



Western Reserve

Area Agency on Aging

**The Role of Spirituality in Preventing Social Isolation
Among Low-Income Older Adults**

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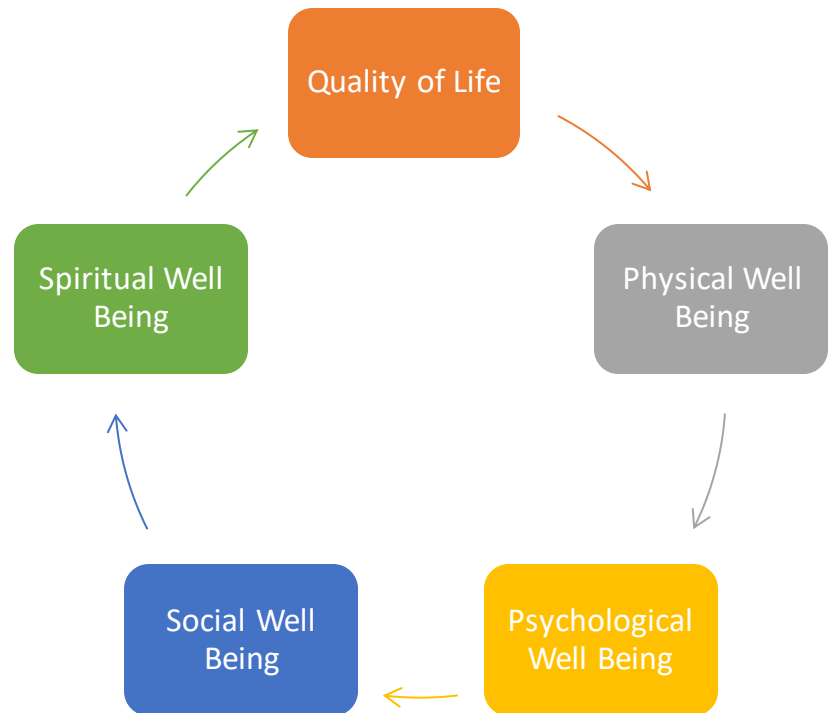
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o4a Annual Conference/For Aging and Disability Resource Networks
Hilton Columbus at Easton

Purpose of the Workshop

Social isolation has been linked to increasing mental and physical challenges that create more hurdles for older adults. Many older adults find that spirituality provides them with emotional and social supports. Learn about programs and partnerships built around spirituality that can prevent social isolation particularly with low-income older adults.

Quality of Life Model



Defining Religion and Spirituality

Religion:

- “a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, especially when considered as the creation of a superhuman agency or agencies, usually involving devotional and ritual observances, and often containing a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs.”
- “a specific fundamental set of beliefs and practices generally agreed upon by a number of persons or sects.”

Spirituality:

"Spirituality is the aspect of humanity that refers to the way individuals seek and express meaning and purpose and the way they experience their connectedness to the moment, to self, to others, to nature, and to the significant or sacred."

What's the difference?

- **Spirituality** is often perceived or described as:
 - A broad, subjective, and unifying concept
 - Informal and non-denominational
 - Highly personal and not dogmatic
 - Feeling-oriented
 - An inward experience
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- **Religion** is often perceived or described as:
- Well-defined and highly structured
- Formal and denominational
- Focused on community, rituals, and specific doctrines
- Behavior-oriented
- An outward experience with inward benefits

Religion, Spirituality & Aging

- Based on a nationwide survey from 2014 by the Pew Research Center, religion is very popular among older adults. In fact, 85 percent of Americans above the age of 65 rated religion as either very or somewhat important—the highest percentage of all age groups. In addition, among people who were 65 or older:¹
- 74 percent said they believe in heaven
- 70 percent said they believe in God with absolute certainty
- 65 percent said they pray at least once a day
- 56 percent said they believe in hell
- 48 percent said they attend religious services at least weekly
- 40 percent said they use religion as their main source of moral guidance

Positive Outcomes of Spiritual Care

- A person's well-being is defined by much more than just his or her physical health. People also have mental and spiritual needs. That's why many seniors with mental or physical conditions benefit from holistic care and counseling that addresses their spirituality. In fact, some older adults experience faster or more complete healing from injuries, emotional grief, or other afflictions when they have the support of a chaplain or spiritual counselor. And, of course, spiritual guidance can provide a sense of peace, comfort, and courage when a person is battling a terminal illness or nearing death.
- For seniors who devoutly practice certain religions, faith-specific spiritual care is frequently very important. After all, they may want to observe specific rituals or follow other practices related to aspects like their diet. Faith-specific care is often especially vital when a devoutly religious person is close to passing away.

Other Positive Outcomes

- Improved confidence and self-esteem
- Restored relationships
- A more hopeful outlook
- A higher sense of purpose and meaning
- A greater sense of personal dignity

Faith Affiliations

- About 83 percent of people in this age group described themselves as Christians. More specifically:¹
- 29 percent said they were Evangelical Protestant
- 24 percent said they were Catholic
- 22 percent said they were Mainline Protestant
- Judaism—3 percent
- Buddhism—1 percent
- Islam—less than 1 percent
- Hinduism—less than 1 percent
- 12 percent of older adults in this age group had no religious affiliations.
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Times of Increased Spirituality

- Many factors can affect a senior's desire to explore more of his or her spirituality. For example, a senior or elderly American may be drawn closer to spirituality or religious faith because of factors like:
- **Retirement**—This stage of life often comes with big changes to our daily activities, the roles we play, and the way we see ourselves. Although it is often an exciting and fulfilling time, it can also feel unfamiliar. That's particularly true for people who retire from full-time careers or who no longer spend the bulk of their time raising or supporting a family.
- **Grieving**—As we get older, more of our friends and family members are likely to pass away. As a result, we may go through the grieving process more frequently than when we were younger. Faith or spirituality can provide us with extra stability as we cope with the loss of our loved ones and reflect on what they've meant to us.
- **Decreased independence**—Another reason why aging and spirituality are so closely linked is that many of us experience some physical decline during our later years. We may need assistance with certain aspects of everyday living, which can make us feel embarrassed or uncomfortable. We may even wonder who we've become if the way we perceive ourselves doesn't match reality. Spirituality can help us bridge that gap.
- **Increased time to reflect**—One of the gifts of getting older is that we often have more time each day to ponder the mysteries of life and reflect on everything we've done so far. We get to review our achievements as well as our setbacks while beginning to recognize a meaningful narrative that ties it all together. We may even start to see deeper connections between our life and the lives of people from past or future generations. In fact, one major aspect of the spirituality of aging is that, upon extra reflection, our perspective may shift in surprisingly profound and positive ways.
- **A growing awareness of one's own mortality**—Many of us fear passing away. We don't know what the experience will be like or whether our spirit (or soul) will continue to live on. Will our consciousness remain intact? What will happen to the loved ones we leave behind? Have we created a meaningful legacy that will live on? What will we be remembered for? Spirituality or religious faith can help us make peace with our mortality.

Potential Points of Connection

Every religion offers spiritual practices that are designed to bring you closer to a sense of the divine. They include activities like praying, chanting, fasting, taking part in rituals, celebrating special milestones, and many other practices.

But you don't necessarily need to follow any particular religious practices in order to enliven your spirituality. Anything that you love doing, that makes you feel whole or truly alive, or that gives you a feeling of deeper connection to the world can be considered a spiritual activity.

Strategies for Corporate Connecting

- Insider
- Survey (WRAAA)
- Focus Group
- Invitation/Visit
- Announcements/Bulletins

It's Your Turn – Scenarios

- How would you approach a faith-based organization?
- What would you offer?
- What is unique about your offer?
- What is the benefit to your organization and the faith-based organization?
- Share previous experiences

Groups report out

Faith-Based Institution Know Knows

- **Preliminary Steps**
- **Offer Something**
- **Collaborations/Sponsorships**
- **Captive Audiences**
- **“Senior” Ministries**
- **Leadership**
- **Challenges/Myths**
- **Protocol and Etiquette**

Take-Aways

What's Next?