

third edition

Integrating Spirituality and Religion into Counseling

a guide to competent practice

edited by
Craig S. Cashwell
J. Scott Young



AMERICAN COUNSELING
ASSOCIATION

6101 Stevenson Avenue, Suite 600
Alexandria, VA 22304
www.counseling.org

third edition

Integrating Spirituality and into Religion Counseling

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American Counseling Association
6101 Stevenson Avenue, Suite 600
Alexandria, VA 22304

Associate Publisher Carolyn C. Baker

Digital and Print Development Editor Nancy Driver

Senior Production Manager Bonny E. Gaston

Copy Editor Kay Mikel

Cover and text design by Bonny E. Gaston

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Cashwell, Craig S., editor. | Young, J. Scott, editor.

Title: Integrating spirituality and religion into counseling: A guide to competent practice / edited by Craig S. Cashwell, J. Scott Young.

Description: Third Edition. | ALEXANDRIA : American Counseling Association, 2020. | Revised edition of | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019053758 | ISBN 9781556203879 (paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Counseling—Religious aspects. | Psychology and religion. | Spirituality—Psychology.

Classification: LCC BF637.C6 I52 2020 | DDC 158.3—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019053758>

Dedication

We wish to dedicate this edition to all those who have encouraged, supported, and challenged us on our spiritual journey.

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Foreword

A remarkable convergence of trends is (finally) shaping the counseling field in ways that draw the profession closer to the human experience. Even a casual reader of counseling and psychology literature will have noticed an increased focus on strategies for helping others live more authentically and happily. For example, positive psychology continues to grow in popularity as it addresses the need to help people develop hope and increase their experience of joy. The burgeoning desire for training in spiritual direction from people of diverse faith backgrounds is evidence that counselors are seeking ways to help others address the essential questions of human experience. Finally, the tendency to label cultural differences as deficiencies is now recognized as oppressive and offensive to people of every cultural background and has given way to cultural affirmation and celebration. As a result, “counseling competence” cannot legitimately be defined without including the requirement of being a culturally competent counselor.

Collectively, these trends have had at least two outcomes. First, many mental health professionals recognize that the most challenging human struggles are also the most common and that these struggles often have a spiritual or religious component. Second, many counseling professionals now wonder how they can best help those coping with challenges related to self-affirmation, self-acceptance, forgiveness, finding purpose, experiencing joy, moving into and through despair, and living with authenticity. For many, these are soul-based or spiritual challenges. As the spiritually aware already know, wondering how to be helpful in these circumstances is the sacred ground out of which creative responses to address these core challenges of human existence emerge. Each of these struggles provides opportunities for spiritual growth and development when that growth is adequately nurtured.

Rather than seeing these encounters as opportunities for spiritual development, many counselors default to pathologizing the client's experience. Collisions of everyday human experience with the innate

and irrepressible drive of the spirit seeking to express itself do not appear on the radar for many helpers. Their firm belief is that life brings most people to this awareness eventually. Those missing the possibility that human struggles reflect innate efforts at spiritual expression significantly limit their capacity to assist others in their journey. Thus, a third outcome of the trends mentioned previously is the need for a book like this one. If you are reading this book, you are at least open to the possibility that spiritual development is a critical aspect of human development, and you may be curious about how to integrate spirituality and religion into your work. This book provides the resources you have been seeking.

Craig Cashwell and Scott Young have long been leading scholars who have gently and professionally urged the counseling profession to consider the essential need to help others on their spiritual journey. The editors of this book are so powerfully convincing not only for their commitment to this work professionally but also for their commitment to their own spiritual development. In others words, they walk the talk. This authenticity is critical when working in the area of spiritual growth. Indeed, you cannot help another go where you have not been when it comes to spiritual development. No one is more qualified to lead the topic of integrating spirituality and religion into counseling than are Cashwell and Young.

Moreover, they have assembled an impressive group of leading scholars who collectively address a full range of topics essential for effectively integrating spirituality and religion in counseling. From ethics to self-awareness to effective spiritual practices to considering spirituality and religion within a cultural context, this book should be required reading for anyone seeking to help others on their spiritual journey.

This book represents an encounter with the spiritual, and you cannot help but consider your own spiritual path as you read these pages. You will be led to consider how you wrestle with the essential existential questions of your life. You will wonder how you can live even more authentically in difficult times. You will consider what your finitude means for how you choose to spend your time. You will reflect upon your responsibility to yourself and others. And you will be led to lean in to the spiritual opportunity within the painful experiences we all encounter in our lives. Finally, you will realize that it is in asking these questions that you develop spiritually and religiously. Celebrate the questions as I know you will celebrate this book.

—*Spencer Niles*
William & Mary

Preface

Since publication of the second edition of *Integrating Spirituality and Religion Into Counseling: A Guide to Competent Practice*, the work in this counseling specialty has continued to evolve with many researchers, educators, and practitioners contributing. Nonetheless, an ongoing need exists for guidelines so clinical work is both ethically grounded and supported by scientific discovery. It is in this context that we worked to evolve the third edition of this text.

Many counselors and clients report that practicing with openness toward the spiritual domain is consistent with their personal values. These individuals hold the belief that coping with the challenges faced on the road to wholeness involves taking seriously the spiritual aspects of the human condition. Unfortunately, some traditions hold that the spiritual life will alleviate pain. Our approach, and that taken by chapter authors, is that the spiritual life ultimately helps us “lean in” to the painful places in our lives and embrace all of whom we are. As mindfulness literature suggests, we are most whole when we turn toward the difficult rather than away from it.

This book is written for people who share the conviction that the basis of sustained fulfillment is a spiritual framework on which to rest. Readers should leave their study of this work with a clearer perspective on how to provide counseling in an ethical manner consistent with a client’s spiritual beliefs and practices. This book is intended to guide the reader to a deeper grasp of competent, spiritually integrated counseling work that respects client belief systems, honors and, at times, introduces spiritual practices, and respects the spiritual experiences of clients.

Beliefs, Practices, and Experiences

The question “Are you a spiritual person?” is often answered with information about one’s belief system, the cognitive schemas on which thinking about faith are built. The core of spirituality, however, lies

beyond these beliefs. To more fully understand a client's spiritual reality, counselors should consider the client's spiritual practice or day-to-day activities that give rise to spiritual experiences. By taking into account the interplay of beliefs, practices, and experiences, the psychological meaning of an individual's spiritual life comes more clearly into focus.

For many people, spiritual belief systems, practices, and experiences are inextricably woven together. Here are a few examples:

- Ray describes himself as a Christian who values contemplative practices. He studies and practices contemplative prayer and Vipassana meditation. Over time, this practice has allowed him to come into contact with a range of emotions that he previously repressed. Consistent with contemplative practices and supported in his counseling sessions, Ray allowed these emotions to come forward and find full expression. At termination, he stated, "Since I have begun letting these emotions flow, I feel lighter, freer. I have joy at the smallest things in life. I see God in all things. Life is not always easy, but it's always good."
- Jasmine describes herself as a prayer warrior who "lifts up" the pain and suffering of others to the God of her understanding. She reports in counseling that her prayer life has really opened her heart with compassion and empathy to those who suffer and that she is far less judgmental now than earlier in her life.
- Brené engages in a spiritual practice of simplicity, eschewing possessions and prestige. She volunteers much of her time at a local women's shelter, supporting the residents.

For others, the interconnection among beliefs, practices, and experiences are more ambiguous or complicated. Examples include the following:

- A person participates in organized religion out of obligation. Because of this obligation (and fear of what may happen if he or she does not attend religious meetings), the individual has virtually no spiritual experiences and little (if any) disciplined spiritual practice outside of formal religious meetings. Such obligatory attendance is not ritual; rather, it is anxiety management.
- A person becomes deeply interested in religion and studies world religions extensively. He or she has no spiritual practice, however, to promote spiritual development and to occasion spiritual experiences. For this person, the spiritual journey is solely an intellectual exercise.
- A person engages in spiritual materialism by frequently exchanging one spiritual practice for another—spiritual window shopping for the "mountaintop experience" of a spiritual high. Such a practice, however, often is grounded in neither a set of spiritual beliefs nor a disciplined and sustained spiritual practice. For some people, these transformative experiences may be poorly (or not at all) integrated into their day-to-day life.

- Paul, a clergy member, believes himself to be ordained by God and provides “counseling” to parishioners in spite of a lack of training in pastoral counseling. After meeting with a woman from his congregation for several months to discuss her marital problems, he initiates a sexual relationship with her. When the relationship is later disclosed by the woman, he justifies the relationship by saying it was ordained by God and that she was chosen for him, an expression of spiritual narcissism (i.e., because I am spiritually enlightened the “rules” don’t apply to me).

For at least some of the situations just described, the individual may be engaging in *spiritual bypass*, the phenomenon of using one’s spiritual beliefs and practices not as a way to support or complement one’s psychological work but rather as a way to avoid it. Here are a few examples:

- Spiritual materialism allows one to seek the next spiritual “high” without committing to a disciplined and sustained spiritual practice, and it is a way to avoid undesirable emotions.
- The clergy member’s spiritual narcissism allows him to reconcile his desire toward a parishioner and justify his sexual behavior rather than deal with the loneliness and emptiness he feels in his life.
- An intellectualized spirituality allows one to avoid somatic and emotional experiences that may be uncomfortable.

This is a critical point related to practices. Spiritual practices are simply tools and, like all tools, can be used for productive or harmful purposes. At their best, spiritual practices promote spiritual development, increase a sense of connection (both with self and others), and support and complement the psychological work a person might be doing. At their worst, spiritual practices serve an avoidance function that prohibits deeper growth from occurring, enabling an escape from difficult and often emotional work. As such, spiritual practices do not always support the work we do as counselors and, in some cases, may inhibit or restrict the client’s psychological growth and healing. Stated another way, spiritual practices are intended to bolster the individual to face her or his psychological struggles, providing strength either to make changes or to make peace with personal struggles, but not to take these struggles away.

Even the phrase *promote spiritual development* is nuanced uniquely to each client. One client might see spiritual practice as strengthening his or her innate Buddha nature (internal), another might view spiritual practice as strengthening a connection to the Divine (relational), and yet another might see spiritual practice as acts of social justice (external). It seems critical, then, to consider what goals a particular client has as one aspect of determining (a) if spiritual practices might be introduced or enhanced as part of the therapeutic process, and (b) what practices might promote movement toward client-determined goals.

Approach and Organization of the Book

This book is designed as an introductory text for counselors-in-training and practicing clinicians and assumes no prior knowledge. The third edition was undertaken to incorporate developments in research and the larger national conversation relative to spirituality and religion in counseling. An ongoing question we have encountered when presenting and researching in this area is, “What techniques and interventions can I use?” To this end, from the outset our intention was that the third edition would possess a “how-to” feel with a focus on counseling practice. The question “What does one do when sitting with a client?” remained central to our conceptualization of this work. A book that guides practice was our goal.

Each chapter has a parallel organization, beginning with a discussion of the focus of the chapter, a discussion of clinical application, a case illustration of the concepts discussed, a conclusion, questions for self-reflection or discussion, and recommended readings. In Part I, the first two chapters introduce psychospiritual integration and the critical issue of ethics in this work. The chapter on ethics is new to this edition. In the first two editions, ethics was infused throughout the book as it continues to be. We have grown to appreciate the criticality of ethics in this work, particularly a profound and unwavering respect for the client’s belief system and the ethical edict to avoid imposing values. Accordingly, we believed this topic warranted additional attention in the new edition.

Part II of the third edition explores the spirituality competencies. Each chapter provides an in-depth description of a cluster of competencies, asking readers to consider for themselves what competent clinical application looks like. Given the variations in practice settings, this question often has no “right” answer. Rather, the challenge is to practice with integrity, with purpose, and with compassion for the client.

Part III of this edition focuses on specific spiritual practices. There are many spiritual practices drawn from different belief systems. For example, the website Spirituality & Practice (<https://www.spirituality-andpractice.com/practices/>) includes a searchable database with more than 1,000 spiritual practices. Clearly, an exhaustive examination of spiritual practices is beyond the scope of this book. Consistent with previous editions, we examine some common spiritual practices, including prayer, mindfulness, 12-step spirituality, and working with the Divine Feminine. New to this edition are chapters on forgiveness and integrating sacred text. We opted to include these new topics because of the frequency with which clients present as struggling with a grievance narrative or with cognitive distortions or belief systems that are impairing psychological functioning and prohibiting spiritual growth. Forgiveness work can be the antidote to resentment and anger, and integrating spiritual text can be a way to gently challenge unhealthy belief systems without imposing counselor values. That is, the counter

to the unhealthy beliefs emerges from sacred text rather than from the counselor's own belief system.

Spiritual practices can be integrated into the counseling process in two ways. At the heart of the efficacy of both of these approaches is the notion that the spiritual practice should be in concert with the client's belief system. The two approaches are (a) spiritual practices as an adjunct to the counseling process and (b) in-session spiritual practices.

Adjunctive Spiritual Practice

Many clients may prefer not to directly engage in spiritual practices during the counseling session, but they may be open to benefits from developing or resuming a spiritual practice out of session. Critical considerations in making recommendations to clients include the following:

- The client's belief system
- The client's financial resources (i.e., does the spiritual community require dues or fees?)
- The client's best fit (i.e., join a religious/spiritual community or have a more solitary practice)

For example, one client might come from a Christian tradition that did not value contemplative practice, but the client might be looking for more of an inner experience, be suffering from mild anxiety, and tend to isolate from others. A counselor might consider referring this client to a local contemplative prayer group. The practice might provide some relief from the anxiety, and the group might provide helpful social support. Another client might be experiencing a great deal of somatic stress, largely from being a strong introvert who works with many difficult people. This client might be encouraged to practice yoga, but might do so in a more solitary fashion (e.g., using videos rather than taking a class).

In-Session Spiritual Practices

Spiritual practices also might be introduced in the counseling session, again with paramount consideration of the client's belief system. We emphasize that the spiritual practices are intended to support the counseling process. Otherwise, the lines between counselor and spiritual director or guru might become blurred. Examples of how spirituality can be integrated in session include the following:

- A client often comes into session harried and rushed, struggling to organize her thoughts early in the session. Consistent with the client's beliefs, the counselor teaches her the practice of Breath Prayer. When the client comes in feeling harried, the session begins with a few minutes of Breath Prayer. The session then resumes with the client feeling more grounded and focused.

- A client has reached an impasse on a particular issue. Consistent with the client's beliefs, the counselor uses the experiential focusing method to help him access a deeper knowing of how and where to proceed.
- A client who self-identifies her tendency to overthink her problems is invited to participate in a guided meditation to access more fully her heart's desire around an issue.
- A client reports an awareness that "something is off" and that he "doesn't feel right" but is unable to pinpoint the exact nature of the unease. With the client's permission, the counselor facilitates a mindful body scan and supports mindfully watching the somatic experience.

This last example highlights one critical aspect of integrating spiritual practices into the counseling process: namely, getting client permission and buy-in. Asking for client permission is a vital aspect of spiritually integrated counseling. Just as a counselor can impose their religious/spiritual beliefs and values on a client, so can an overly directive and prescriptive counselor impose spiritual practices. Asking for client permission and listening deeply to ensure that the client is not simply responding affirmatively to appease the counselor is critical.

Used artfully, spiritual practices can augment in-session work or serve a critical complementary function to the counseling process. Spiritual practices have the potential to increase the depth of the therapeutic work, and they can support clients in meeting goals and living a more congruent and authentic life, supporting their psychological healing, holistic wellness, and spiritual development.

As we worked with chapter authors to hone and refine this collection of writings, our goal was to provoke the reader's thinking about competent and ethical integration of spirituality into counseling. The process of doing this well is, indeed, a process. You will probably make clinical mistakes along the way. Humility and owning your mistakes go a long way toward correcting these therapeutic blunders, and along the way you may find yourself more confident in your ability to handle the range of clinical issues and situations described throughout this book. As Napoleon Hill said, "Education comes from within; you get it by struggle and effort and thought." We hope you enjoy the struggle . . . it is the way forward.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the authors who contributed their expertise, knowledge, and experience in the development of this text. We also thank our families who provided the freedom and encouragement to make this endeavor possible. Our thanks are also directed to Carolyn Baker and other members of the ACA staff for their encouragement and assistance with copyediting and ultimately the production of the book.

About the Editors

Craig S. Cashwell, PhD, is professor and chair in the Department of Counseling and Educational Development at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG). Dr. Cashwell has previously served as president of the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling, board chair of the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, Association for Counselor Education and Supervision representative to the ACA Governing Council, and president of Chi Sigma Iota International Honor Society. He focuses his scholarship on the ethical integration of spirituality and religion into counseling and behavioral addictions. He has written more than 125 publications and has received multiple research awards, including twice being the recipient of the ACES Outstanding Counselor Education and Supervision Article Award. Dr. Cashwell is dedicated to student development and success and has received mentoring awards from UNCG (2012), the Conference of Southern Graduate Schools (2013), and the American Counseling Association (2016). He has maintained a part-time private practice for more than 25 years.



J. Scott Young, PhD, NCC, LPC, is professor in the Department of Counseling and Educational Development at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and has been a practicing counselor in private practice, agency, and hospital settings for more than 25 years. His leadership in the field of counseling includes service as president of the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling and member of the Governing Council and Executive Committee for the American Counseling Association. Dr. Young is coeditor of *Integrating Spirituality Into Counseling: A Guide to Competent Practice*, a coauthor of *Counseling Research: Quantitative, Qualitative, and Single Subject Design*, and coeditor of *Clinical Mental Health Counseling: Elements of Effective Practice*. He has published numerous articles on the interface of clinical practice with

spirituality and religion and has received awards for his work. Dr. Young received degrees from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (BS) and the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (MEd, PhD). Dr. Young is a national certified counselor (NCC) and a licensed professional counselor (LPC). He is married to Sara DeHart-Young, who is also a licensed counselor and registered art therapist. He and Sara are the parents of two daughters—Savannah and Sophie.

About the Contributors

Amy Tais Banner, PhD, is an alumnus of the counseling program at the University of North Carolina Greensboro and is a former counselor educator. Currently, she is devoting her time to raising her children.

D. Paige Greason Bentley, PhD, is the director of Counseling & Well-Being Services and an assistant professor in psychiatry at Wake Forest School of Medicine.

Craig S. Cashwell, PhD, is professor in the Department of Counseling and Educational Development at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Sharon E. Cheston, EdD, is a retired professor from Loyola University Maryland.

Jennifer R. Curry, PhD, is a professor in the School of Education at Louisiana State University.

Stephanie F. Dailey, EdD, is an assistant professor in the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University.

Ryan D. Foster, PhD, is assistant professor and clinic coordinator in the Department of Counseling at Tarleton State University.

Jesse Fox, PhD, is an assistant professor in the Department of Counselor Education at Stetson University and an affiliate lecturing in the Department of Pastoral Counseling at Loyola University Maryland.

Cheryl L. Fulton, PhD, is an associate professor in the Department of Counseling, Leadership, Adult Education, and School Psychology at Texas State University.

Carman S. Gill, PhD, is professor and doctoral program coordinator in the Department of Counseling Education at Florida Atlantic University.

Amanda L. Giordano, PhD, is an assistant professor in the Department of Counseling and Human Development Services at the University of Georgia.

Daniel Gutierrez, PhD, is an assistant professor in the department of the School Psychology and Counselor Education at William & Mary.

Laura R. Haddock, PhD, is a full-time clinical faculty member at Southern New Hampshire University and a licensed professional counselor-supervisor.

W. Bryce Hagedorn, PhD, is a professor and the program director of Counselor Education at the University of Central Florida.

Melanie C. Harper, PhD, is an associate professor and counseling program director in the Department of Counseling and Human Services at St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Texas.

Janice Miner Holden, EdD, is professor emeritus of counseling, Department of Counseling and Higher Education, University of North Texas, Denton, Texas.

Michele L. Kielty, PhD, is professor and director of the School Counseling Program at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia.

Joanne L. Miller, PhD, is a speaker, coach, and founder of Spiritual Geography, LLC.

Holly J. Hartwig Moorhead, PhD, is the chief executive officer for Chi Sigma Iota Counseling Academic and Professional Honor Society International.

Oliver J. Morgan, PhD, is professor of counseling and human services at the University of Scranton.

Keith Morgen, PhD, is associate professor of psychology and chair of the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences at Centenary University.

Patrick R. Mullen, PhD, is an assistant professor and school counseling program coordinator in the School of Education at William & Mary.

Linda A. Robertson, PhD, is in private practice in Oviedo, Florida.

P. Clay Rowell, PhD, is professor and chair of the Department of Counseling at the University of North Georgia.

Richard E. Watts, PhD, is distinguished professor of counseling in the Department of Counselor Education at Sam Houston State University and a Texas State University System regents' professor.

Marsha I. Wiggins, PhD, is professor emerita in the Department of Counseling at the University of Colorado, Denver.

J. Scott Young, PhD, is professor in the Department of Counseling and Educational Development at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Mark E. Young, PhD, is professor emeritus at the University of Central Florida and directs the International Meditation Research Institute.