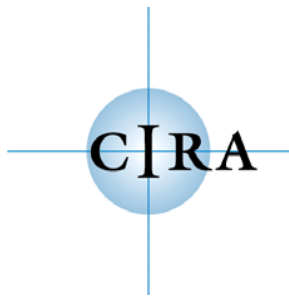


# The Spirituality of People Living With HIV: A Resource for Strength, Meaning and Coping



Center for Interdisciplinary Research on AIDS

## *Struggling With HIV, Struggling With the Spirit*

AIDS service organizations are vividly aware of the profound struggle in the lives of people living with HIV to cope with anger, distress, guilt and grief, and often addiction to drugs and alcohol. Several CIRA scientists are contributing to an emerging body of research suggesting that many HIV positive view this struggle within a spiritual framework, and that engaging explicitly with spiritual coping can be a productive way for service organizations to help HIV positive people and for HIV positive people to help each other.

### *What is Spiritual Coping?*

By engaging with spiritual questions, beliefs about life's meaning, and one's role in relation to a higher, universal power, people are able to contextualize and cope with the significant stressors in their lives. For people with HIV, these stressors include the constant threat to their health and life from their infection, and the psychological stress of inhabiting a stigmatized role within their community.

Recent research among people with HIV suggests that those who find meaning through spirituality suffer less from emotional distress, anxiety and depression and are able to cultivate a greater sense of hope for the future than those who do not. Spiritual coping is even associated with higher immune function.

## *Spirituality and Religion What's the Difference?*

Many organizations working with HIV positive people may feel that they shouldn't engage on religious issues because, after all, they are not churches, and have no particular religious agenda to offer. However, surveys of people with HIV show that many define themselves as "spiritual" but not necessarily "religious". The crucial distinction is that while religion is worship directed by institutional dogma, "spirituality" is a personal quest to engage with the sacred, not requiring sanction from religious authorities. Within this definition of spirituality, there is room even for secular organizations to engage with their clients' spirituality without promoting any brand of religion.

### *CIRA on Spirituality and HIV*

#### *"A Spiritual Coping Group For Adults Living With HIV/AIDS."*

CIRA-affiliated clinical psychologists Nalini Tarakeshwar and Kathleen J. Sikkema conducted eight guided group discussions on spirituality and HIV with three groups of people living with HIV; one group for women, one for heterosexual men, and one for gay men. In the discussions, group members described their personal definition of spirituality and how it related to their

struggles with HIV. Reinhold Niebuhr's "Serenity Prayer" was read as a group.

"God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference."

In this way, the group acknowledged the danger and difficulties of living with HIV, while asserting the abundant possibilities for growth and happiness. Group members reported great satisfaction with the group, and were found to have increased their use of spiritual coping methods and decreased in depressive symptoms .

### ***"Spiritual Self-Schema Therapy for Drug Abuse and HIV (3-S)"***

S. Kelly Avants and Arthur Margolin, CIRA scientists and psychologists at the Division of Substance Abuse of the Yale School of Medicine, have developed and tested a faith-based therapy whose goal is to increase the motivation of HIV positive drug users to do no harm to self or others, which includes not engaging in behaviors that spread HIV.

Spiritual Self-Schema Therapy (known as 3-S) draws on both cognitive-behavioral therapy and Buddhist psychology. It asks drug users to identify within themselves an "addict self" and a "spiritual self" and guides them in making a shift from the former to the latter. For the patient,

defining and activating his or her spiritual self leads to increased HIV preventive behavior and positive change.

The Buddhist framework, which emphasizes mindfulness, equanimity, and compassion, was selected because it is compatible with the major world religions. This therapy has been successfully provided to clients of many different spiritual orientations.

### ***More Information for Community Organizations***

More information about 3-S therapy is available online at [www.3-s.us](http://www.3-s.us). Therapy manuals can be downloaded and a free DVD training set can be requested.

For more information on spiritual coping contact Nalini Tarakeshwar at 203-764-4333.

## ***About CIRA***

The Center for Interdisciplinary Research on AIDS (CIRA) was established in 1997 and is funded through a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). CIRA focuses on the prevention needs of those most affected by HIV in Connecticut, including the poor, drug users and their partners, and communities of color. The Center unites three Connecticut research institutes: Yale University in New Haven, The Institute for Community Research (ICR) and the Hispanic Health Council (HHC) – both in Hartford.

The Center brings together scientists from 13 different disciplines with the mission of supporting the conduct of research aimed at the prevention of HIV infection and the reduction of negative consequences of HIV disease in vulnerable and underserved populations. CIRA also supports research on legal, policy and ethical issues in HIV/AIDS. The Center presently provides infrastructure support to over 60 research and training grants and over 40 affiliated scientists.

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