

# TRAUMA MATTERS

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## CONNECTING WITH CLIENTS OF FAITH

### Professionals share advice on incorporating clients' religious values into the counseling process

The following article was originally published in *Counseling Today*, the monthly magazine of the American Counseling Association ([www.counseling.org](http://www.counseling.org)) and is reprinted here with permission. This reprint is selected excerpts only.

A growing number of studies suggest a positive connection between active religious faith and various measures of psychological well-being, including career satisfaction, the ability to cope, a sense of meaning and purpose in life and overall levels of happiness. "From my biased point of view, I think religious clients have fewer mental health problems," says Robert Brammer, an American Counseling Association member who considered going into the ministry before becoming a counselor. "There's this sense of peace for them in giving up control to a higher being. But there's also more conflict for these clients when things aren't meshing with their worldview. Reconciling their point of view with their religious belief is sometimes very hard."

Helping clients who are guided by their faith can be a challenge, Brammer says, especially when the counselor doesn't espouse the same beliefs. In such cases, the counselor must focus on respecting the client's beliefs and the client's ability to choose what is best for them, says Brammer, director of both the mental health and school counseling graduate programs at Central Washington University.

Brammer recalls when he was a private practitioner and was counseling a woman who remained in an abusive relationship because of her religious belief that she was to submit to her husband and that divorce was wrong. "As a counselor, I couldn't encourage her to be submissive as she believed she was supposed to be," Brammer says, "but I told her I understood that it would be hard for her to go against her religious beliefs and that she would ultimately have to make a choice. Sometimes, when the religious person's views are in conflict, they simply have to decide which one to stay with for the moment." The woman chose to leave counseling and make the best of her marriage according to her interpretation of the tenets of her faith. However, six months later, Brammer says, she came back. "And this time, she was ready to move on. Perhaps that's one of the key components to counseling religious clients – give people time to work things out when there are contradictions between their two worldviews."

### Communicating respect and acceptance

When Lisa Jackson-Cherry, immediate past president of the Association for Spiritual, Ethical and Religious Values in Counseling, was working as director of the mobile crisis team for Baltimore Crisis Response, her team encountered a client who stated her belief in and need for a root doctor. As described by Jackson-Cherry, root work is a combination of West African religion, herbal folklore and Christian beliefs (most often Catholic practices). It includes the ancient belief that everything in creation is filled with spiritual significance. Taken aback by the client, team members initially dismissed her beliefs as silly. "But I said, 'No, let's just find this person what she thinks she needs. Let's find her a root doctor,'" Jackson-Cherry says. "If you don't necessarily believe what your client believes, it's important to get information about why that belief is important to them. Then, as counselors, we need to figure out why we have a problem acknowledging the benefits to the client."

Being open to a client's religious beliefs as a counselor is one thing; making the client aware that the counselor's office is a welcoming place to discuss matters of faith and religious identity is another task altogether. Most clients aren't going to assume this on their own, says Jackson-Cherry, who adds that counselors must "give clients permission to share their story" by asking nonthreatening questions about their religious background (or lack thereof) during the intake.

(continued on page 2)

## COUNSELING WITH CLIENTS OF FAITH (CONTINUED)

Richard Watts, editor of the ASERVIC journal *Counseling and Values* and director of the Center for Research and Doctoral Studies in Counselor Education at Sam Houston State University, prefers to broach the subject on the intake form because he thinks certain clients are more likely to overstate the importance of religion in their life if the counselor verbalizes the question. "I include a statement asking if their religious and spiritual values are important to them and asking if they would like them included in the counseling process. Occasionally, counselor self-disclosure may be appropriate for increasing a religious client's comfort level. "But it should be done judiciously," Watts advises. "Ask yourself, "Am I doing this for the good of the client, or is this about my own stuff?"

### Finding strength in the sacred

Longtime ACA member Kenneth Anich says counselors can work more effectively with religious clients by focusing on a key question. "How can you utilize the client's religious beliefs -- whatever they are -- to help them through their depression or other presenting problem? Counselors should use the strengths that are already there," advises Anich, an associate professor of psychology at Divine Word College and a member of the Society of the Divine Word, an international congregation of Catholic missionary priests. Many times, this means helping clients to reframe their struggles or their approach to those struggles by reviewing the guidance and examples provided to them in their faith traditions.

### Putting problems into a religious context

Various faith traditions speak to the need for believers to change their perspective, and sacred texts of many faiths provide examples of individuals whose lives were transformed after their perspectives changed, Watts says. "So I might pull out that concept in a counseling session and talk to a Christian client about the Christian faith's focus on repentance, which is essentially having a change of mind that leads to a change in behavior. Basically, we're talking about something similar to cognitive restructuring, but by using this concept, it resonates with their religious perspective."

Stevens believes counselors can best assist religious clients by helping them think through their theology of suffering and struggle. "Do they understand struggle as a growth opportunity or a character flaw? Do they perceive God as One who causes, allows or protects them from suffering? What does the client believe about human nature? Is it good, evil, redeemable? With Christian clients, it can help to remind them that the Bible says there will always be a conflict between one's old, fallen nature and the new, redeemed nature. However, the Bible also says there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. This often helps to normalize their struggle while also giving them permission to move beyond the old, shame-filled, condemning self-talk."

"Counselors can help clients learn to lean into their pain, reminding them that struggles provide us with opportunities for personal growth, to connect with God and to make contributions to the community," she continues. "I stress to clients that even the most challenging times can be the soil for good things to come, congruent with their faith."

To work effectively with religious clients, Stevens advises counselors master some straightforward steps. "Do more inquiring than suggesting with these clients. Know how to guide them to their spiritual support systems. Respect that counseling and faith should be working toward some of the same goals. Finally, let the client's faith ultimately guide them to wholeness, because wholeness as defined by secular counseling may be too self-serving for some religious clients to embrace."

Jonathan Rollins

## HEALING PRAYER

*For those who would like to say a healing prayer with or for a client, the following is offered by Rev. Joyce Crutchfield:*

Gracious and loving God, come to me and hear my prayer. I need Your help and guidance. I cannot do this alone. You created me in Your image and filled me with Your spirit. I ask that You rekindle that spirit within me. Give me wisdom to seek out support. Give me courage to accept the love, guidance and help around me. Remind me that regardless of where my journey takes me, I am always Your child. Your love is boundless and Your patience has no limits. When I stumble You are with me. When I feel alone You are with me. There is nothing that can separate me from Your love. Shine Your healing light on the darkest places within me that I may face my sorrows and accept Your healing presence. Merciful God, do not let the chains of guilt or shame keep me bound. Open my eyes that I may see You in myself. Grant me humility that I may accept Your gift of renewal, new life and new beginnings. Strengthen me with endurance for the journey to health and wholeness. Thank you God, for Your tenderness and care. Thank you for calling me back to You.

Amen

## RELIGIOUS ISSUES AND LGBT CLIENTS

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Few issues tend to spark as much debate in religious circles as matters of sexual identity. Perhaps for that reason, says Michael Kocet, president of the Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues in Counseling, many people – including some counselors – assume that the LGBT community as a whole dismisses the need for religion. That assumption is dangerously false, says Kocet, who has chosen "Finding the Spirit Within: Celebrating the Diversity of Spirit in the LGBTQ Community" as the theme of his presidency.

"In my opinion, religion should be a place of affirmation for people to be in touch with their spirituality," he says. "LGBT individuals often want to stay connected to their religious tradition, but they don't always feel welcome or safe. They sometimes feel alienated in their place of worship and experience homo-prejudice. Sometimes, religious institutions hurt the self-worth of LGBT clients."

Some LGBT clients feel so ostracized that they leave their religion altogether or search for another religious community that is more accepting and affirming, Kocet says. "Counselors have an ability to help these clients find their own path and can point them to groups where they can integrate their two identities," he says.

At the same time, Kocet emphasizes, the client must be the one who makes the decision to explore that path of action – not the counselor. "Some clients may be open to exploring other faith traditions than the one in which they were raised," he says, "but counselors also have to be affirming of client autonomy if they want to stay where they are. If their faith is important to them, it would be unethical for the counselor to coerce the client to choose a different religion."

ACA member Robert Brammer says LGBT clients sometimes get the sense that counselors view their religious identity as being less important than their sexual identity. "One of the problems I see is that some counselors assume LGBT clients should just abandon their religion. They don't always understand how fundamental that religious belief is to these clients," says Brammer, who recently wrote an article exploring ways to help gays and lesbians integrate their spiritual beliefs with their sexual orientation for the *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*. "It's probably more important as counselors to help them reconcile the dissonance they may be feeling and encourage them to seek religious guidance in addition to psychological help."

Jonathan Rollins

## SPIRITUALITY RESOURCE CORNER

### In Print

From Eileen Russo:

My favorite prayer book is *Illuminata: A Return to Prayer* by Marianne Williamson. I can find a prayer for most situations in this book. These non-denominational prayers are written in plain language and can be adapted to the needs of the reader.

From Carol Huckaby

*The Big Book of Faith* by Iyanla Vanzant is a book of non-denominational daily affirmations and healing for all people and can be adapted to the needs of the reader.

*Breath Prayers for African Americans* by Honor Books—scripture and words of encouragement.

### On the web

Association for Spiritual, Ethical and Religious Values in Counseling

[www.aservic.org](http://www.aservic.org)

"ASERVIC is an organization of counselors and human development professionals who believe spiritual, ethical, and religious values are essential to the overall development of the person and are committed to integrating these values into the counseling process." [www.aservic.org](http://www.aservic.org), retrieved 10/22/09

## OPEN AND AFFIRMING CHURCHES IN CONNECTICUT

We are blessed with many open and affirming congregations in towns and cities throughout CT. Information with directions may be obtained at the website - [www.gaychurch.org](http://www.gaychurch.org)

**Some of the Radically Inclusive churches which are usually lead by out GLBT Pastors include:**

**Metropolitan Community Church of New Haven**

323 Temple Street, New Haven, CT  
203-397-2312 [www.mccnh.org](http://www.mccnh.org)

**Open Door Ministries,**

955 Connecticut Ave, Bridgeport. CT  
<http://opendoorministriesfellowship.org>

**Metropolitan Community Church of Hartford**

155 Wyllys Street,  
Hartford, CT  
[www.mcchartford.com](http://www.mcchartford.com)

**Recovering the Promise Ministry**

@ UCC Springfield, South Congregational  
45 Maple Street, Springfield, MA  
Last Saturday of each month @ 2:00 PM  
(413) 726-0914  
[RecoveringthePromise@yahoo.com](mailto:RecoveringthePromise@yahoo.com)

**Getting into Trauma Matters**

- You can access an electronic version of the "Trauma Matters" Newsletter at [www.traumamatters.org](http://www.traumamatters.org); [www.dmhas.state.ct.us](http://www.dmhas.state.ct.us); or [www.womensconsortium.org](http://www.womensconsortium.org)
- Do you want to be placed on our mailing list or is there an event or topic you would like covered in this newsletter? Please call "Trauma Matters" editor Carol Huckaby at 203.909-6888, x25 or e-mail her at [chuckaby@womensconsortium.org](mailto:chuckaby@womensconsortium.org).



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