may open to the contemplative mind and find their own inner fountainhead that reminds him or her what is most important, what is most just and may offer unexpected wisdom and comfort. It may emerge as an inner feeling, thought or image or may combine with the richness of our imagination to emerge in even more vivid ways.

Ellen reported that an unexpected teacher emerged for her 7-year-old daughter, Laura, one day in the back of their station wagon. The beloved family dog, Adam, had

died a week before and Laura was still deeply saddened. She was crying a lot about him and nothing her mom did seemed to be able to console her. One day while they were driving in the car and Laura was talking a lot. Ellen was tired and asked her to “Please just lie down and rest,” which Laura did. After twenty minutes she sat up and said that something wonderful had happened. She said that she had just talked with Adam. He came to her and told her that he was just fine. He liked it where he was now and that her being upset was making it harder for him. If she really wanted to help him she should just send him love and light. “I did,” she said, “and it feels good.” Laura paused and then added, “Adam said the reason he came to see me is that when someone close to me dies I’ll know what to do.” Two weeks later, Laura’s aunt gave birth to a baby with a terminal illness. It was a very difficult situation for everyone. Her mother said, “Normally, given Laura’s emotionally charged personality, I would have expected her to fall apart, to be hysterical. But in the middle of all this upset, Laura insisted on holding the dying baby in the hospital. She was calm and clear; she was not upset or crying but was working hard to send this dying baby love and light in order to help him. I think she taught all of us what we could do.”

As a therapist, we don’t need to figure out the ultimate reality of this situation, we only need to evaluate it based on the quality of the information received. For Laura, the lulling silence of a car ride opened to comfort and insight for her own struggle.

An antidote to chaos and confusion is comfort and wise counsel. Children can find those supports within and without.

- *What makes you feel safe?*
- *Do you have a special place where you go sometimes?*
- *Who or what do you trust?*
- *Describe how you know what is right and what is wrong?*
- *Who or what helps you when you need it?*
- *Do you have a special and private source of wisdom?*

6. CULTURE AND RELIGION

Our worldview is shaped by the culture that we grow up in.

The most familiar way we think of spirituality is through the eyes of culture and religion. This includes gender, national origin, language, ethnic group, race, religious beliefs and practices, sexuality, even geographical region. All of these can shape one's worldview and, ultimately, behavior. These will typically be left for the social assessment portion of intake.

Understanding both the nature of the religion and culture and the child's and family's relationship to it—Is it nourishing or punishing? Does it play a significant role in their beliefs or attitudes?—can help us to orient to their world. Successful assessment and treatment often rely on our ability to understand and empathize with the client's world and this includes their cultural and religious beliefs and values.

Recognizing basic underlying religious values or cultural norms helps to bring us into the client's world and devise treatment approaches and use language that would be in agreement with the client's culture and religion. We may utilize existing beliefs, for example in a higher power or in principles of forgiveness, as well as utilizing existing resources such as a faith or ethnic community to provide support for positive change.

Three dimensions are generally recognized in cultural and religious sensitivity: 1) counselor's awareness of one's own religious and cultural beliefs and values, 2) awareness of client's worldview 3) culturally appropriate intervention strategies.

We begin this assessment with our self: What is my worldview? What do I believe I? What are my own cultural lenses through which I see the world? We then have a reference point to compare and ask the client about their world.

- *Do you belong to and practice a religion?*
- *What does your religion do for you or provide you?*
- *What is your ethnic and cultural background?*
- *Do you have other spiritual beliefs practices or experiences that shape you?*

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