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• Spirituality is a phenomenon that provides meaning to life  
• Spirituality can help a person cope with mental illness  
• Spiritual beliefs can make everyday occupations more meaningful and health-enhancing  
• Some people find it valuable to engage in shared occupations that focus on spirituality  

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Spirituality as sustenance for mental health and meaningful doing: A case illustration

By Clare Wilding

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Introduction

The relationship between spirituality and health is an area of increasing interest, as evidenced by the plethora of literature devoted to exploration and discussion of this issue.1-10 This interest is equally apparent within the profession of occupational therapy.11-15

Occupational therapy seeks to enhance the health of its patients by enabling them to participate in occupations that they want and need to do.16 It is important to recognise that the term ‘occupation’ when used by occupational therapists differs from the popular meaning of ‘work’. ‘Occupation’ in this context embraces all of the meaningful activities that people engage in to occupy themselves.16 Or, put more simply, all the things that people do. In this sense, occupation includes work and also self-care, domestic, leisure and caring activities. Interest in the relationship between spirituality, health and occupation, but with a concurrent lack of research evidence about this association, prompted me to conduct a phenomenological study of this relationship.
There is no consensus in the literature on a definition of spirituality. 17-18 Within the study discussed in this article, an exploratory approach was taken to defining spirituality that included asking each participant what spirituality meant to him or her.

**Method**
I approached two community mental health centres in rural Australia and asked case managers to invite patients, who were willing to talk about their experiences of spirituality, to participate in the study. Six people, three men and three women, aged between 35 and 55 years, volunteered to participate. Detailed demographic information was not collected since this was not relevant to the exploratory, qualitative design of the study. Participants discussed having diagnoses of one or more of the following conditions: depression; anxiety; drug and alcohol abuse; bipolar disorder; and, psychosis.

I interviewed four participants at the community mental health centre they attended and two participants in their own homes, at their request. The unstructured, in-depth interviews aimed to encourage participants to speak freely and comprehensively about their understandings and experiences of spirituality, particularly in relation to their everyday occupations and to living with mental illness. I used open-ended questioning to enable this process.

Each participant was interviewed once for approximately an hour and a half. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed, with the transcriptions forming the major data set. I analysed the data using a Heideggerian phenomenological approach, which is a qualitative research approach that aims to understand and interpret experiences in order to determine more clearly the particular essential constituents of the phenomenon under examination. 19, 20 Through multiple readings of the transcripts I coded the narrative data and combined them to form “chunks of meaning” that were subsequently compared to each person’s whole story and ultimately collapsed and interpreted into themes. As is consistent with this research paradigm, the findings presented here represent my interpretation of the data. More detail about the method has been reported previously. 21
Findings
As a ‘meta-theme’ of the study, spirituality as experienced by the participants was found to be a phenomenon that is life-sustaining. 22 In detail, eight themes were uncovered:

a) Spirituality is
   1. experienced uniquely by each participant
   2. a journey that occurs throughout each participant’s life
   3. a phenomenon that provides meaning to life

b) The relationship between spirituality and mental illness is
   4. that developing mental illness provided the catalyst for the participants’ search for a personally meaningful spirituality
   5. that spirituality helped the participants to cope with living with mental illness

c) The relationship between spirituality and occupation is
   6. that the participants engaged in spiritual occupations, which are occupations whose primary purpose is to express and experience spirituality (for example, prayer, meditation, worshipping)
   7. that spirituality is a form of Being that provides the meaning that underpins doing
   8. that engaging in shared spiritual occupation was highly valued

A more detailed comparison and explication of the themes as reflected in the six participants’ narratives has been presented elsewhere. 22 In this article, only one participant’s story is presented, as an in-depth illustration of the relationship between spirituality and health. “Bonnie”, which is a pseudonym chosen by the participant, is a man who at the time of the interview reported experiencing chronic anxiety and depression spanning a period of at least 10 years.

Themes from Bonnie’s story

Spirituality saves from death and provides meaning to life

Bonnie’s sense of spirituality has helped him to resolve the question of whether to commit suicide: *I was always searching for the answer, what’s the meaning of life? ... When I was depressed I was always thinking about ending my life. But in actual fact... life does not end, it keeps going... So that helped me... because I started to think, well maybe it doesn’t end*
anyway you know, it might end in this physical realm but it won’t end, ultimately anyway. It’ll be eternal. So the point was that I came to believe that to commit suicide or to take my own life was irrelevant.

At a later point in the interview, Bonnie stated even more bluntly that without spirituality he would have suicided. He said that if he had not developed a strong sense of personally meaningful spirituality... I'd be dead. I would be honestly because that's what kept, that's what's saved my life. That's it, the bottom line, really.... And I'm fairly confident that I will never take my own life. Now, a few years back... I would've said I'm fairly confident that sooner or later I'll take my own life... But it's changed now because of God... I honestly believe, 100% guaranteed that the reason for my existence right now... is because I believe in God.

Not only did spirituality give Bonnie a reason to not die, importantly it has also given him a reason to live. Bonnie believes... I was created for a relationship with God... So my life is all about establishing and maintaining a healthy relationship with God... It’s the spiritual realm that is what life is all about [and] that gives life substance. So that’s what’s kept me going... I'm living life because of God.

Spirituality helps a person cope with mental illness

Bonnie believes that if he asks for help from God, then he will receive it. It's basic, simple, belief and faith that there is a God and if I communicate, miracles happen... Things happened for my benefit that I couldn’t explain, but they happened... I found that [I] wouldn’t necessarily get what I wanted but I got what I needed. And it’s a cliché, but that’s the way it works. Things panned out.

Bonnie also believes that his sense of spirituality helps him deal with his anxiety by helping him to calm down. All of a sudden if I consider God, well then everything's all right, everything’s okay. Doesn't matter what’s happening in the world or in my head. Because if I believe and I reconnect and re-establish my relationship with God well I know that I’ll get lead along the right path and I won’t have to worry about the bills or the rent or ... the job or
the friends or the relationship or whatever. Because I know that through God it’ll work out…
I hand my worries to God.

Spirituality enhances ordinary occupation: meaningful being underpins doing
When Bonnie feels connected to his spirituality and is in tune with God, he engages in ordinary, everyday occupations, which he finds very health-enhancing. Doing these ordinary occupations is good for his soul. *It’s all the simple, basic lifestyle things that make all the difference. You don’t have to go out and make millions of dollars or have the great job or the flash car or the big house or any of that stuff. It’s all just basic simple taking care of yourself…feeling well, feeling connected, feeling not isolated. Not helpless, not threatened by the world… going for a walk out in the bush and enjoying nature and …spending quality time with other people.*

Spirituality has social and community dimensions
Sharing his spirituality with others is another important aspect of Bonnie’s spiritual life. Connecting to other people helps Bonnie connect to God and experience his spirituality. *It works through people. I have friends who I discuss it with… I don’t feel too bad because I know that there is somebody there with me. And that makes the difference.*

Bonnie has also had negative experiences with others involved in “charismatic” spirituality. *It was good to start with… [but] the most disturbing thing I found… was the concept of pray and be healed… And me with a mental illness getting involved in that regard was quite distressing. Because…they believed it was a simple case of pray and be healed. And if I’ve got a mental illness all I have to do is pray and be healed, and if I pray and I’m not healed well that means that I’m doing something wrong. So there’s right and wrong … So you’re getting judged by humans, by people, which just throws the whole thing out of whack… it left a bad taste in my mouth that whole experience of judgement.*
Discussion: Implications for clinical practice

Spirituality is an important topic for discussion in health practice

The fact that spirituality saved the participants from suicide and provides them with a reason to live is a compelling argument for health practitioners to explore the issue of spirituality with their patients.\(^{22,23}\) The question of suicide is widespread amongst people who experience mental illness.\(^{24}\) Thus, it is considerably heartening to find that at least for some people who experience mental illness, spirituality can elicit a healthy bond to life. Webb, a person who has experienced mental illness, also believes that the question of suicide can be resolved if a person can find a satisfactory answer to the essentially spiritual question, “What does it mean to me that I exist?” (p.18).\(^{25}\) To take this idea further, if spirituality is so powerful that it can persuade a person who is contemplating suicide to remain alive, then it may even be considered to be a moral imperative that health workers discuss spirituality with their patients. It is possible that for some people, connecting to hope and reassurance that spirituality might provide can give people who are engulfed in despair a reason to live and to move on to a path of hope and healing.

Another important reason for health workers to consider the role that spirituality might play in recovery from illness is the finding that spirituality can help the participants cope better with mental illness. Spirituality was found to provide emotional support to participants, especially a feeling of connection to others that helped them feel not alone, and that increased their sense of hopefulness. Other authors have also advocated for the importance of spirituality in recovery from illness.\(^{26-28}\)

Health practitioners need to discuss spirituality cautiously

While spirituality was found to improve the participants’ mental health, for example, sharing spiritual practices enabled some participants to feel supported and loved, there were also times that discussions about spirituality were perceived as negative experiences. For example, Bonnie experienced being judged pejoratively by others, when he did not recover after he was told to “pray and be healed”. Since discussing spirituality can be either positive or negative, it is recommended that health practitioners take care to demonstrate sensitivity and acceptance when talking about spirituality with people who
have experienced mental illness. Some authors have offered suggestions for how to talk about spirituality with patients.

Conclusion
Spirituality can provide hope, provide a reason to live, and support a person in his or her life. Spirituality can provide the meaning that underpins the everyday occupations in which people engage. For these reasons, it can be seen that spirituality can directly affect a person’s health. Spirituality may therefore also be a legitimate topic of discussion and exploration for health professionals. It is proposed that discussions about spirituality with patients be dealt with cautiously and sensitively.

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