

Salvaging Strength From Stress/Trauma: Spirituality and Meaning

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Mental health professionals sometimes hesitate to respond to a client's spiritual or religious concerns or to their existential concerns regarding the meaning of life. Here are some reasons why:

1. Mental health professionals are ethically bound to remain neutral on such subjects.
2. Except for pastoral counselors, mental health professionals are not specifically trained in the areas of religion, philosophy, or spirituality.
3. Religious, spiritual, and existential beliefs can be so highly personal and sensitive that therapists fear their comments and questions might be misunderstood or viewed as offensive by the client.

Yet for persons who survived severe stress or trauma, the emotional and the spiritual often overlap. Also, in my experience, persons who have encountered life-threatening situations (or endured other forms of massive psychological overload) often want to talk about the meaning of life (in general), their specific life purpose, the nature of good and evil, and other spiritual, religious, or existential matters.

Most therapists are not qualified to be religious or spiritual advisors. They can, however, assist clients in identifying and clarifying their spiritual, religious, or existential issues and conflicts, as well as their strengths. Some of the suggestions presented below might be helpful.

[Note: The ideas and suggestions presented here are not intended to be spiritual guides or promote any particular religious, spiritual, or existential orientation. Neither are they intended to suggest that every individual ought to be concerned about such matters or that adherence to a particular form of organized religion is a prerequisite for emotional health or a standard of individual worth. For some persons, such issues are not of concern.]

1. Potential Positive Mental Health Benefits of Spirituality, Religion, or Search for Existential Meaning

- Can provide relief from despair and hopelessness
- Can provide comfort when facing past grief or new losses
- Can provide some relief from guilt
- Can help to unite or connect pre-and-post stress/traumatic experiences, thereby providing

a sense of order to one's life

Can help unite one with a community of others

Can help one salvage their strengths and gain a sense of purpose from the stress/trauma

Can provide a focus in one's life other than the trauma/severe stress itself

2. Possible Obstacles to Spirituality/Finding Meaning/Identifying Strengths

Feeling that one's religious faith or spiritual beliefs failed them

Feeling that one failed their religious faith or spiritual beliefs

Failure of general/easy slogans or platitudes to ease inner agony or provide direction

Psychological theories of motivation that tend not to include spiritual motivations

Combining varieties of spiritual/religious practices as a means of escaping one's feelings (primarily grief) or otherwise avoiding looking inward.

2. Spiritual Blaming the Victim

Spiritual blaming the victim occurs when the victim or others (or both)

a. Focus on the victim's failure to live up to certain religious or spiritual ideals during or after the stress/trauma

b. View the severe stress (or resulting psychological/medical problems) as a form of payback or punishment for sins/wrongdoings or as divinely ordained means of emotional/spiritual development

4. Ways of Salvaging Strength and Finding Meaning

The following suggestions for salvaging strength and finding meaning are just that: suggestions. They may or may not be appropriate, feasible, or useful, depending on the individual.

Taking Stock:

Write a spiritual/religious autobiography: Describe your spiritual, religious, and/or existential beliefs and experiences throughout your life. What were the key experiences which influenced your spiritual, religious, and/or existential beliefs and sense of life purpose? Describe the impact of the stress/trauma on these beliefs and on your sense of purpose in life.

Write or think about the following questions: Where do you stand on the issues of good and evil in the world? On the issue of the suffering of the innocent? On any feelings of anger at or of being betrayed/ abandoned either by God, your higher power, life, or the universe?

Attend a religious or spiritual service or meet with a spiritual or religious leader of your

choice. Afterwards, think about this experience, then talk and/or write about it in order to clarify your personal beliefs and identify sources of confusion, certainty, or hope.

Identifying Strengths or Sense of Purpose: Consider the following questions:

Has your stress/trauma created so many health, financial, family, and other problems that it is impossible to salvage any strength or sense of purpose? If so, then disregard this section.

But if there is some possibility that your experiences might have increased your ability to handle crises, increased your desire to live each day to the fullest, or contributed to the development of some other strength or positive quality, consider the following:

What did I do right during the stressful/traumatic event? What strengths did I display during that difficult time?

Did I grow as the result of my stress/trauma? If so, how?

What can I do now that I couldn't do before my stress/trauma? What can I offer others as the result of my sufferings?

Has my stress/trauma become my identity? Did it ever become my god or my higher power? Has my stress/trauma become the central organizing principle in my life or the central focus of my attention? If so, to what extent? In which areas of my life is this the case? In what areas is it not the case?

Follow Your Bliss

What is your bliss; i.e., your dreams and goals? How did or does your stress/trauma impact on pursuing your dreams and goals?

Do you believe it's possible to follow your bliss? If so, to what extent? What would be required for you to follow it? What are the obstacles towards achieving your goals and dreams?