

DOES SPIRITUALITY STILL HAVE RELEVANCE FOR RECOVERY?

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By most traditional measures of religiosity and spirituality, the era of faith being a central component in the everyday lives of Americans would seem to be on the decline. Evidence of this can be seen in the 2014 Religious Landscape Study conducted by PEW Research. [1] This study indicated that the percentage of people who identified their current religion as atheist, agnostic, or nothing in particular showed a statistically significant increase in all generations between the years 2007 and 2014.

In addition, the younger a particular generation is, the greater the percentage of individuals belonging thereto who identify as atheist, agnostic, or nothing in particular. Based on that finding, the waning role of religiosity in the United States is likely to be an ongoing trend. In fact, just seven years later in 2021, PEW reported that 28% of all respondents identified their current religion as atheist, agnostic, or nothing in particular. [2] This is the highest this percentage has been since this data has been collected.

With such a significant shift away from individuals having an identified religion, one may be inclined to ask whether religiosity and spirituality have any relevant role to play in American society in our present day. In considering that question, we can return to the 2021 report from PEW.

The results of this poll demonstrate that, although the indicators suggest that religiosity is on the decline:

- 71% of adults in the U.S. identify with a formal religion.
- 66% of adults in the U.S. report religion is either somewhat or very important to them.
- 50% of adults in the U.S. report attending religious services several times a year or more.
- 62% report praying at least weekly, with 46% of adults in the U.S. reporting that they pray at least once per day.

Therefore, although on the decline, religiosity remains a significant aspect of the lives of most people in the United States.

If this were an inquiry into the relevance of religion, the PEW report would point toward the answer. The question posed in article's title, however, is whether spirituality still has relevance for recovery; and religion and spirituality are not synonymous. In his 2006 article "The Spiritual Platform: Clinical Spirituality in Addiction Treatment," Jeffrey Georgi frames the distinction between religion and spirituality in this way:


"Religion comes from the Latin root religio meaning obligation or rule. For most of us, religion provides us with a guide, a rule about how to live the 'righteous life.' On the other hand, the Latin root for spirituality is spiritus meaning breath or breathing." Religions often have a text or texts that are considered sacred, definitive rules regarding what is right and wrong, and established beliefs and/or actions that are necessary for one identifying as being of a particular faith or religion. Spirituality, on the other hand, is the essence of life." [3]

Most of the information referenced in the 2021 PEW study may well be a reflection of religiosity more than of spirituality. This is likely due in part to religiosity being more readily measurable than spirituality. In the words of William R. Miller, “Spirituality...is very difficult to delimit. By its focus on the transcendent, it defies customary conceptual boundaries.” (1998) [4] The religious behaviors of participation in ritualized or corporate worship services, prayer, or giving to religious organizations, for example, are more readily and objectively quantified than how spiritual an individual may be. Here it may be important to simply acknowledge that in some cases what is being addressed as supporting recovery is likely more religious than solely spiritual support.

Although the beginnings of modern addiction counseling were steeped in an emphasis on the role of spirituality in recovery, the interest in religious and spiritual influences became less prominent in the wake of newer biopsychological models of intervention. [5] However, interest in the spiritual implications of substance use, treatment, and recovery appears to be gaining momentum once again. Although the questions being asked about spirituality and recovery are not new, this is the first time rigorous scientific methods are being employed to evaluate and answer them. [6] For example, a large 2001 study and meta-analysis undertaken by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) concluded that spirituality and religion are important components of SUD prevention, treatment, and recovery for many people. [7]

Again, here we see spirituality and religion being paired. Indeed, for many individuals and for researchers as well, separating religion and spirituality can seem to be an elusive task. One might begin to approach conceptualization of this distinction by looking at categories of elements associated with spirituality. For example, in her 2020 exploration of studies and meta-analyses related to spirituality and recovery, Pamela Woll identified two categories related to spiritual resources: activities that build spirituality (what one does) versus evidence of spirituality (one’s feelings, attitudes and experiences). Resources in the first of those two categories are more likely to be organized, action-oriented, and/or social in nature, common attributes of religion. Woll also differentiated the benefits of spirituality into three categories: treatment/recovery success, essentials people need for stability in life and recovery, and areas of ongoing spiritual growth (e.g.: spiritual connectedness, meaning and purpose, hope and happiness, and moral relief). This conceptualization provides fertile soil for more research related to the distinction between the forms of religion and the functions of spirituality. [8]

What then of the role of spirituality, which may or may not overlap with religiosity? Does it still have relevance and a role to play in recovery?



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In 2006, two researchers, William L. White and Alexandre B. Laudet, made a powerful assertion. They stated that there is “growing evidence that spirituality can serve as an antidote for substance use disorders.” As researchers, they did not make this statement arbitrarily or lightly. They cited specific recovery benefits of spirituality from a range of studies indicating “spirituality can be a catalyst of recovery initiation, a protective shield in early recovery, and an increasingly significant dimension of long-term recovery maintenance.” [9]

The previously referenced 2020 work by Woll also provides a substantial list of ways in which spirituality in general can support recovery and well-being, with citations for their source documents. Some of the notable findings gleaned from this review include that:

- Spirituality-based programs tend to make the most recovery progress [10]
- Spiritual elements within these programs can raise program success, [11] lower the risk of relapse, [12] and help participants cope with the effects of trauma. [13]
- Including an individual’s faith in wellness planning has also been found to contribute to lower numbers of hospitalizations and relapses. [14]
- Within or without the context of religion, spirituality has been found to lower anxiety and raise resilience, [15] buffering stress [16] and providing protection from the negative effects of stress. [17]
- Spirituality can also fuel optimism [18] and bring hope even in seemingly hopeless situations, [19]
- Spirituality can help people cope with adversity by providing a vehicle for seeking meaning. [20]
- In addition, the review provided a significant list of ways in which spirituality can support both recovery and general well-being. These include that:
 - Spirituality has been found to enhance self-concept, by helping people regulate their self-esteem, [21] by encouraging knowledge and skill building, [22] by influencing their goals and the actions they take in pursuit of those goals, and by strengthening their sense of purpose. [23]
 - Spirituality can also help people progress in the areas of appropriate behavior and moral decision-making, by protecting them from destructive urges [24] and by providing positive role models, moral rules and virtues, and a sense of moral order. [25]
 - When the religion of the individual’s choice is also part of the mix, religious affiliation can strengthen people’s social and organizational ties [26] and increase their access to social support. [27]

Perhaps one of the most meaningful distinctions between religion and spirituality is that, whereas religion may at times serve as a source of division by offering conflicting ideologies and worldviews from other traditions and creating “in groups” and “out groups,” spirituality tends to be more universal and unifying. In fact, the divisive nature of religion may have the end effect of mirroring and supporting the isolation so prevalent in active addiction rather than fostering healthy social supports for recovery.

Kurtz and White put it this way in their 2015 article entitled “Recovery Spirituality”: “Everyone needs a sense of ‘community’—the deep experience of being in some way at one with some others. Unlike other communities that one may join, ‘home’ is a place where we belong because it is where our very weaknesses and flaws fit in and are in fact the way we ‘fit in’.” [28]

Perhaps in the wake of waning religiosity within the United States, we as the behavioral health field and recovery community can begin to turn our attention towards the places where we find greater belonging, connection, and support. We can begin to shift our focus toward the therapeutic effects of universality and shared experience [29] rather than distinct beliefs and ideologies. We can seek to identify ways of measuring spirituality in meaningful ways. In doing so, we can honor both the traditions of the past and the lived experience of ourselves and each person we have the privilege of walking alongside on their journey to recovery.



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