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## Five spiritually based tools for clinical practice during challenging, stressful, and apocalyptic times

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**Five Spiritually Based Tools for Clinical Practice  
During Challenging, Stressful, and Apocalyptic Times**

### **Abstract**

Stress in America and across the globe is high with so many ongoing societal problems. The COVID-19 global pandemic along with accelerating climate change, increasing economic instability and inequality, divisive politics and an increase in authoritarianism, racism and discrimination against those who are oppressed and marginalized are just a few current examples. Evidence suggests that mental health problems and demand for services have exploded as well. Psychotherapists who are well versed in spiritual and religious integration in their clinical work can help. While therapists cannot solve the country's and world's numerous problems they can help their clientele better cope and manage the distress that they experience through highlighting several spiritual and religiously based tools that are commonly available and supported among diverse spiritual and religious traditions. The purpose of this clinical reflection is to encourage clinicians to use five especially relevant spiritual and religious tools with their clientele that include (1) underscoring the sacredness of all, (2) learning to accept others, even with faults, (3) focusing on spiritual modeling, (4) encouraging virtues of forgiveness, kindness, gratitude, and compassion, and (5) incorporating ethics into daily decision making. A brief explanation of each tool along with clinical case examples are presented here.

*Keywords:* stress, spiritual tools, religion, psychotherapy

We seem to be living in remarkably stressful and unprecedented national and global times. The combination of the global COVID-19 pandemic, escalating and dramatic problems associated with climate change, significant political divisiveness and polarization, the explosion of negative social media influences, escalating war in Europe, economic inequality and instability, racism and discrimination, and increasing gun violence, all make for extremely difficult and perhaps apocalyptic times (e.g., Canady, 2021; Flaskerud, 2020, 2022; Taylor, 2021). The American Psychological Association's *Stress in America* studies have indicated that stress in America has never been higher (American Psychological Association, 2022). The Surgeon General issued an unusual advisory during December 2021 warning the public about an exploding mental health crisis among the population and especially among youth in particular. The advisory highlighted the dramatic increase in the incidence of suicide, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and other mental health challenges in recent years and what the public might be able to do about it (Office of the Surgeon General, 2021). The demand for mental health services has never been higher as more and more people seek professional help (e.g., Duong, Bruns, Lee, Cox, Coifman, Mayworm, & Lyon, 2021). Sadly and tragically, many of these problems seem to be getting worse rather than better with few apparent solutions offered (e.g., Listerneck & Badawy, 2021; Saunders, Buckman, Fonagy, & Fancourt, 2021).

Mental health professionals who integrate spirituality into their clinical practices can help by offering value added and evidence-based spiritually and religiously informed tools to their clientele who are struggling with today's unique stressors (Pargament & Exline, 2021; Plante, 2009). While mental health professionals cannot solve our serious and numerous societal problems, they can offer helpful strategies to those with whom they work to help them cope better with these challenging issues. Given the unique constellation of these current societal and

global stressors, this brief clinical reflection offers several spirituality and religiously based tools that might be especially helpful for clients and therapists, alike, now.

### Sacredness of all

People are quick to demonize or cancel those with whom they disagree with on various matters. Social media has provided a bullhorn to everyone and sadly, many people decide to use these platforms and their bullhorn to harm others (e.g., Dershowitz, 2020; Haskell, 2021; Ng, 2020). Much has been written and discussed about the lack of civility in modern discourse. Respectful engagement in conversations about solutions to various problems and controversies with people holding contrary views is hard to come by now (e.g., Peterson, 2019; Plante, 2017). Compromise in politics and social discourse in general, are often no longer considered a reasonable expectation when different groups of people have different points of view (e.g., Cammaerts, 2018; Johnson & Roberto, 2019). Once people are demonized and cancelled, then it becomes easier to commit inhumane atrocities when given the opportunity to do so (e.g., Katz, 2018).

The religious traditions tend to emphasize the sanctity and sacredness of life. They emphasize the divine within all or that we were created in the image of the divine. For example, the popular greeting in Hinduism, “Namaste,” means the sacred or divine in me recognizes the sacred and divine in you (Sharma, Kumar, & Koushal, 2021). In the Catholic faith tradition, one of the rules of Saint Benedict is to greet strangers as if they were Jesus himself (e.g., Boakes, 2019; Frey, 2018; Henry, 2021). In the Jewish tradition, Abraham offers hospitality to a stranger not realizing that the stranger is actually an angel sent by God (Hartog, 2020). Seeing the sacred or divine in all can be a useful tool for interpersonal relationships and minimizing the demonizing of others who we do not like or agree with on important matters (Wilson, 2021).

Highlighting the sacredness of all and working to see the divine spark in others may help to soften their interactions with others and minimize hate and destructive words or actions against them (Plante, 2009).

Case example: Carla is a 33-year-old Latina was raised in a Roman Catholic family originally from Mexico but converted to an evangelical Christian non-denominational church during her late teen years. She married a Caucasian man who she met at church in her Bible study group. Her husband is a highly conservative Republican who has enthusiastically supported Donald Trump before, during, and following his presidency. She has come to his point of view about American politics and they are both highly assertive in their political views and often aggressive in the way they describe Democrats and liberals often demonizing them. Many of her family members do not share her political views and she expressed concern about having arguments with them during family holiday celebrations and other get-togethers. She takes her evangelical faith seriously and wants to live as a “good Bible based Christian.” She entered therapy to discuss her tensions with her family members. She welcomes a spiritual and Bible based approach to therapy seeking out a therapist who is comfortable with religion and her faith tradition. In therapy, the notion of the sacredness of life is highlighted and that God loves all, even those with whom she disagrees with. Bible verses from the Gospels are used to help encourage a softening of her tone and views.

#### Accepting others, even with faults

It is easy for people to criticize and find fault with others (e.g., Archer, 2018). Perhaps during current times it is too easy for people to make judgements about others and then broadcast these judgements to the world through social media and other digital means (e.g., Mueller, 2021). Thus, judgments about others can be harsh and can receive a great deal of attention

quickly and easily using contemporary communication technology (e.g., Feinberg, Fang, Liu, & Peng, 2019).

The religious and spiritual traditions typically emphasize the problem with being judgmental towards others. Sacred texts from multiple religious traditions underscore that one should let the divine do the judging and that we should be slow to judge and quick to acknowledge our own imperfections (e.g., Chery, 2022). For example, in the Christian Gospels, avoiding judgement is highlighted numerous times (e.g., “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you” (Matthew 7:1-2). In the Christian New Testament Pauline letters it states, “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23).” This quote is often referred to in terms of reminding us all of our many imperfections. The spiritual and religious traditions support and can be invoked to encourage acceptance of others and minimizing harsh judgements.

Case example: Carla has been an active social media participant spending a lot of time commenting on and sharing politically based material that supports her views and demonizes those of others. Some members of her church do the same and support her efforts. As many people engaged with social media, getting lots of “likes” and attention on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter is reinforcing leading to more frequent and more divisive postings. In therapy a discussion of the problems about judging others is discussed and using the WWJD (i.e., what would Jesus do?) approach is offered to reflect on her social media presence. Carla can see how her engagement harms people and starts a process to be more thoughtful in future posts.

Spirituality modeling

Social psychological research over many years have highlighted the power of observational learning and modeling (Bandura, Grusec, & Menlove, 1966). People tend to model their thinking and behavior after high value or high status models, living or dead. For example, within various religious traditions, modeling one's behavior after Jesus and the saints, Martin Luther King, Gandhi, Mohamad, or other well-known religious figures is common. The popular phrase WWJD (i.e., what would Jesus do?) is a good example of the power and influence of spiritual and religious models (Shore, 2010).

Research has found that most people turn to their close friends and relatives for spiritual modeling (Oman, Thoresen, Park, Shaver, Hood, & Plante, 2012). They observe parents, grandparents, or others who are well known to them for spiritual and religious guidance. These various religious and spiritual exemplars can be used to help clients decide how they should act and respond to various challenges in their lives. They can be encouraged to model their behavior on models that are influential and often inspiring to them (Oman, Thoresen, Park, Shaver, Hood, & Plante, 2009).

Case example: Carla decides that the WWJD approach to her behavior makes good sense and is consistent with her religious traditions and teachings. She uses this approach when dealing with her family members and others with whom she disagrees. They notice a change in her behavior and thank her for it, which she finds reinforcing. In therapy, she is encouraged to engage in spiritual direction with an appropriately trained spiritual director associated with her faith tradition who also uses a WWJD approach to decision-making.

Encouraging virtues of forgiveness, kindness, gratitude, and compassion



The religious and spiritual traditions highlight the value of various virtues that include forgiveness, kindness, gratitude, compassion, and so forth (Krause & Hayward, 2015). Research has consistently found that there are many psychological and relational benefits to nurturing these virtues supported by the religious and spiritual traditions (Plante, 2009, 2012). These are critically important values to nurture today given the lack of forgiveness, kindness, gratitude, and compassion offered during current times. The stressors of today often bring out the worst in people (Berkowitz, 1989) and thus leveraging these important virtues to assist clients in coping and managing their lives, with support from their religious and spiritual traditions, is especially important today.

Case example: Carla is encouraged to offer compassion and kindness to others, including those with whom she disagrees. Her new spiritual director helps her to review Biblical passages that emphasize these qualities and commands. In therapy, she talks about nurturing the “fruits of the spirit” and seeks strategies to do so. She reports that she also tends to be a “glass half empty” type of person that makes matters worse since she tends to be pessimistic about life. Therapy included a variety of techniques to help her cope including the nightly use of the Examen, a commonly used end of day prayer and meditation that was developed and popularized by St. Ignatius and the Jesuits (Manney, 2011; McMillin, 2021; Mottola, 1964; Plante, 2021). The Examen includes five steps such that gratitude for the day is highlighted. Carla practices the Examen nightly and feels better in doing so.

### Ethics

All of the religious and spiritual traditions provide guidance regarding how to live one’s best life. They underscore ethical principles for living and making challenging decisions. Often these principles include highlighting respect for others, responsibility, integrity, competence, and

compassion (Plante, 2004). In the Jewish tradition, much has been written in the Talmud about how to solve a wide range of problems and conflicts in life (Friedman, 2012). Ethics supported by the religious and spiritual traditions along with moral philosophy can be used to help clients make better life decisions (Vaughn, 2015).

Of course, people with different points of view may point to different ethical principles to support their views. For example, those who oppose abortion on moral and religious grounds may point to the welfare of the unborn and see abortion as morally and religiously unacceptable murder. On the other hand, those who support abortion may point to ethical principles of supporting the rights and freedom of the mother and her well-being noting that religious scripture fails to outline guidelines on abortion. Similarly, other contemporary and often controversial societal issues such as homosexuality, gender identity, and political ideology also may use selective ethics to justify their actions and beliefs. In therapy, using ethical principles embraced by both client and therapists alike can better inform the therapeutic process and provide organizing and centering principles such as responsibility, integrity, and compassion as examples.

Case example: Carla is encouraged to reflect on Christian ethics and virtues. She works in a large company and mentions that she is appalled about the lack of ethics in the business world. She discusses and often gets upset about how selfish and egotistical people can behave. In therapy, she makes the connection that some of the behaviors she has observed in the business world is similar to the behaviors that she engages in online and within her religious community. She is mindful of virtues and fruits of the spirit in her religious life and wants to incorporate them into her work life as well. She is encouraged to embrace ethical principles that can be used and referred to in both her personal and professional life and to avoid compartmentation.

However, she is also well aware that she must adapt her religious and ethical principles for a secular business audience. Some of the principles she finds most compelling is being respectful, responsible, and honest in business dealings. She feels encouraged by her efforts and her mood and spirit lifts when she feels that she can do something to potentially improve ethical behavior in the work environment.

### Conclusion

We live in challenging, remarkably stressful, and perhaps apocalyptic times. Stress levels and mental health problems are at an all-time high (American Psychological Association, 2022; Office of the Surgeon General, 2021). The demand for mental health services have exploded. Psychotherapists who are trained and skilled with the integration of spiritual and religious informed therapy offer an important value added approach to their clients during these hard times (Pargament & Exline, 2021; Plante, 2016). While there are many tools that the religious and spiritual traditions offer (Plante, 2009), perhaps several discussed in this article are the most relevant and critical to use now. These include (1) underscoring the sacredness of all, (2) learning to accept others, even with faults, (3) focusing on spirituality modeling, (4) encouraging virtues of forgiveness, kindness, gratitude, and compassion, and (5) incorporating ethics in daily decision-making. The case example of Carla provides just one of potentially many examples of spiritually integrated and informed treatment. While psychotherapists certainly cannot solve our many societal problems, they can help their clients better manage and cope with them and in doing so they can offer a critically important and valuable service to the public.

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