



## SPIRITUALITY AND MENTAL HEALTH: A NATIVE AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

While specific teachings and beliefs vary amongst Indian Peoples, there is an almost universal belief in the importance of spirituality and the influence of spiritual forces in the balance of one's life.

It is said that we are spirits on a human journey. In this journey, health and well-being are a result of the complex interplay between the physical world (i.e., our bodies), our mental processes (our thoughts and emotions), our environment (our family, culture, etc.), and the spiritual forces outside of us and the spiritual learned practices that become part of us. This perspective is sometimes referred to as the relational world view.

For the purpose of this article, I define spirituality broadly. It is more than religion. It is the power of the human spirit. It is the complex and often conflicting nature of spiritual teachings, a sense of purpose and being, a sense of future, a sense of a higher power guiding and shaping our existence. It is a sense of seeking understanding of the mystery of human existence. It includes religion and religious teachings from every conceivable point of view. This world view, in which well-being is balanced between mind, body, spirit, and context, teaches that these elements of life have equal weight; achieving balance among these various functions is in essence the objective of our human existence. To be well is to have these things in balance. From this perspective, it is not enough to understand mental health simply from a biochemical, personality, or emotional functioning point of view.

Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of need, for example, examines need from the perspective of the individual, placing food at the bottom of the hierarchy and self actualization at the top. For the system of Native thought, where spirituality is a cornerstone of existence, this hierarchy seems devoid of acknowledgment of the spiritual need of individuals. As an Indian social work professional, I have translated Maslow's hierarchy, converting it from a pyramid shape to a set of concentric circles. Spirituality is placed in the middle, with relationships around that core. Next are food, water, safety and security, identity, esteem, and self-actualization. In this scheme, if one maintains a proper relationship with one's creator, one will eat. If one maintains proper relationships with Creator and family, one will be safe, have identity, and self-actualize. Having

this element at the core means that mental health is dependant, in many ways, on the nature of the spirit realm. Mental well-being depends heavily on spiritual practices, teachings, the interplay between spiritual events, and influences interacting with the rest of our human experience. For example, in the mind/ body connection we know that the power of the mind can influence the body and that brain chemistry can influence the body. If one factors in spirituality (i.e., spiritual beliefs, experiences, disciplines, practices), it follows that the spirit influences thought, and thus influences body chemistry. In like manner, chemical alteration of the body will alter states of mind as well as stimulate or hinder spiritual experience.

The social context that we live in provides us with teachings or institutionalized theories about the nature of the spirit. It also provides structure, in the form of formal religions, to exercise these beliefs. Formal religions provide a community of similar beliefs and a context for religious practice. Ritual and ceremony have developed in all cultures as methods for maximizing the value of the spiritual forces recognized in nature or human experience.

In broader American culture there is a tendency to split the different aspects of the human experience. For example, society compartmentalizes spirituality as organized religion, the body as a biochemical organism, the mind as personality, and the intellect and environment as a set of social, political, and economic theories and systems. In contrast, most American Indian teachings describe these realms as totally integrated and inseparable in their influence on the human experience.

Spiritual influences on mental health can be described in four different categories: learned positive, learned negative, innate positive, and innate negative. The learned positive are those spiritual practices, rituals, and ceremonies ranging from prayer and meditation to vision quests and healing ceremonies. The learned negative ranges from the use of negative spiritual practices such as curses, what are commonly referred to as sins (those human frailties that are often referred to as the things that people should not do, such as jealousy, covetousness, or disrespect of elders). Innate positive influences are those spiritual forces that bring positive influences into our lives. Different peoples understand these positive forces

differently. Some regard them as good luck, good fortune or divine intervention, while others regard them as angelic forces, spirit helpers, or grace. Some understand these influences as the random occurrences; others understand them as the prescribed divine intervention of an all-powerful being. Similarly, the innate negative influences on human existence can be understood as bad luck, the influence of mischievous spirits, or the actions of power spiritual beings. Various religious and cultural teachings about these forces have historically shaped how we respond to these forces. From the relational worldview perspective, it does not matter how we view the place of these forces in our lives or whether we treat them as elements of chance or as directed forces. They just are. Our elders would teach that such forces require our constant and careful attention.

Western psychology has historically ignored this realm, discounting its important influence on human behavior. Worse than neglect, psychology has in fact *pathologized* religious beliefs and has often categorized beliefs and spiritual phenomena as dysfunctional. This approach is part of a Western paradigm that regards scientific thought, intellectual process, and observation of physical phenomena as superior to the experience and influence of the spiritual.

Only recently have the fields of psychology, social work, and psychiatry, in the Western model, begun to embrace the power and function of spirituality as an important factor in the mental well-being of children and families. American Indian communities have long known and embraced the influence of the spiritual and have had to struggle in a world focused on biochemistry and Western models of psychology. Ritual, ceremony, and spiritual interventions have only recently gained legitimacy as valid mental health treatment approaches. We now know that such approaches are effective. We can even measure their impact by observing changes in brain chemistry and coding resulting behavior using Western research and evaluation models.

For example, we know that prayer and meditation change brainwaves and promote calm and focus. We know that children that are taught the traditional stories of their culture are better able to develop values and a sense of purpose and to maintain a sense of direction. Without cultural teachings children experience a sense of loss and a lack of future orientation—precursors to high-risk behavior. We have long known the power of positive thinking and the influence of visualization on the capacity of the human body and mind to heal itself. We have come to recognize

in the therapeutic process the importance of reframing human experience in ways that help individuals gain a sense of mastery over the traumatic or debilitating events in their lives. Spiritual practices are key elements to the reframing that can lead to healing. We also know that many human emotions are anchored in the body through complex biochemical interactions that have laid down patterns in the brain and neurological systems of the body. We know that physical experiences and the use of music, dance, and drumming can influence and even reprogram these very same neurological pathways.

From a Western point of view, learning how to make the greatest use of cultural practices to promote healing and mental health of children and families is in its infancy. Using the Native American perspective of balance does not diminish the role of the physical biochemical process, nor does it diminish the roles of social learning, personality development, or ego function on human behavior. Additionally, it does not diminish the role of system and environment in understanding human behavior. It simply adds and integrates, in a meaningful way, all four areas of human experience and relies on the complex interplay among these four elements to understand and to promote mental wellness. The human organism is designed to thrive. We sometimes confuse harmony, balance, and wellness with perfection. Being in harmony does not mean we have everything together in each of the four realms. We may have family problems, health problems, or biochemical imbalances that bring trouble. Wellness does not necessarily come from healing isolated aspects within each of these areas of functioning, but can stem from a harmonious adjustment allowing the best experience that one might have, despite the limitations of real life. Spirituality plays a tremendous role in bringing about this harmony among the various quadrants of our existence. It is the role of faith. Whether we practice that spirituality in a formal religious framework or in the form of traditional beliefs systems is irrelevant. When we recognize the human being as a spiritual being, we can begin to respect and value the spiritual nature of human existence and spirituality's role in the achievement and maintenance of mental health.

**Terry Cross** is the executive director of the National Indian Child Welfare Association. He oversees curriculum development, training, consultation, research, and advocacy. Mr. Cross writes and teaches on issues of cultural competency in children's mental health services and tribal child welfare. He is also the keynote presenter at the 2002 Building on Family Strengths Conference. [tlcross@nicwa.org](mailto:tlcross@nicwa.org)