

SPIRITUALITY IN MEDICINE

by Elizabeth Chen Christenson, MD, LAC.



Spirituality, in a narrow sense, concerns itself with matters of the spirit - the vital principle or animating force within living beings. The word spirit has been connected to breath, divine spark, life force, psyche, soul, vitality. Spirituality is a perceived sense of connection - connection to a metaphysical reality greater than oneself, which may include an emotional experience of religious awe and reverence, such as nirvana. Spirituality relates to matters of sanity and of psychological health and is not a religion.

Religion vs Spirituality

Religion includes:

- Personal beliefs – belief in God or higher power
- Institutional beliefs – church membership, church attendance, commitment to the belief system of a church or organized institute
- A social institution (like a school) for transmitting spirituality and other knowledge

Spirituality is:

- Personal belief or experience with hope of transcendence and understanding of the truth of universe
- Possibly, but not necessarily, a belief in God or higher power
- Personal knowledge acquired from religion (school) or another source

Physiology of Spirituality

- Spirituality is a brain state – hopeful, transcendent
- As discovered by neuroscientists, spirituality is a feeling created when a certain part of the brain is activated by meditation, mantra or electro-probe stimulation..
- The ability to feel spiritual is genetic and is a property of your brain like all human traits such as height, weight, hair color.
- Research has shown the physiological effect and health benefits of spirituality.
- Methods used to study spirituality or religion include questionnaires, EEGs, EKGs, functional MRI or CAT scans, and genetic studies.

Health Benefit of Spirituality or Religion

Studies have found associations between weekly church attendance and the following:

1. Lower rates of coronary disease, emphysema, cirrhosis and suicide
2. Lower blood pressure
3. Less heart attacks
4. Better physical function after heart transplants

Health benefit of meditation include:

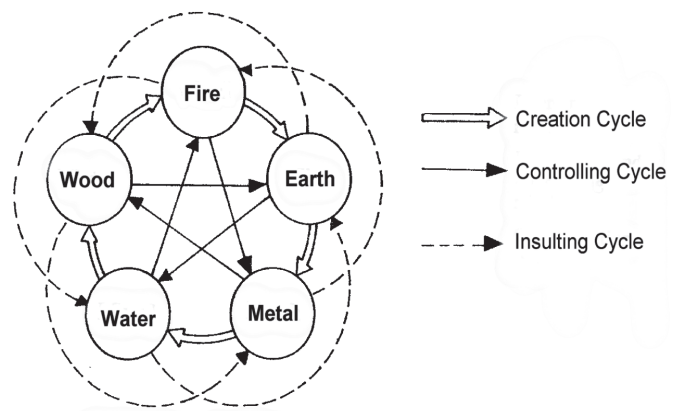
1. Reduced chronic pain
2. Increased longevity and quality of life
3. Reduced cholesterol
4. Reduced cancer pain
5. Fewer negative mental, physical and social symptoms
6. Less use of health care resources – ER, doctor, dentist visits
7. Lower lung cancer rate
8. Reduced anxiety/psycho-emotional stress
9. Reduced substance abuse

Mechanism of Action of Health Benefits of Spirituality and Religion:

1. Promotion of healthy life style – discourages smoking, drinking, eating meat and promiscuity
2. Promotion of positive social interactions, love, empathy, compassion
3. Promotion of greater relaxation responses - decrease in BP, heart rate, oxygen consumption - counteracts the fight and flight stress response

Modern Western Medicine Neurophysiology View

- The brain is not in command of emotions and actions
- Body can affect the brain, for example: Smile now – how do you feel? The act of smiling changes facial muscles which stimulate the brain and your brain thinks you are happy. You can tell your brain to be happy by just smiling.



From the modern neurophysiology point of view this is a multiple neuro-feed-back-loop between the body and brain, unlike the previous belief that the brain takes charge of your emotions and actions. Now neuroscience believes your actions (or thoughts) can influence your brain to secrete neurotransmitters that can affect your organs in many different ways – healthy or unhealthy. This is a very important scientific discovery that meditation or positive thoughts can make us healthier.

Body-Mind Connection from Chinese Medicine Perspective

The Chinese medicine view of body and mind and their connection can be interpreted from the five element theory.

Some of the main correspondences of the five elements to the human body (in nature this list is infinite):

Correspondence	Wood	Fire	Earth	Metal	Water
Seasons	Spring	Summer	late summer	Autumn	Winter
Yin organs	Liver	Heart	Spleen	Lungs	Kidneys
Yang organs	Gall	Small	Stomach	Large	Urinary
	Bladder	Intestine		Intestine	Bladder
Colors	Green	Red	Yellow	White	Black
Sense organs	Eyes	Tongue	Mouth	Nose	Ears
Sensory function	Vision	Words	Taste	Smell	Hearing
Tissues	Sinews	Vessels	Muscles	Skin	Bone
Emotions	Anger	Joy	Pensiveness	Sadness	Fear
Spiritual	Hun (魂) Soul	Shen (神) Spirit	Yi (意) Intelligence	Po (魄) Animal spirit	Zhi (志) Will

All five yin and yang organs influence emotions, mind and spirit. The Body-Mind is a circle of interaction between the internal organs and their emotional aspects:

1. Heart houses the Mind (Shen 神)

In Chinese medicine - mental activity and consciousness “reside” in the Heart. Heart is the residence of the Mind (Shen 神 - indicates the whole sphere of emotional, mental and spiritual aspects of a human being - corresponds to “Spirit”)

Shen 神 - appearance with vitality, bright and flourishing

The state of Heart will affect:

- Mental activities (emotional state)
- Consciousness
- Memory
- Thinking
- Sleep

2. Liver houses Ethereal Soul (Hun 魂)

The Ethereal Soul broadly corresponds to Western concept of “soul” or “spirit.”

3. Lungs house Corporeal Soul (Po 魄)

The Corporeal Soul is closely link to the body – somatic expression of soul – It gives us the capacity of sensation, feeling, hearing, sight etc.

4. Kidneys house Will Power (Zhi 志)

The mental drive that gives us determination and single-mindedness in the pursuit of our goals.

5. Spleen houses Thought (Yi 意)

Corresponds to our capacity for applied thinking, studying, concentrating and memorizing.

Seven Emotions in Chinese Medicine

1. Anger includes other emotional states: resentment, repressed anger, irritability, frustration, rage, indignation, animosity, bitterness
– makes Qi rise – affects the Liver
2. Over Joy / Excessive Excitement – slows Qi down – injures the Heart
3. Worry – knot Qi – affects the Spleen & Lungs

4. Pensiveness (excessive thinking, excessive mental work, excessive studying - students, medical students, residents, physicians etc, irregular meals, eats quickly at work, discusses work while eating) - knot Qi – weakens Spleen Qi
5. Sadness – dissolves Qi – weakens the Lungs
6. Fear – descends Qi – depletes Kidneys’ Qi
7. Shock – scatters Qi – affects Kidneys and Heart - The Classic “Simple Questions”: “Shock affects the Heart The mind has no shelter cannot rest chaotic Qi”

Severe and long-standing emotional problems need:

Professional help: western medication, skilled psychotherapist, skilled counselor, acupuncture, herbs, spiritual healer

Spiritual and Emotional Well-being

The work of your life is to discover your purpose (soul calling) and live it out.

Soul = Spirit = Message. Soul is the essence of life.

For anything in the universe, the soul is the essence of that thing.

The Soul calling is: A persistent burning desire

An undeniable inner knowing - where inspiration, passion, capability and talent intersect to be of service to the world

What you are called to do is an expression of your true self

How Do We Nourish Our Soul (Spirit)?

Human beings need food to survive; so does the soul.

- How do we feed the soul?
- We feed soul with virtue.
- Good virtue is created by acts or thoughts of love, care, compassion, sincerity, honesty, integrity, generosity, purity, charity, volunteerism, prayer, healing, unconditional service.
- Good virtue can: bless your life; give you happiness / health / peace / harmony; transform your life –to be more loving, kinder, gentler, peaceful, happier; and help you reach soul enlightenment. ☯

For more information about stress reduction

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