
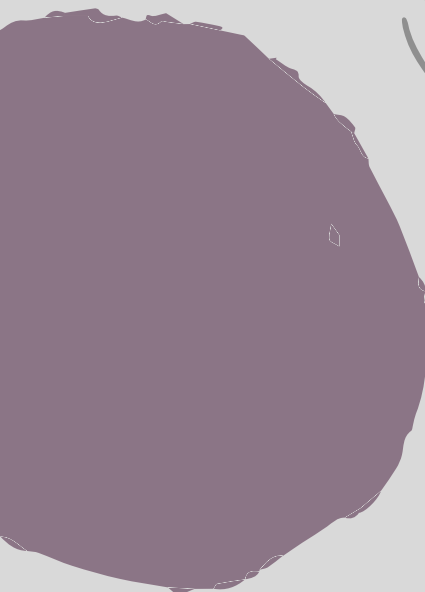





*The Power of Spirituality in
Recovery: Evidence of Hope*



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ISSUE BRIEF #1:

THE POWER OF SPIRITUALITY IN RECOVERY: EVIDENCE OF HOPE

For many people living in the grip of substance use disorders (SUD), much of life—and much of the surrounding world—can seem dangerous, even desperate. Faith and hope are hard to find even in the best of times, and these are not the best of times. At this writing, the burden on many people with SUD has grown far heavier, with the effects of global pandemic, social isolation, financial recession, escalating issues of social injustice and trauma, and widening health and financial disparities in many communities of color. This might be a good time to look for hope, inspiration, and spiritual grounding.

About This Series

The Southeast Addiction Technology Transfer Center (Southeast ATTC) is preparing an in-depth monograph on the power of spirituality in SUD recovery, scheduled for release in Spring, 2021. Meant for treatment, recovery, and faith audiences, the monograph will offer data on effectiveness, wisdom from history, and an abundance of suggestions for treatment, recovery, and faith leaders. Meanwhile, we are releasing two issue briefs, each offering a look at one facet of the monograph.

- This Issue Brief #1 examines the volume of evidence for the power of spirituality found in the literature of the field.
- Issue Brief #2, “The Experience of Spirituality in Recovery,” will look beyond the evidence to the human experience of spirituality as it has been described in the science-based literature on substance use disorders and recovery.

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Spirituality is an old subject in anecdotal accounts of recovery, and one that is finally taking its rightful place in the scientific literature. “Spirituality” refers to that fundamental and transcendent connectedness that, for some people, overlaps with religion. White and Laudet (2006) wrote of its diversity in recovery, saying that “Clients describe spirituality as a subjective experience, a relationship (with self and/or with resources beyond the self), a core quality of character and a style of living.”[1]

What Can Spirituality Do?

White and Laudet minced no words when they cited “growing evidence that spirituality can serve as an antidote for substance use disorders.” There may have been good reason for their encouragement. “The beginnings of modern addiction counseling were marked by an emphasis on the role of spirituality in recovery,” they wrote. “This interest in religious and spiritual influences on recovery faded in the wake of new biopsychological models of intervention, but is increasing once again. No, the questions being asked about spirituality and recovery are not new, but this is the first time in history rigorous scientific methods are being employed to answer them.” [2]

The massive study and meta-analysis undertaken by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) also concluded that spirituality and religion are important components of SUD prevention, treatment, and recovery for many people. [3] And after their own exhaustive analysis of the literature, White and Laudet (2006) were ready to cite specific recovery benefits of spirituality: “...studies confirm that spirituality can be a catalyst of recovery initiation, a protective shield in early recovery and an increasingly significant dimension of long-term recovery maintenance.” [4]

Even a look at only 25 studies and meta-analysis provides a long list of ways in which spirituality in general can support recovery and well-being.

For example:

- There is evidence that spirituality-based programs tend to make the most recovery progress [5] and that spiritual elements within these programs can raise program success, [4] lower the risk of relapse, [7] and help participants cope with the effects of trauma. [8]
- The practice of including the individual’s faith in wellness planning has also been found to contribute to lower numbers of hospitalizations and relapses. [9]
- Within or without the context of religion, spirituality has been found to lower anxiety and raise resilience, [10] buffering stress [11] and providing protection from the negative effects of stress. [12]
- Spirituality can fuel optimism [13] and bring hope even in seemingly hopeless situations, [14] in some cases by increasing people’s faith in God’s power. [15]
- Spirituality can help people cope with adversity by providing a vehicle for seeking meaning. [16]

- Spirituality has been found to enhance self-concept, by helping people regulate their self-esteem, [17] by encouraging knowledge and skill building, [18] by influencing their goals and the actions they take in pursuit of those goals, and by strengthening their sense of purpose. [20]
- Spirituality can also help people progress in the areas of appropriate behavior and moral decision-making, by protecting them from destructive urges [21] and by providing positive role models, moral rules and virtues, and a sense of moral order. [22]
- When the religion of the individual's choice is also part of the mix, religious affiliation can strengthen people's social and organizational ties [23] and increase their access to social support. [24]

Spiritual Resources and Their Benefits

Of course, there is no blood test to measure spirituality. In Miller's (1998) words, "Spirituality...is very difficult to delimit. By its focus on the transcendent, it defies customary conceptual boundaries." [25] To address this challenge, researchers have identified a range of factors that often serve as evidence of spirituality. In real life, spirituality and religion are expressed in a wide array of affiliations, beliefs, activities, attitudes, human qualities, and experiences. Many of these have been and are being recorded, studied, and matched with outcome data for people recovering from SUDs.

Although life does not neatly divide itself into "cause and effect," research often has to try to do so—though this can be difficult with a subject as fluid, subjective, and unpredictable as spirituality. For example, the last dot-point (just above the last sub-heading) includes the assertion that religious affiliation can strengthen people's social and organizational ties. It is difficult to prove that it was the religious affiliation itself that strengthened people's social and organizational ties, when it might be that people who tend to develop strong social and organizational ties are also more likely to join religions. So, to reflect the researchers' conclusions without making too many assumptions, we might think of the "cause" side simply as "Spiritual Resources" and the "effects" side simply as "Benefits."

And given the data reported in our 25 source articles, we might divide the "cause" or "Spiritual Resources" side into two main categories:

1. "Activities that Build Spirituality" (activities that study participants were engaging in within treatment or recovery groups, or in their larger spiritual lives)
2. "Evidence of Spirituality" (feelings, attitudes, and experiences) that were already apparent in the lives of study participants during the study period

On the “Benefits” side (the positive outcomes recorded), we find three main categories of data:

1. “Treatment and/or Recovery Success” (in recovery from SUDs or mental health challenges)
2. “The Basics” (essentials that people need for basic stability in life and recovery)
3. Areas of “Ongoing Spiritual Growth” that might contribute to lasting recovery

Our Main Table (below) shows the overall shape and structure of the spiritual resources and benefits reported in our 25 source articles. Then, for each of the five columns in the Main Table, we will offer a column-specific sub-table that shows more detail about the resources or benefits organized under that column.

Main Table: Spiritual Resources and Benefits

Spiritual Resources		Benefits		
1. Activities that Build Spirituality	2. Evidence of Spirituality	3. Treatment and/or Recovery Success	4. The Basics	5. Ongoing Spiritual Growth
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recovery Group Participation • Spiritual and/or Religious Activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spiritual Feelings and Beliefs • Spiritual Attitudes • Spiritual Experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recovery from Substance Use Disorders • Recovery from Mental Health Challenges 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social Connectedness • Help with Stress Management • Life and Spiritual Skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spiritual Connectedness • Meaning and Purpose • Hope and Happiness • Moral Relief

Next, we draw from the source articles and look more closely at the spiritual resources that their authors recorded, with a separate table for each of the five columns in the Main Table.

So we start with Column 1, the first column of Spiritual Resources. Here are some activities that participants in the studies engaged in that tended to build spirituality:



Spiritual Resources		Benefits		
1. Activities that Build Spirituality	2. Evidence of Spirituality	3. Treatment and/or Recovery Success	4. The Basics	5. Ongoing Spiritual Growth
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recovery Group Participation • Spiritual and/or Religious Activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spiritual Feelings and Beliefs • Spiritual Attitudes • Spiritual Experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From Substance Use Disorders • From Mental Health Challenges 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social Connectedness • Help with Stress Management • Life and Spiritual Skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spiritual Connectedness • Meaning and Purpose • Hope and Happiness • Moral Relief

Recovery Group Participation	Spiritual and/or Religious Activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Going to many AA meetings²⁶ • Having²⁷ or being an AA sponsor²⁸ • Collaborative coping²⁹ • Helping others³⁰ • Working Step Eleven³¹ • Having broad experience in AA³² 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attending more religious services³³ • Spiritual and/or religious practices³⁴ • Positive religious coping³⁵ • Social support³⁶ • Social acceptance³⁷

Looking at the activities identified by the researchers, it seems that one task for professionals, volunteers, and supportive communities might be to identify potential obstacles—things that might be keeping people from engaging in these kinds of activities—and ways of helping people overcome them. Another might be to look for or envision tools and resources that might help people find the most benefit in these kinds of activities.

Next, we move on to Column 2 of our Main Table. It lists some feelings, beliefs, attitudes, and experiences in participants’ lives that the researchers measured—elements that one might interpret as evidence of spirituality.



Spiritual Resources		Benefits		
1. Activities that Build Spirituality	2. Evidence of Spirituality	3. Treatment and/or Recovery Success	4. The Basics	5. Ongoing Spiritual Growth
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recovery Group Participation Spiritual and/or Religious Activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Spiritual Feelings and Beliefs Spiritual Attitudes Spiritual Experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> From Substance Use Disorders From Mental Health Challenges 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social Connectedness Help with Stress Management Life and Spiritual Skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Spiritual Connectedness Meaning and Purpose Hope and Happiness Moral Relief

Spiritual Feelings and Beliefs	Spiritual Attitudes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Changes in God consciousness³⁸ Increase in faith³⁹ Belief in a universal spirit⁴⁰ Feeling God's presence⁴¹ Sense of personhood⁴² Sense of empowerment⁴³ Sense of hope⁴⁴ Sense of self-transcendence⁴⁵ Sense of meaning⁴⁶ and spiritual purpose⁴⁷ Sense of spiritual well-being⁴⁸ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Openness⁴⁹ Optimism⁵⁰ Contentment⁵¹ Gratitude (among people who are abstinent after treatment)⁵² Love⁵³ Commitment to a higher power⁵⁴
	Spiritual Experiences
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Having had a spiritual awakening⁵⁵ Daily spiritual experiences⁵⁶

It is worth noting that this “Evidence of Spirituality” column is still part of the “cause” side—elements that led to positive outcomes in study participants’ recovery, rather than the outcomes themselves. In many cases, these kinds of resources are experiences, attitudes, feelings, and beliefs in the lives of people who are still very new to recovery—or are trying recovery again after many attempts that ended in disappointment. At this point, people may be “barely hanging on,” assailed by:

- the neurological chaos that often trails in the wake of acute withdrawal;
- the family, social, and professional wreckage and grief that active addiction can set in motion; and/or
- the often-indelible record of arrests, detention, and incarceration that can threaten to follow and limit a human life forever.

So people may be metaphorically hanging on by their fingernails—but look what they are hanging onto! Picture a man, woman, or virtual child, racked by foreboding and feelings of failure and self-blame. But that man, woman, or child is still trying to carve out a little corner of consciousness to nurture the new growth of something real and true and transcendent. How does this happen—and happen to so many people? And what can the community do to help protect and sustain this process?

Moving on to the “Benefits” side of our Main Table, we start with Column 3, “Treatment and/or Recovery Success.” Here we see a number of standard measures of success in recovery from SUDs and co-occurring mental health conditions.

Spiritual Resources		Benefits		
1. Activities that Build Spirituality	2. Evidence of Spirituality	3. Treatment and/or Recovery Success	4. The Basics	5. Ongoing Spiritual Growth
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recovery Group Participation • Spiritual and/or Religious Activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spiritual Feelings and Beliefs • Spiritual Attitudes • Spiritual Experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From Substance Use Disorders • From Mental Health Challenges 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social Connectedness • Help with Stress Management • Life and Spiritual Skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spiritual Connectedness • Meaning and Purpose • Hope and Happiness • Moral Relief

Recovery from Substance Use Disorders	Recovery from Mental Health Challenges
<p>More AA involvement⁵⁷ Less cravings⁵⁸ and more days abstinent⁵⁹ Less heavy drinking at 6-month follow-up⁶⁰ Less severe relapse episodes⁶¹ Longer recent abstinence⁶² and sobriety⁶³ No cravings in the past week⁶⁴ More recovery progress;⁶⁵ lower relapse risk⁶⁶ Lower dropout rate one-year post-discharge⁶⁷ Better likelihood of sustaining recovery⁶⁸ Still being in recovery after three years⁶⁹</p>	<p>Psychological growth⁷⁰ Protection from destructive urges⁷¹ Lower severity of mental health conditions⁷² Better trauma/PTSD recovery⁷³ Fewer hospitalizations⁷⁴ and shorter hospital stays⁷⁵ for mental health conditions Lower anxiety⁷⁶ Less depression⁷⁷ Better endocrine and immune functioning⁷⁸</p>

Each of those areas of treatment and recovery success was shown to be more likely in people who were: a) receiving spirituality-based services, b) participating in one or more of the spiritual activities shown in column 1 of our Main Table, or c) showing some of the evidence of spirituality listed in column 2 of the Main Table.

The next category of benefits is Column 4 of our Main Table, called simply “The Basics.” Given the physical and emotional devastation, loss, toxic stress, trauma, and illness that many lives have absorbed, there is often a primary need for psychological safety and stabilization of people’s physical and emotional reactions to stress and challenge. The most essential early recovery needs are often for things like trustworthy human connection, assistance in managing high levels of stress, and the range of life and spiritual skills that help people bring their lives back into balance. Whether or not people will seek out or accept these kinds of resources is often a pivotal question in early or shaky recovery.

In the studies described in the articles consulted for this paper, the investigators found that those who had received spiritual services or resources were more likely to connect with and take advantage of the benefits listed below.

Spiritual Resources		Benefits		
1. Activities that Build Spirituality	2. Evidence of Spirituality	3. Treatment and/or Recovery Success	4. The Basics	5. Ongoing Spiritual Growth
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recovery Group Participation Spiritual and/or Religious Activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Spiritual Feelings and Beliefs Spiritual Attitudes Spiritual Experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> From Substance Use Disorders From Mental Health Challenges 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social Connectedness Help with Stress Management Life and Spiritual Skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Spiritual Connectedness Meaning and Purpose Hope and Happiness Moral Relief

Social Connectedness	Life and Spiritual Skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social and organizational ties⁷⁹ More social support⁸⁰ Engaging in healthy, appropriate intimacy⁸¹ Connecting with positive role models⁸² Greater inclination to volunteer⁸³ Positive influence on goals and their pursuit⁸⁴ Stronger community engagement⁸⁵ Developing an attitude of tolerance⁸⁶ Engaging in more helping behaviors⁸⁷ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More daily prayer⁸⁸ More meditation⁸⁹ Knowledge and skill building⁹⁰ More effective coping⁹¹ More effective self-regulation⁹² More effective regulation of self-esteem⁹³ Stronger sense of responsibility⁹⁴ Ability to keep commitments⁹⁵ More effective moral decisions⁹⁶ More effective self-protection⁹⁷ Higher achievement⁹⁸
<p>Help with Stress Management</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Spirituality as a buffer for stress⁹⁹ Sense of spiritual trust¹⁰⁰ Resilience to stress,¹⁰¹ less distress¹⁰² 	

And remember: These are only the forms of social connectedness, help with stress management, and basic life and spiritual skills that the investigators looked for and recorded. The range of possible benefits in these areas may be enormous. What might the community do to help people foster these and other important kinds of connections and skills, and what role might you play in helping that happen?

The last category on the “Benefits” side is Column 5 of our Main Table, “Ongoing Spiritual Growth.” Here we see again some of the resources from Columns 1 and 2, sometimes in more mature form. The fact that some aspects of spirituality show up on both the “cause” side and the “effect” side of a multi-source collection of data is not a logical problem. This might reflect both:

- the differences in different investigators’ interpretations of these experiences and
- the fact that spirituality is often its own best reward.

For example, having a spiritual experience in early recovery might strengthen hope and provide incentives for staying sober—and recovery itself might lead to many spiritual experiences over the years.

The benefits organized under “Ongoing Spiritual Growth” are divided into four categories: “Spiritual Connectedness,” “Hope and Happiness,” “Moral Relief,” and “Meaning and Purpose.”

Spiritual Resources		Benefits		
1. Activities that Build Spirituality	2. Evidence of Spirituality	3. Treatment and/or Recovery Success	4. The Basics	5. Ongoing Spiritual Growth
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recovery Group Participation Spiritual and/or Religious Activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Spiritual Feelings and Beliefs Spiritual Attitudes Spiritual Experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> From Substance Use Disorders From Mental Health Challenges 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social Connectedness Help with Stress Management Life and Spiritual Skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Spiritual Connectedness Meaning and Purpose Hope and Happiness Moral Relief

Spiritual Connectedness	Moral Relief
Spiritual development ¹⁰³ More God-related experiences ¹⁰⁴ More daily spiritual experiences of God or purpose ¹⁰⁵ Feeling valued by and connected with the divine ¹⁰⁶ Belief in God's power ¹⁰⁷ Surrendering one's will and life to God ¹⁰⁸ Higher power as a collaborating ally in recovery ¹⁰⁹	Sense of moral order ¹¹⁰ Perception of moral rules and virtues ¹¹¹ Sense of altruism ¹¹² Feeling more protectiveness toward others ¹¹³ Sense of having a path toward purification ¹¹⁴ Feeling validated in a moral sense ¹¹⁵ Reduction in stigma and shame ¹¹⁶ Feeling whole ¹¹⁷ Feeling that one is a good person ¹¹⁸ Having a higher sense of self-worth ¹¹⁹
Hope and Happiness	Meaning and Purpose
Sense of hope, ¹²⁰ even in seemingly hopeless situations ¹²¹ Strength, ¹²² optimism, ¹²³ and satisfaction ¹²⁴ Higher quality of life ¹²⁵ Higher sense of well-being ¹²⁶	Finding meaning ¹²⁷ Having a sense of purpose ¹²⁸

If you are a faith leader, you might see in those benefits many of the connections, convictions, experiences, and forms of progress you seek to instill in your congregation. If you are a treatment practitioner, a peer recovery supporter, or a member of a mutual-help recovery group, you probably recognize the experiences of many of the people in recovery you have served and supported. As these benefits are woven into people's lives and associated with recovery in their minds, it gives them more and better defenses against the voice of addiction that—like the make-believe monster in the movie—is probably not really dead, just sleeping.

Now, does all this evidence mean that "just any" respectful spiritual intervention that honors each individual's faith orientation will necessarily improve recovery outcomes—even perhaps improve people's spiritual lives? Unfortunately, that does not appear to be the case. The monograph coming out next spring will describe two studies in which a carefully designed and delivered spiritual intervention did virtually nothing that the investigators hoped it would do!^[129] To pretend that all this is simple would be a mistake.

No one knows how the troubles of the world, the nation, or a single individual will rise and fall, but times of crisis are also times of opportunity. Please look for Issue Brief #2, to be released soon, and the monograph that will come out next spring. Please welcome collaboration from people whose perspectives on hope and spirituality complement your own. And please remember that the light can shine from the most unlikely places—and never stop looking for it.

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