

# Chapter 30

## Spirituality: A Path to Healing for Children in Rural Communities

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### ABSTRACT

*Religion appears to shape the daily lives of most children in America; the influence of religion often serves as a template for making decisions, establishing relationships, comprehending the world, and finding meaning in confusing and/or traumatic situations that children may encounter. To ignore the role of religion and spirituality in behavioral and mental health treatment is to dismiss a central domain of child and adolescent development as well as a potential path to healing. In this chapter, we discuss the role of spirituality and religion in children in rural communities and how they can be integrated into counseling and therapy as a path to healing.*

### INTRODUCTION

According to Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life (2008), the United States stands out as one of the most religious nations in the developed world. Given the high levels of religiosity in America, it is not surprising that the vast majority of adolescents in this country, approximately 87%, tend to affiliate with one particular religious group (Smith & Denton, 2005). In addition, research suggests that children and adolescents living in less densely populated and more rural areas of the country have a greater association with religiousness than their peers in other parts of the country (Smith & Denton, 2005.)

Religion shapes the daily lives of most children in America; religious influence often serves as a template for making decisions, establishing relationships, comprehending the world, and finding meaning in confusing and/or traumatic situations that children may encounter (Smith & Denton, 2005). To ignore the role of religion and spirituality in behavioral and mental health treatment is to dismiss a central

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domain of child and adolescent development, as well as a potential path to healing. In this chapter, we discuss the role of spirituality and religion in children in rural communities and how to integrate them into counseling and therapy as a path to healing.

## **Definitions**

Religiousness and spirituality are similar and overlapping constructs; however, different connotations are developing in U.S. culture to describe these terms. Religion is described as an organized system of beliefs, practices, rituals, and symbols designed to:

1. Facilitate closeness to the sacred or transcendent (higher power), and
2. Foster an understanding of one's relationship and responsibility to others within a community (Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001).

Spirituality, as defined by Koenig and colleagues (2001), is the personal quest for understanding answers to ultimate questions about life, meaning, and relationship to the sacred or transcendent, which may (or may not) lead to or arise from the development of religious rituals and the formation of community.

As noted, religion and spirituality are broad concepts that can very often use overlapping terminology. There is much controversy regarding definitions of spirituality and religion, even within the religion and mental health fields (Moreira-Almeida & Koenig, 2006). For the purposes of this review, religion will refer to an organized system of beliefs, rituals, practices, and community, oriented toward the sacred. Spirituality will refer to more personal experiences of or searches for ultimate reality or the transcendent that are not necessarily institutionally connected (Josephson & Dell, 2004). Because of controversy over precise definitions, no attempt will be made here to distinguish these two concepts. Inasmuch as the terms are commonly used together, the generic term, religion/spirituality, is used in many places throughout this chapter to capture an often overlooked variable that helps shape identity in children.

## **INTEGRATING SPIRITUALITY AND PSYCHOTHERAPY**

There is a significant need for mental health services in rural America. Research suggests that, in comparison to children in urban areas, children living in rural areas have a small, but significantly higher prevalence of mental health problems (Lenardson et al., 2010). Also, in comparison to urban peers, there is a greater proportion of children with mental health problems compounded with behavioral problems in rural areas. However, studies further reflect much lower access to needed healthcare for children in rural communities (Lenardson et al., 2010). As mentioned, more rural areas of the country have a greater association with religiousness (Smith & Denton, 2005). As service providers become more sensitive to the role of religion/spirituality in the lives of rural children, mental health evaluations can broaden to address religious issues as a serious component of their well-being. When service providers do not ask clients about their spiritual life and religious background, an opportunity to leverage a powerful resource to help clients process their trauma or give meaning to the difficulties of their lives may be lost (Grame, Totorici, Healey, Dillingham, & Winkebaaur, 1999). A client's spiritual experience or religious background can be used as a healing resource.

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