

“Whoever has faith and courage will never perish in misery” Anne Frank

The Spiritual Dimensions of Depression and Well Being

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A Personal Note: *For twenty years, I have counseled people with life threatening illness. I have had the blessing of accompanying many people to the threshold of that mystery that follows our last breath. Each of these individuals served as a powerful spiritual teacher for me. Each showed me in his or her own way that facing the inevitable reality of physical death can help us to live and to love more fully. It can remind us of what is important and what is not, and what our real priorities are.*

Within a very short time of receiving a serious diagnosis, I have seen many people (and their loved ones) dramatically change their perspective on life and how they choose to spend their time and energy. I have witnessed “ordinary” Americans become profoundly compassionate teachers of universal wisdom, consistent with the teachings of the great traditions. For some, complicated symptoms disappeared during this inner transformation. Others became an inspiration to everyone around them as they embraced death consciously and in a state of profound inner peace, and sometimes, joy. Each one demonstrated a remarkable capacity for love, forgiveness, courage, gratitude, faith and humor.

Next-door-teachers such as these have tapped into important truths that seem to be within all of us. We don’t have to wait until we have a terminal diagnosis to explore this inner wisdom or to develop the personal qualities that we know would benefit our lives and our relationships. I believe that we would all be healthier and happier if we would more fully

- * develop the wisdom and gifts within*
- * honor and pursue that which gives our lives meaning*
- * embrace the sacredness of each moment and the gift of life*

I also believe that as healthcare providers, parents, friends and family, we can only respond to the deeper needs of others to the extent that we address these needs in ourselves.

Introduction

US News & World Report (3/8/99) claims we are entering an “Age of Melancholy”. Martin Seligman, 1998 president of the APA, reports that the mean age of onset of depression has gone from 30 to 15 (Seligman, '98). He claims that “the rates of depression among young people have never been higher. It’s no longer a middle-aged housewife’s disorder. It’s a teen-ager’s disorder”. “The great buffers against failure - relationship to God, community, extended family, relationship to nation” he courageously continues, “have diminished so greatly. *I think the spiritual furniture that our parents and grandparents sat in when they failed has become threadbare.*” Drugs such as Prozac won’t solve the problem, he says, noting the “moral problem of drugging an entire generation of teen-agers so that they find their happiness and productivity dependent on medication.”

The causes of depression are complex and illusive, and can involve the physical, mental and spiritual dimensions, as well as, lifestyle choices. The more subtle factors are often overlooked and left untreated. Sometimes depression is a healthy sign that a person is not satisfied with a superficial existence or with things that can never satisfy for long. Sometimes, it reflects a need for deeper meaning or purpose in one’s life or a need for further spiritual and emotional development. Depression

can, at times, be a doorway to a strong, healthy part of ourselves untouched by problems, negative feelings or personal melodramas.

In this writing, “religion” refers to a set of organized *external* practices and prescribed beliefs. “Spirituality”, on the other hand, refers to an individual’s *internal* experience of, and longing for, the mysterious reality that religions all point to. The spiritual dimension is an aspect of every human being, whether or not it is consciously developed. It is an inherent capacity and therefore, not dependent on religion for its existence or development. Concern about the meaning and value of one’s life or a desire for “real” connection, or to feel more “alive”, generally arise from the spiritual dimension.

Traditionally religion has assumed responsibility for the nourishment and expression of this aspect of human experience. Today, many people are pursuing spiritual development outside of established religion, but little research has been done on this population. Understandably, most relevant research has been done on Christians. Since spirituality cannot be measured directly, we must assume that to some degree, data gathered from religiously active individuals also reflects the results of inner activity, or the spiritual dimension, as well.

This writing presents research findings related to the effects of religious involvement on physical and mental health. It then contrasts images of human nature that are prevalent in America today with a model of healthy human development that includes a natural desire to serve a 'good' beyond the satisfaction of ego desires. It considers the relevance of desirable character qualities in everyday life and gives practical suggestions for developing and maintaining a healthy spiritual immune system. This writing attempts to use a fairly universal and non-religious language for discussing the spiritual dimension so that the ideas might be embraced by people with diverse belief systems.

It Seems Religion Is Good for Our Health and Well-Being

After years of investigating the non-physical dimensions of health, Herbert Benson, MD, a medical researcher from Harvard concludes;

... I believe that humans are wired for faith and that there is a special healing generated by people who rely on faith. So whether or not you believe in God per se,... (b)elieve in something good if you can. Or even better, believe in something better than anything you can fathom. Because for us mortals, this is very profound medicine. (Benson, 1997)

Benson bases his comment on his own research and on numerous studies summarized by Harold Koenig in his book, “Is Religion Good for Your Health?” The overwhelmingly positive findings related to the effects of religious beliefs and activities on health are summarized without comment in Figures 1 & 2 below.

These data raise many questions deserving further investigation. Which religious beliefs and activities have the strongest influence on health? How do they influence Health? Does religion reduce stress by providing a source of hope and by encouraging forgiveness, trust and faith? Do non-religious spiritual practices have similar affects?

Figure 1 Effects of Religious Beliefs and Activities on Physical Health (Koenig, '97)

Scientific studies indicate that

Frequent church attendance is associated with...

Lower

- blood pressure (systolic and diastolic)
- risk of stroke in controlled analyses
- death rate from coronary artery disease
- pain levels perceived by patients with end-stage cancer
- levels of physical disability among older persons at 1,2 or 3 yr follow-up

Religiousness is associated with...

- greater physical health and greater longevity
- positive perception of ability to function (true at any level of chronic illness)
- rapid recovery from hip fracture

Figure 2: Effects of Religious Beliefs and Activities on Mental Health (Koenig, '97)

Scientific studies indicate that...

Frequent church or synagogue attendance is associated with

Lower

- risk of depression (40-50% lower)
- rates of suicide
- rates of anxiety disorder
- rates of alcoholism and drug use

Higher

- social support, self esteem, life satisfaction

Greater

- well-being, happiness, adjustment, usefulness
- positive affect and mood 12 years later among young adults

Scientific studies also indicate that...

Private religious activities, such as prayer and scripture reading, are associated with

- greater well-being and satisfaction
- less death anxiety
- lower rates of alcoholism and drug use

Interventions for depression and anxiety disorder that integrate religion with psychotherapy induce recovery quicker than secular techniques alone.

In spite of these facts, mainstream treatments for mental or physical problems rarely incorporate the religious or spiritual domain. Psychological interventions generally focus on emotions, problems and ego strength and goals. These are important aspects of healthy human development but so are aspirations, higher ideals, strength of character, and sense of meaning. The latter point to the noble aspects of human nature which at times, enable people to find a sense of peace and purpose even within the most difficult circumstances.

Is Unrestricted TV A Contributing Factor In Depression?

For every 100 Americans there are 81 television sets, and a typical household will have the television on for six hours a day. What are the dominant images of human behavior and motivation portrayed on TV and by newspapers that seem incapable of admiring anyone or anything? How do they influence one's beliefs about the world, oneself and other people? What views of human nature are found among people raised on a steady diet of TV and media coverage of negative events? What do they trust in? Who are their heroes? What do they strive for? What do they believe will bring them happiness and well-being? *How does their health compare with that of people who restrict TV usage in favor of religious practices?*

Peter Gibbon (Gibbon '99), a Harvard researcher, claims that "well-being depends not only on nutrition, sunlight, and exercise; on friendship, work and love, but also on how ...(we) see the world. Subtly and powerfully the media helps shape ...(our) world view." Journalists, he says, now have more influence than ministers, professors, novelists and politicians. No longer are actors, musicians and supermodels just entertainers, he adds, they are now treated like "philosopher-kings, telling us how to live." According to Gibbon and many others, "the media creates the impression that sleaze is everywhere, that nothing is sacred, that no one is noble, and that there are no heroes."

What effect might this have on our ability to hope and trust, on our sense of well being, and on our attitude toward others?...

No Wonder So Many of Us Are Depressed

Perhaps because there is no longer a public language in the United States that adequately expresses what is *right with people*, many individuals seem genuinely unable to even recognize, let alone acknowledge, their own strengths such as, courage, hope, humor, determination, etc. As a society, we also lack a shared understanding of the innate human potential to grow from and beyond problems. The immeasurables that make life worth living (e.g., love, friendship, compassion, hope, joy, service, etc.) tend to be absent from mainstream perceptions of normalcy and health. In other words, how many of us are able to describe what it means to be healthy or normal in more positive or meaningful terms than the absence of symptoms or some statistical average? We know an "average" found in a particular

society may *not* represent what is “normal” for the human species. Should a physically active, financially successful adult who cannot love or respect others be considered healthy or normal?

By focusing only on the measurable and by avoiding the subtle dimensions of human experience, Western psychology and medicine have contributed to the very diminished and pessimistic view of what it means to be a human being that is now prevalent in America. The media’s fixation on the negative and education’s dutiful avoidance of what is not measurable, have also helped to create a nation of people who tend to identify themselves and others as their problems or diagnosis, and a social network based on what is *wrong* with people (e.g., “I *am* a cancer patient”, “I *am* an alcoholic”, “I *am* an adult child of a...”, etc.).

Figure 3 presents an optimistic model of human development that is consistent with research in developmental psychology and with teachings from the great wisdom traditions. It provides a secular rationale for developing the most humane parts of ourselves, parts that science now tells us are critical aspects of health and healing (Benson, 1997). A growing body of research suggests that there is a strong relationship between health and the human longing for more than *just* external rewards or success. Even devout rationalists are beginning to explore these subtle aspects of health and to scientifically affirm what we all seem, on some level, to already know.

Figure 3
HOW DO YOU CHOSE TO LIVE?

AUTOMATIC, REACTIVE LIVING (Survival)	EGO-INTENTIONAL LIVING (Efficaciousness)	PURPOSEFUL LIVING (Fulfillment)
REACTIVE: Behavior programmed by personal, cultural & physical environments	INTERACTIVE: Efficacious behavior in family, social & work situations	INTEGRATIVE: Conscious choice reflecting virtues, principles & respect for oneself & others
PHYSIOLOGICAL: Increase pleasure & comfort, avoid pain or threat	PSYCHOLOGICAL: Achieve personal & interpersonal desires & goals	TELEOLOGICAL: Find meaning beyond personal & material realm
UNCONSCIOUS: “automatic pilot”, nonreflective, just reacts	SEMI-CONSCIOUS: “little story” of ego likes, desires, fears, etc.	CONSCIOUS: part of “bigger story” of life, a “good” beyond ego
Emotions		Aspirations

Developmental psychology tells us that fully functioning and happy adults are committed to something more than *just* satisfying their own needs and desires. They tend to be people who try to live according to principles, are concerned about others and generally, derive meaning from serving a “good” larger than themselves. Given the right environment and influences, the *main interest* of healthy individuals seems to move from satisfying physical needs, to creating a position and identity for

themselves in the world, and then, to living a life of integrity dedicated to a purpose greater than themselves.

For a variety of reasons, some people seem not to progress beyond Reactive Living. Some, especially in this society, do not seem to *know* that there is something to life beyond fulfilling ego desires. Our society lacks common guidelines and systemic support to help individuals grow beyond Ego-Intentional Living. It is common for Americans to feel discontent and be labeled “depressed” once they achieve their goals and acquire all they wish. Of course, depression is also common among those who do not have what they want, or have come to believe they will not achieve or acquire what they want.

Though immensely helpful when used appropriately, mind altering medications sometimes alleviate a natural and *healthy dissatisfaction with that which can never fully satisfy*. Have we forgotten that healthy discontent can be a breeding ground for wisdom and determination to improve the situation or oneself. Dissatisfaction, rightly guided, can motivate people to gain a deeper understanding of what is ultimately important to them and how to pursue that. In some situations, inappropriate medication can soften the motivation to develop qualities such as determination, self-respect, respect for others, etc., qualities that may be needed to achieve goals or to move on to the next stage of emotional and spiritual development.

Overlooking Our 'Higher' Capacities Can Bring Us 'Down'

It is important to meet our physical and emotional needs and to achieve our personal goals, but pursuing this *alone* can create unnecessary stress and anxiety and it will never satisfy more subtle human longings. In order to keep things in perspective and to have a sense of peace and fulfillment even when things are not going the way we would like, we must develop a part of ourselves that is deeper and more essential than our personalities and our ego-desires. The wisdom traditions teach us that lasting fulfillment comes from being committed to something greater than *just* our wants and wishes, something like Truth, Love, Justice, Beauty, or some higher good. Experience teaches us that fulfillment comes from living a conscious and balanced life that includes our higher ideals *as well* as the satisfaction of our physical, emotional and social needs.

On the other hand, failure to live a balanced life or to develop higher human capacities can lead to depression, chronic dissatisfaction and negativity, and to unnecessary stress and anxiety due to the ***lack of***

- **A source of hope** when life is difficult
- **A reason to forgive or trust**
- **A sense of the 'good' within** oneself and others
- **A frame of reference** for keeping oneself, one's activities & one's life in perspective
- **A basis for setting priorities** & knowing what is important & what is not
- **A sense of meaning or purpose** beyond satisfying personal desires and goals

- **The motivation, resiliency and inner peace** that can come from having high ideals to grow towards & universal principles to live by *regardless of circumstances*

Figure 4 is a practical tool that can help us recognize when we may be causing ourselves unnecessary stress and when it might be beneficial to adopt a larger perspective on life. When we are caught by our ego-desires alone, we are likely to overly stressed and worried and to be experiencing many of the states listed in the left column. At such times, we would probably benefit from re-evaluating our priorities and from serving a good beyond *just* getting or having what we want. The right column points to indicators and potential benefits of making conscious choices and developing personal qualities that reflect one's higher ideals. Medical research has shown that sustaining the ways of being in the left column for long periods of time can be detrimental to our health (Goleman, 1993). Traditional wisdom and research both claim that as individuals age healthfully, their *main* focus shifts from the concerns described in the left column in Figure 4, to those in the middle and right columns.

Figure 4
BENEFITS OF PURPOSEFUL LIVING

REACTIVE & 'EGO' LIVING

reaction
contraction
despair
focus on what divides
angry demands
sense of separation
fear & worry
control
focus on what's wrong
personal likes & dislikes
agitation
quantity
resistance
judgment
"good" for self alone
caught in own "little story"
focus on goal alone

PURPOSEFUL LIVING

action (response)
expansion
hope & faith
focus on what unites
justice-based requests
connection
trust & appropriate action
allowing choice/consequence
focus on what's right & possible
virtues & core values
calm
quality
choice based on principles
discernment
"good" for all
aware of a "bigger story"
focus on goal and means

We can reduce the negative impact of living in an uncertain and rapidly changing world by consciously focusing on what has lasting value and on what gives meaning to our lives. This gives us a healthy alternative to the distress caused by too many choices, over activity, bad news, unwanted change, or fear. Pursuing personal goals is less stressful and more joyful when we make conscious choices that are consistent with our core values and higher principles. Listening to our sense of *what is right and what kind of person we want to be*, as well as to our ego wants, can

bring greater peace of mind. This does not mean a stress free life, but it does mean living a life that has purpose and meaning. This gives us a basis and motivation for making healthy choices, for keeping things in perspective, and for *not spending 10 dollars worth of stress on 10 cent problems.*

Purposeful Living requires that we make choices that are consistent with our higher values and that we develop inner qualities that can improve our relationships and our sense of well being, qualities such as, patience, forgiveness, detachment, assertiveness, etc. Developing a healthy balance of these inner resources can obviously help to reduce stress, but it can also increase a sense of choice and control, and peace of mind regardless of circumstances. It may even enable us to actually make the dietary and lifestyle changes that we already know we should make. But *how* do we do this?

Figure 5 identifies practical, conscious choices that unleash powerful inner resources, reduce stress and improve one's sense of well-being. It also demonstrates the use of an apparently universal spiritual language rarely spoken in public in this society.

Figure 5 **Disease or Difficulties in Life** **CANNOT PREVENT Us from...**

BEING

- ◆ HONEST with ourselves and others
- ◆ DETERMINED to do the best we can
- ◆ LOVING and KIND to others and to ourselves
- ◆ WISE with regard to what is important and what is not
- ◆ FAITHFUL to our deepest truths and guiding principles
- ◆ OPEN TO the BEAUTY of nature
- ◆ CREATIVE with how we respond to circumstances
- ◆ OPEN TO LOVE
- ◆ HOPEFUL that we will learn from difficulties and easier times will come
- ◆ DISCERNING as to what is best for us
- ◆ APPRECIATIVE of everyday blessings and gifts
- ◆ FORGIVING of others and ourselves
- ◆ GRATEFUL for the good things we have
- ◆ RESPECTFUL and CONSIDERATE of others
- ◆ FRIENDLY whether or not it is returned

HAVING

- ◆ COURAGE to do what needs to be done
- ◆ RESPECT FOR OURSELVES, our gifts and our good intentions
- ◆ PERSEVERANCE in working towards what is best
- ◆ PATIENCE with ourselves, others, and circumstances
- ◆ MODERATION and balance in how we live our lives
- ◆ COMPASSION toward others
- ◆ a sense of HUMOR
- ◆ a sense of DETACHMENT from negative thoughts and emotions
- ◆ TRUST in the wisdom of our souls
- ◆ TACT in how we speak our truth
- ◆ SELF DISCIPLINE in areas where it is important
- ◆ HUMILITY
- ◆ FAIRNESS and MERCY toward others and ourselves
- ◆ REVERENCE for life

Note: This information is meant to provide an example of one way of approaching the emotional and spiritual dimensions of health; an approach that has been positively received by people from widely different backgrounds. It is not meant to be used in a prescriptive or guilt inducing way. I believe that considering these ways of being may help those of us without a faith gain more of the health benefits that have been associated with religious commitment. For those with a religious commitment, it may provide a rationale for activating our faith more fully. Experimenting with these ways of being can help all of us recognize, and take greater responsibility for, the connection between our health and how we choose to be in the world. It can help broaden our focus to include our inner intentions, as well as our external goals and desires.

Difficult circumstances and the emotions that accompany them are not easy to deal with, but with right guidance, we can become wiser and emotionally healthier people because of them. We can learn a great deal by asking ourselves how people we admire would handle the kind of situations we find ourselves in. If we identify the personal characteristics we admire in these people, we can then choose to develop those qualities in ourselves. We can intentionally focus on the kind of person we want to be and the qualities we want to bring forth in a situation, instead of focusing on what we don't like or want. Even if this doesn't change the circumstances immediately, it can definitely change us. By practicing desirable inner qualities, we can move beyond habitual *reactions* toward *actions* based on higher principles and ideals. This results in greater peace of mind and confidence, which of course, reduces the stress that can hinder the functioning of the immune system (Goleman, 1993)

Equally important, consciously developing inner resources enables us to grow through and beyond difficult circumstances and enables us to be of greater service to ourselves, our families and our communities. We can become more like the people we admire and perhaps someday, be a model for someone else. In a society well aware of the dark side of human nature, we can remind ourselves and others of the tremendous potential for good that lies within us all. We can make choices that reflect wisdom and a genuine love for ourselves and others. How could this *not* improve our health and well being and the health and well being of the social systems around us? David Lynch, a physician and well known medical researcher says,

“The mandate to ‘Love your neighbors as you love yourself’ is not just a moral mandate. It’s a physiological mandate. Caring is biological. One thing you get from caring for others is you’re not lonely. And the more connected you are to life, the healthier you are.” (Lynch, 1977)

Failure to acknowledge and develop these higher capacities leaves us with little resistance to the vicissitudes of life, or with an impoverished spiritual immune system,

Developing A Healthy Spiritual Immune System

A strong spiritual immune system increases our sense of

Well Being ♦ Loving Kindness ♦ Harmony ♦ Balance ♦ Concern for Others

Desirable states such as these cannot be maintained in modern times without recognizing and developing our ability to seek a good beyond the fulfillment of just ego desires. This requires that we fill our lives with personal qualities such as those listed below in Figure 6. Desirable character qualities are the components of a strong spiritual immune system. They are like phyto-nutrients derived from a balanced spiritual diet.

Common complaints such as anxiety, fatigue, resentment, jealousy, envy, and busyness are often associated with a deficiency or toxic amount of one or more qualities or spiritual nutrients. Striving for the optimal balance of these essential nutrients helps reduce unwanted stress, negative thinking and self-defeating habit patterns.

There is some evidence that people addicted to poverty or affluence, dominance or victimization, or electronic representations of reality may respond positively to the administration of appropriate dosages of missing nutrients.

Figure 6 Maintaining a Healthy Spiritual Immune System: Essential Nutrients

Intra-Personal

Awareness
Confidence
Commitment
Courage
Creativity
Detachment
Determination
Discernment*
Enthusiasm
Excellence
Flexibility
Gratitude
Hopefulness
Humility
Idealism
Joyfulness
Moderation
Obedience
Patience
Perseverance
Purposefulness
Reliability
Responsibility
Self discipline
Self respect
Simplicity
Sincerity
Trustworthiness

Inter-Personal

Assertiveness
Commitment
Compassion
Consideration
Courtesy
Empathy
Fairness
Friendliness
Generosity
Helpfulness
Honesty
Humor
Kindness
Loyalty
Mercy
Obedience
Respect*
Service
Tact
Tolerance
Trust

Trans-Personal

Faith
Forgiveness
Love*
Peacefulness
Reverence
Wisdom*

Too much, as well as, too little of any one desirable quality can result in undesirable behavior. For example, impulsivity can signal a deficiency of self discipline, while compulsivity generally reflects a toxic level of self discipline. In order to avoid

difficulties associated with an overabundance or indiscriminant use of any one spiritual nutrient, awareness of complementary nutrients is useful. Certain combinations (co-nutrients) tend to maintain overall behavior and the spiritual immune system in a balanced state.

Examples of "**spiritual co-nutrients**" to be kept in balance are:

justice & mercy
assertiveness & detachment
loyalty & self respect
obedience & responsibility
truthfulness & tact
compassion & detachment
self discipline & joyfulness

determination & flexibility
purposefulness & discernment
peacefulness & enthusiasm
courage & understanding
love & wisdom
idealism & practicality

We must remember that

"Life is a sacred adventure. Every day we encounter signs that point to the active presence of Spirit in the world around us. Spiritual literacy is the ability to read the signs written in the texts of our own experiences. Whether viewed as a gift from God or a skill to be cultivated, this facility enables us to discern and decipher a world full of meaning" Brussat ('96)

What a powerful anti-depressant!

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