Defining Spiritual Health: A Review of the Literature

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Defining Spiritual Health: A Review of the Literature

Robert J. Bensley

It is generally agreed that total health consists of a variety of components, notably the physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions of health. Currently, there are several accepted definitions for the physical, mental, emotional, and social components of health but relatively little pertaining to the spiritual dimension of health. In addition, exploration of the spiritual aspect presently does not exist at the same level or intensity as with the other dimensions of health.

A review of the literature provides indication that attempts at defining the spiritual dimension of health indeed have been made. These attempts, which can be categorized according to their similarity, address a variety of components of spiritual health. The purpose of this article is to explore these components as a means of defining and categorizing existing definitions of spiritual health as identified in the literature. In doing so, the author has analyzed existing definitions and categorized them into the following six perspectives: (a) a sense of fulfillment in life, (b) values and beliefs of community and self, (c) wholeness in life, (d) a factor in well-being, (e) a controlling higher power or "godlike" force, and (f) the human/spiritual interaction.

Defining Spiritual Health

Before an attempt can be made at defining spiritual health, it is impor-
higher education acknowledges problems associated with discussion of spiritual health in the educational setting (Collins, Hurst, & Jacobson, 1987).

Spiritual health may be difficult to define, but according to Ellison (1983), "In order for scientific study to occur there has to be a consensus of meaning with regard to the phenomenon being observed" (p. 331). This suggests that a consensus definition of spiritual health is vital to study and discussion of the spiritual dimension. When considering a definition for spiritual health, many aspects should be considered. As an example, Banks et al. (1984) indicate that spiritual health can be explained in humanistic, philosophical, or religious terms. Chapman (1986) describes criteria that can be used to guide in development of a definition of spiritual health. These are summarized as follows: (1) Definition should not attempt to provide singular answers to highly complex and ultimately personal questions. (2) It must be practical and relate to health. (3) "It must recognize the scope of other areas of specialization in the field of health promotion" (p. 40). (4) "It must facilitate development of an appropriate science base surrounding practical use of spiritual health program interventions" (p. 40). (5) It must be flexible enough to provide opportunity for inclusion of new ideas and concepts concerning health and well-being.

Currently there is no single recognized definition of spiritual health. One view of spiritual health relates to the sense of fulfillment in life and interaction with self and others. According to Chapman (1987b), "optimal spiritual health may be considered as the ability to develop our spiritual nature to its fullest potential. This would include our ability to discover and articulate our own basic purpose in life; to learn how to give and receive love, joy, and peace; to pursue a fulfilling life; and to contribute to improvement of the spiritual health of others" (Chapman, 1987a, p. 17). Bloomfield and Kory (1978) support this definition by stating "Spiritual health generates a sense of personal fulfillment, a sense of peace with yourself and the world" (p. 244). In a study done by Banks (1980), it was found that components of the spiritual dimension which were ranked as "very important" included (a) something which gives meaning or purpose to life, (b) a set of principles or ethics to live by, and (c) the sense of selflessness and a willingness to do more for others than for yourself.

Values and beliefs of community and self have been recognized as important components of the definition of spiritual health (Central Michigan University Spiritual Health Committee, 1989). This is supported by Meeks (1977) when she indicates that one's belief system does in fact affect one's health behavior. More specifically, the Central Michigan University Spiritual Health Committee (1989) defines spiritual health as "Living in congruence with the values of community and self." Bellingham, Cohen, Jones, and Spaniol (1989) indicate that "Values are an extension of a person's beliefs about the world and attitude toward life. They are formed over time through a series of life experiences . . . and they are reflected in a person's hopes, dreams, desires, goals, and ambitions" (p. 20). Additionally, Bellingham et al. (1989) indicate that "Most people have a vague idea of what is important to them and live their lives based on an imprecise understanding of values" (p. 20).

Spiritual health also may be defined in terms of wholeness in life or spiritual wholeness. Bellingham et al. (1989) define spiritual health as "the ability to live in the wholeness of life" (p. 18). Young (1984) incorporates the concept of spiritual wholeness as "an ongoing process of growth in three areas - faith, hope, and love" (p. 279). He further defines this concept by indicating that faith is the belief that helps us realize our purpose, hope is the belief that allows one to look confidently and courageously to the future, and love involves accepting, affirming, and respecting self and others regardless of who they are. In addition, Young indicates that love also includes caring for and cherishing the environment we live in. Finally, Young applies the concept of spiritual wholeness by indicating that the process of growth in faith, hope, and love is not an accomplishment or destination, but rather a journey.

Ellison (1983) describes the spiritual dimension as a factor of well-being. He suggests that well-being depends on satisfaction of four basic kinds of needs. The first three are suggested from Campbell and include the need for having, the need for relating, and the need for being. Ellison's forth need, the need for transcendence, refers to the sense of well-being that is experienced when one finds purpose and meaning in life. It is non-physical in nature and can best be termed as spiritual. He also indicates that spiritual health may be an underlying state from which spiritual well-being arises. Also, spiritual well-being itself may in fact be an expression of spiritual health and, therefore, spiritual health and spiritual well-being may not necessarily be the same thing (Ellison 1983). Ram (1988) acknowledges the "meaning in life" component of spiritual well-being when he indicates that a result of spiritual illness is the feeling of general meaninglessness of life.

Spiritual health also has been described in terms of a controlling higher power or "godlike" force. It is not defined in terms of the social, physical, or psychological nature of man, but rather as a higher power greater than man (Brown, 1978). Banks (1980) states, "when attempting to answer questions dealing with meaning of life, the central core of an individual often is directed toward an infinite and all-powerful force.
which may be referred to as the 'Ultimate Meaning' or 'Ultimate Concern,' or 'Cosmic Force,' or 'God' (p. 195). Additionally, she indicates that the "spiritual dimension of health is based on four aspects: a unifying force within individuals; meaning in life; a common bond between individuals; and individual perceptions or faith" (p. 200-201). Bloomfield and Kory (1978) support the notion of the higher power when they acknowledge that spiritual health "may lead to a sense of unity with the cosmos or a personal closeness to God" (p. 244). Greenberg (1985) also supports the notion of a higher power as he defines spiritual health as "the belief in some unifying force. For some, that will be nature, for others, it will be scientific laws, and for others it will be a godlike force" (p. 403). Finally, the higher power as a component of spiritual health can be detected in a summarization by Eberst (1984) of Russell's and Banks' viewpoints regarding the spiritual dimension. He states, "Russell and Banks have attempted to establish the component aspect of this dimension. Accordingly, spiritual health involves the ability to love and be loved. Spiritual health includes trust, integrity, principles and ethics, purpose or drive in life, basic survival instincts, feelings of selflessness, degree of pleasure-seeking qualities, commitment to some higher process or being, and the ability to believe in concepts that are not subject to 'state of the art' explanations" (p. 100).

The dimension of spiritual health also has been described by the interaction between the human being and the spirit. Ellison (1983) indicates that "it is the spirit of human beings which enables and motivates us to search for meaning and purpose in life, to seek the supernatural or some meaning which transcends us, to wonder about our origins and our identities, to require morality and equity. It is the spirit which synthesizes the total personality and provides some sense of energizing direction and order" (p. 331-332). Archer et al. (1987), Hoyman (1966), Ram (1988), and Young (1984) acknowledge that an interconnected unity of the body, mind, and spirit is essential for good health and, in a sense, human survival. Human spiritual interaction can be viewed as the interaction of the spirit between and among people including such non-quantifiable qualities as the ability to give and receive love, a sense of personal responsibility, sacrifice, the ability to trust and be open and honest, integrity, acceptance of and love for others and self without being judgmental, and a positive attitude and enjoyment toward life (Banks et al., 1984; Jose, 1987). Additionally, Russell (1980) views the human/spiritual interaction as a component of the well-springs of positive, holistic health which is a combination of the concepts of spiritual and social well-being.

Research has been conducted pertaining to the concept of human/spiritual interaction. Russell's ongoing investigation has discovered that "the spiritual is the aspect of self which responds to God's initiatives and seeks relationship with God," "the spiritual is the unifying force in human relationships, giving a sense of relatedness between and among different social interactions," and "a strong well developed spirit within a person can act as a preventer or reliever of pain," to name a few (Banks et al., 1984, p.18). Results of research conducted by Poehler (1982) indicate that the human spiritual interaction involves a caring relationship and concern for others, provides a purpose in life, gives meaning to life, and provides opportunities to interact and share with others.

Summary

Even though the spiritual dimension of health has been recognized as an important component of comprehensive health, its nature makes it difficult to define. Currently, a commonly accepted definition of spiritual health does not exist. In fact, interpretations pertaining to the concept of spiritual health differ in many ways. Some professionals define spiritual health in relation to the sense of fulfillment in life, while others concentrate on values and beliefs of community and self. Spiritual health also is defined as a component of wholeness in life, spiritual wholeness, and spiritual well-being. Finally, attempts have been made to explain the spiritual dimension of health in terms of a controlling higher power, a "godlike" force, and the human/spiritual interaction.

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