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Spiritual therapy in treating drug and psychotropic substance addiction

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Abstract

Spiritual therapy relies on faith in spiritual power and communication with God through prayer, meditation, and encouragement of positive thinking and reflection on religious spiritual meanings. Drug addiction is a serious problem affecting millions worldwide, necessitating immediate treatment. Many addicts find spiritual and religious therapies effective in coping with addiction. Addiction is a complex issue requiring a multidimensional approach to treatment. Spiritual therapy for addicts can be a valuable tool in overcoming addiction, addressing spiritual and emotional aspects often overlooked in traditional treatments. Drugs affect the nervous system, posing multiple risks that undermine mental and emotional balance.

According to experts, prayer is crucial in healthcare as it is widely used. Surveys indicate nearly 90% of seriously ill patients engage in prayer to alleviate suffering or illness. Among complementary medicine forms, prayer is one of the most prevalent healing methods. Research suggests prayer is the second most common method (after oral pain relievers) and the most common non-drug method for pain management. One approach used in addiction treatment is the 12-step program, scientifically supported and widely adopted globally. Statistics show over 15 million people effectively participate in 500,000 12-step groups. This program is a lifestyle based on spiritual principles outlined simply in a numbered sequence from 1 to 12, focusing on reliance and faith in God to heal addiction.

Spiritual therapy, as confirmed by numerous studies, can lead to a meaningful, addiction-free life and is a powerful factor in preventing relapse. Promising results from clinical studies highlight its effectiveness in aiding addicts' recovery and returning to a healthy, positive life.

Keywords: Spiritual therapy, addiction treatment, drug addiction, psychotropic substances, substance abuse

Introduction

Spiritual therapy is considered a significant modern therapeutic approach used in addiction treatment centers. Its focus revolves around strengthening faith, engaging in worship practices, enhancing spirituality, and fostering communication with God as a means to overcome and recover from addiction.

Spirituality transcends religious affiliation, striving for inspiration, humility, meaning, and purpose, even among those who do not adhere to any religious belief (Murray & Zentner, 1989) [38]. The spiritual dimension plays a crucial role during emotional stress, physical (and mental) illnesses, loss, grief, and death.

The application of spiritual therapy for addicts involves techniques such as meditation, prayer, and reflection on teachings of the Ahlul Bayt (peace be upon them), drawing lessons from them in all aspects of human life. These practices serve as strong deterrents against drug abuse. Additionally, therapeutic techniques include:

Forgiveness technique: Convincing oneself that God forgives sins, acknowledging human fallibility.

Acceptance and gratitude skill: Recognizing that God is with us and we are not alone, trusting that God will help solve our problems.

The 12-step program also plays a significant role in addiction treatment, widely supported by scientific research and utilized extensively in advanced countries (Earl E., 2016) [3]. Overall, these religious techniques and practices in spiritual therapy can lead to addiction recovery,

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strengthen faith in God, and serve as important preventive measures against drug addiction, as confirmed by various scientific psychological studies.

Drug addiction remains a serious global issue affecting millions of people, necessitating treatment. Many addicts find spiritual and religious therapies effective in managing addiction. Numerous scientific studies have concluded that spiritual therapy can effectively aid addicts in recovery, enabling them to return to a healthy, meaningful, and positive life.

Drug addiction is recognized as a complex problem that requires a multifaceted approach. Spiritual and religious therapy can be a valuable tool in helping addicts overcome their addiction, providing an opportunity to address the spiritual and emotional aspects of addiction, which are often neglected in traditional treatments.

Drug addiction is considered the most toxic scourge that exacerbates addictive mental disorders and their symptoms, extending beyond the individual addict to impact society as a whole. The danger of drugs lies in the severe physical damage they cause to the entire body, as well as the disruption they impose on parts of the brain and nervous system, resulting in multiple risks that deprive the addict of their natural mental abilities and psychological and spiritual balance. Forms of spiritual and religious therapies include prayer, meditation, and other activities that can help addicts reconnect with their faith and find inner peace. These therapies can also provide comfort during difficult times and instill hope for the future.

According to Dr. Wayne Jonas, prayer is significant in healthcare contexts simply by its usage, with surveys indicating that nearly 90% of seriously ill patients engage in prayer to alleviate their suffering or illness. Among all forms of complementary medicine, prayer is widely recognized as the second most common method for pain management (after oral pain relievers) and the most common non-drug method for pain control, as highlighted in research conducted by Dr. Christina Puchalski, Director of the George Washington Institute for Spirituality and Health. (Earl E., 2016)^[3]

Spiritual therapy, defined as "therapeutic strategies that include a spiritual or religious dimension as a central component in the intervention and recovery process" (Hodge, 2006, pp. 157-166)^[8], encompasses spirituality as openness to God, nature, or the universe, where individuals experience harmony with truth, feelings of love, hope, mercy, inspiration, or enlightenment, and a sense of meaning and purpose in life, or a personal connection with the divine. Religion, on the other hand, is viewed as a collective expression of this connection, mediating one's relationship with God and society through an organized system of beliefs and practices. (Burnett, 2014, pp. 28-29)^[2].

"Spirituality is the core or nucleus of the human experience through which all other dimensions and the ultimate meaning of life are found." (Seeber, 2001, p.76)^[39].

"The term spirituality comes from the Latin word Spiritus, meaning 'breath or something within the body that provides life force.'" (Wasner, 2005, pp. 99-104)^[40].

Carson (2008)^[41] asserts that spirituality has several definitions and is challenging to define comprehensively because spirituality represents "heart knowledge" rather than intellectual knowledge, and heart knowledge is difficult to define in words. (Carson, 2008, pp. 3-32)^[41].

Spirituality is also defined as "the desire to communicate with God and approach Him." (Worthington & Aten, 2009, pp. 123-130)^[7].

Nearly 350 studies on physical health utilizing spiritual and

religious interventions have found that religious and spiritual involvement is associated with better physical health outcomes.

Several other studies have shown religious involvement is associated with longer life spans. (Comstock, 1971, p. 1-10; Clark *et al.*, 1999, p. 91-381)^[18, 19].

Moreover, spiritual treatments can be combined with traditional medical treatments for drug addiction to achieve better results. The use of spiritual therapy for drug addicts has garnered more attention in recent years as a means to assist them in recovery, live more hopeful and optimistic lives, and attain better health.

Faith and connection with Allah (God) are crucial sources, as most addicts lack this spiritual and religious connection, exposing them to dangerous practices. This lack of spiritual connection is considered one of the significant reasons, if not the most important, that leads them into drug addiction. Conversely, individuals with spiritual and religious faith in Allah are found to be distanced from drug use, as this sense of connection fortifies them with strong willpower against addiction. These findings are supported by studies and scientific research in the field of psychology.

The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse study of 2001^[9] found that adults who do not consider religious beliefs important are three times more likely to abuse alcohol and nearly four times more likely to use illegal drugs. The study also compared those who attend religious services at least weekly with those who never attend, revealing that adults who never attend are more than five times more likely to use illegal drugs and nearly seven times more likely to abuse alcohol. The study concluded that individuals with strong religious or spiritual beliefs enjoy better health, recover faster, and live longer than those without these beliefs, and that religion and spirituality can play a strong role in the prevention and treatment of drug abuse. (CASA, 2001)^[4].

While focusing on the biological aspects has allowed for advanced diagnostics, safe surgeries, and longer lifespans, these achievements often come at a high cost. However, neglecting the important role of internal spiritual aspects of healing in communities, especially advanced ones, has led to the spread of new diseases such as anxiety, mood disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, and all types of addiction, including drug abuse. (Dacher, 2014, p. 148-157)^[6].

According to the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse in 2001^[9], 95% of Americans have some form of spiritual or religious beliefs, such as belief in God or a higher power, which can provide them with a sense of security and stability. (CASA, 2001)^[4].

A study by Pardini *et al.*, 2000^[5], found that religious affiliation was an important factor in recovering from drug addiction. (Pardini *et al.*, 2000, p. 347-354)^[5].

Religiosity may also be associated with resilience and the ability to recover from challenging life events, such as substance addiction among adults. Studies have shown a positive correlation between religiosity and successful recovery from drug addiction. (Pardini *et al.*, 2000, p. 347-354)^[5].

Studies by Matthews *et al.*, 1998^[20]; Wallace *et al.*, 1998^[21]; and Oleckno *et al.*, 1991^[22], have also confirmed these findings. (Matthews *et al.*, 1998, p. 24-118; Wallace *et al.*, 1998, p. 41-721; Oleckno *et al.*, 1991, p. 26-819)^[20, 21, 22].

Religious individuals are less likely to use alcohol and other drugs. A study by Joshanloo *et al.*, 2010^[26], affirmed a positive correlation between spirituality and mental health among both healthy individuals and those suffering from

various physical ailments and mental disorders. Despite spiritual individuals tending towards optimism and social support, and experiencing a deeper intrinsic meaning in life, strength, and inner peace.

Recognition of the importance of spiritual aspects in healing has increased since 2001, particularly by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations for assessing spiritual care by healthcare providers for patients and their families. (Hodge, 2006, pp. 317-326)^[8].

Ahmed, 2011^[12], asserted that the best way to develop standardized Islamic spiritual therapy is by focusing on recommendations from the Quran.

Cocoran *et al.*, 2004^[13], emphasized that religion serves as a preventive factor facilitating positive outcomes, as it enables individuals to avoid activities that may lead to drug abuse and addictive behaviors.

Culliford, 2005^[15], highlighted that spiritual therapy enhances spiritual well-being and affects physical health and quality of life, recently gaining special attention from health researchers. Religious and spiritual beliefs have been shown to ameliorate symptoms of mental and physical disorders, accelerate recovery, and reduce the risk of recurrence.

Silva *et al.*, 2009^[16], confirmed that spirituality has a positive impact on improving quality of life among patients suffering from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).

Koenig, 2012^[12], found that religious beliefs reduce mortality rates from cancer and cardiovascular diseases.

Ellison, 1991^[23], concluded that strong religious faith leads to higher levels of life satisfaction, happiness, and psychological well-being.

The study (Speck, 2004, pp. 124-126)^[24] affirmed that the meaning of life is an essential and deeply rooted component of spirituality, despite not receiving significant attention in the field of addiction until now.

Another study (Cherry *et al.*, 2018, p. 492-501)^[42] confirmed that individuals who are religious or influenced by their connection to God or a higher power in the world consider it as one of the important and strong variables contributing to psychological resilience against natural and technological disasters. There are several spiritual relaxation techniques, including:

Deep Muscle Relaxation Exercise

The therapist guides the client to focus on a specific spiritual value. During the relaxation exercise, the therapist can ask the client whether the spiritual images they imagine bring them a sense of peace. Studies have found that among various forms of meditation, spiritually guided meditation was more effective than other meditation techniques in reducing negative mood states and anxiety levels, inducing stronger spiritual feelings, and better managing migraine headaches in patients with migraine problems. The meditation process also involves stopping negative thoughts and diverting attention from worrying thoughts. Clients can relax by taking deep breaths while reading sacred texts or focusing on their favorite spiritual word or image (Barrera *et al.*, 2012, pp. 346-358)^[33].

Developing Acceptance and Gratitude Skills

The therapist suggests to the client to consider some spiritual thoughts, such as "I am not alone," "A greater power will help me overcome my problems," and "Only God knows what will happen in the future," which can assist them. The client may adopt these ideas as suggested by the therapist or may create alternative thoughts for themselves (Barrera *et al.*, 2012, pp.

346-358)^[33].

Forgiveness Technique

Forgiveness from God, and accepting that everyone makes mistakes, and that people are not perfect, and that God is always with them and also grants them strength and resilience (Vasegh, 2009, pp. 301-316)^[34].

Worthington & Aten (2009)^[7] propose four types of spirituality:

1. **Religious Spirituality:** Defined as the test of sanctity and unity defined by a specific religion, often based on feeling close to God or a higher power.
2. **Humanistic Spirituality:** Defined as a commitment to humanity, communication, or concern for a larger group of people, often reflected in love, loyalty, and sacrifice.
3. **Natural Spirituality:** Defined as a sense of connection to the environment or nature, as when a person experiences awe and wonder at a beautiful natural scene.
4. **Cosmic Spirituality:** Characterized by a feeling of interconnectedness with creation, such as contemplating the boundaries of the universe (Worthington & Aten, 2009, pp. 123-130)^[7].

Spiritual Therapy as a Form of Psychological Treatment

Spiritual therapy is a form of psychological treatment that seeks to heal a person's spirit, mind, and body by accessing individual belief systems and utilizing faith in a higher power to explore areas of conflict in life. Research indicates that individuals who are more spiritual often have higher levels of mental and emotional health, as spirituality can also help individuals cope with stress, health problems, and other life challenges.

[Link to Source] (<https://www.goodtherapy.org/learn-about-therapy/issues/spirituality/support>)

Scientific theories emphasize the importance of spiritual therapy, one of which is:

Victor Frankl's Search for Meaning Theory

Victor Frankl (1905-1997) focused on faith in God and spirituality during his experience in concentration camps during World War II, which he discussed in his famous book "Man's Search for Meaning". In this book, Frankl discusses relying on faith and spirituality, and positive thinking as means to survive and overcome hardships and difficulties. Frankl emphasizes the importance of logotherapy in finding personal purpose and meaning in life, asserting that faith and spirituality can aid in achieving this goal, providing psychological comfort and mental health (Frankl, 1946)^[25].

The theory of Victor Frankl's Search for Meaning shows us that faith, spirituality, and positive thinking are means to overcome life's difficulties and challenges. When addicts come to the treatment center burdened with a huge amount of negative and aggressive thoughts, and they have distanced themselves from God by committing acts contrary to God's law and not knowing the true meaning of life.

Step Program

Addiction is a chronic disease that has significant effects on individuals' health and well-being, and there are proven methods to treat addiction that have been effective in helping individuals recover and maintain sobriety. The philosophy of the 12-step program presents a specific perspective on the recovery process, emphasizing the importance of accepting

addiction as a disease that can be arrested but not completely eliminated. It enhances individual maturity and spiritual growth, reduces self-focus, and provides assistance to other addicted individuals (e.g., sharing recovery stories in group meetings, sponsoring new members) (Humphreys *et al.*, 2004, pp. 151-158) [36].

The 12-step model is widely recognized and has proven successful in addiction treatment and recovery. Its fundamental principles include acknowledging powerlessness over addiction, recognizing a higher external power (God) and seeking His assistance to overcome the need for substances, committing to diligent work to achieve stability, control, personal growth, and spiritual development. It involves identifying 12-step program-based support groups as activities practiced or sequential steps that drug addicts must achieve during the recovery process. These steps specify that drug users must admit their powerlessness over alcohol and drugs, conduct a moral inventory of themselves, acknowledge the nature of their wrongs, make a list of individuals harmed by them, make amends to them, and aim to participate in such groups to receive support for substance abuse recovery, establish a social network (fellowship) to join, and adhere to a set of 12 guiding principles (steps) during the recovery process (Kaskutas *et al.*, 2002, pp. 891-900) [35].

The 12 Steps to Recovery from Addiction

1. Recognizing powerlessness over addiction and moving towards seeking help, as this program is based on acknowledging and admitting to ourselves that we are powerless and have lost control over our addiction, and that we are unable to confront it on our own. So, if we accept this truth, we have completed the first part of the first step in this program. In this step, we become more open and accepting of seeking help from others or from a higher power beyond ourselves. The first step leaves the person in a state of powerlessness, where they lack any willpower, control, or command over their addiction. This can make them feel futile and desperate. Here is where the second step comes into play.
2. Acknowledging the belief in a higher power to help overcome addiction. Often, people's losses in life multiply after using substances and becoming addicted to them, whether it's financial losses from spending money on drugs or health losses such as damage to organs due to addiction. There are also psychological losses where individuals lose themselves and make sacrifices to obtain the substance. Addicts may lie to doctors to get the substance, or women may turn to prostitution for a single dose of drugs. The addict then realizes that addiction only brings pain and physical and spiritual destruction. In this step, the addict begins to stop using the substance because they see its impact on their life. When withdrawal symptoms appear, along with intense cravings and pain, this leads them to turn to a higher power, "God," to relieve this pain. They draw strength and endurance from this higher power to face the effects of addiction.
3. Making a decision to turn one's life over to the care of a higher power, meaning surrendering to God and trusting Him to manage our affairs. In this step, we recognize that the more we escalate our drug use to higher levels of intoxication, the worse our situation becomes, deteriorating and worsening. We begin to clearly see the ugly face of addiction, and here we must decide either to quit the substance and face severe withdrawal symptoms,

or surrender to addiction, making it necessary to consume more.

4. Conducting a fearless moral inventory. In this step, the addict learns to look at themselves with a bold, comprehensive, and evaluative perspective to discover exactly who they are and what personal flaws need work. It's important to approach this self-examination with compassion, understanding that this perspective should be merciful, returning the addict's current state to its true underlying causes. They have been a victim of these causes and the substance they became addicted to. We don't want them to blame themselves regretfully for their actions and their current situation or to blame themselves for the pain they have caused themselves and others.
5. Acknowledging the exact nature of one's wrongs towards oneself and others. In this step, the addict must confess the true nature of their mistakes before God, as well as acknowledge these errors to themselves and to another person among their fellow recovering individuals.
6. Being entirely ready to have a higher power remove all these defects of character. Here, the recovering individual learns to place their trust in a power greater than themselves, finding the courage to confront their past, admit to the wrongs they have committed, and examine their personal flaws.
7. Step Seven relies heavily on humility, meaning recognizing that we are not superior to others. At the same time, it involves realizing that others are not inherently better than oneself. This also means understanding that there is a greater power than oneself that can continue to effect change. By employing humility, one recognizes that the same power that alleviated the compulsion to drink and use drugs can also remove other sources of dissatisfaction in life, thereby achieving serenity.
8. The addict prepares a list of people they have harmed due to their addiction and becomes ready to make amends to them. Recovery here involves looking at what can be changed, not dwelling on what cannot. What they can change is themselves, figuratively sweeping their side of the street. However, they cannot control how others behave or how they may react to efforts to change or make amends.
9. In Step Nine, it's time to make amends to those who have been harmed. The addict must overcome the urge to make excuses for not taking this crucial step. It's important to remember in Step Nine that they have no control over how the other person may react. While many people may accept their efforts to reach out and work on correcting the mistakes they've made, some may react with hostility or anger. The only scenario in which making amends should be avoided is when bringing up the past would cause further harm to them.
10. Continuing to take personal inventory and promptly admitting when wrong in Step Ten, the individual learns to live one day at a time. Continuing to prepare a detailed account of personal behavior means developing mental habits such as self-review, evaluation of actions, situations, and relationships on an organized basis. By persisting in preparing a detailed statement of their personal behaviors, they will mentally liberate themselves from current restrictions and their past. Consequently, they will not resort to justifications, as this step allows them to be self-sufficient
11. Seeking through prayer and meditation to improve

conscious contact with a higher power. The purpose of Step Eleven is to increase awareness, perception, and strengthen one's relationship with God to derive strength and determination in facing the demands of their new life. The closer their connection to God through prayer and meditation, the more they realize they are guided by God's will, not their own, and that they are walking the path of recovery by God's will, not theirs.

12. Achieving spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, and carrying the message to other addicts and practicing these principles in all areas of life. Acknowledging indebtedness to those who come after, they need to cultivate readiness to freely give to others what has been given to them. By sharing stories, they remember how bad things were and how much worse they could be if they stray from the right path again. This way, the 12-step program can benefit as much as it has benefited those they engage with. (Fulton, 2019)^[37].

The study conducted at Brigham Young University in Utah found that among 1036 participating college students, 99.1% were religious, with 86% stating they had never used drugs because it violated their religious beliefs (Merrill *et al.*, 2001, pp. 347-357).

A subsequent study found that religious affiliation was a significant factor in recovery from drug addiction (Pardini *et al.*, 2000, pp. 347-354)^[5]. Evidence-based studies indicate that faith contributes effectively to preventing drug use.

The majority of cases show that religious and spiritual beliefs and practices lead to lower levels of drug use, including reduced likelihood of using various drugs over a lifetime (Degenhardt, 2010)^[27].

A study by Lyon found that up to 82% of addicts who experienced spiritual awakening during drug treatment and recovery remained abstinent for one year compared to 55% of clients who were not spiritually awake (Lyons, 2010, pp. 528-3109)^[31].

In a qualitative study by Cheney *et al.* (2013)^[32], various religious and spiritual dimensions were explored regarding the reduction and cessation of cocaine use among African Americans in rural and urban areas of Arkansas. The study analyzed four ways in which religion could influence participants:

Firstly, participants affirmed that drug use conflicted with their religious and spiritual frameworks.

Secondly, involvement in organized religious activities helped many participants reduce or cease cocaine use temporarily at some point in their drug use history. These activities ranged from attending church services to studying scriptures, which they identified as a steady force in reducing cocaine use.

Thirdly, participants pointed to their personal relationship with God as a factor in reducing cocaine use and setting them on the path to recovery.

Fourthly, many participants expected divine intervention in their recovery process (Cheney *et al.*, 2013, pp. 94-113)^[32].

Another study conducted by Rebecca aimed to compare the effectiveness of cognitive-behavioral religious therapy versus non-religious cognitive-behavioral therapy in clinical depression cases among religious individuals. The study involved two types of therapy: one with a religious orientation and content, and the other with standard cognitive-behavioral therapy. The study included 59 depressed religious individuals undergoing therapy, with therapists including both religious and non-religious practitioners. Results indicated that cognitive-behavioral religious therapy yielded better

outcomes compared to non-religious cognitive-behavioral therapy.

These studies highlight significant factors and reasons to consider spiritual and religious dimensions in treatment approaches for individuals in recovery. Many participants expressed a need for attention to these dimensions regarding their goals and issues, emphasizing a crucial need for therapists themselves to be trained in and practice spiritual and religious factors, linking effective outcomes in therapy interventions (Candwe, 1998)^[11].

Spirituality has been found to assist recovering addicts in finding meaning and purpose in their lives, often linked with hope and the healing process. Most drug treatment programs in the United States, totaling 11,000 types, include some form of spirituality (Ringwald, 2002, p. 201-210)^[1].

In our current research, we aimed to answer the following question: Does spiritual therapy play a role in reducing substance abuse? The answer was affirmative, based on a review of significant scientific studies demonstrating the effectiveness and role of this therapy in drug addicts' recovery.

Given that drug addiction is a very serious scourge affecting all societies worldwide, with numerous detrimental effects on individuals, communities, and countries at large—including criminal, psychological, health-related, social, economic, and political damages—it adversely affects most bodily systems. It impacts the nervous system, causing various mental, psychological, and neurological disorders, as well as affecting vital body functions through its impact on the immune and respiratory systems.

Our country, Iraq, is one of those societies where drug addiction has become rampant, with increasing trafficking and usage day by day, posing alarming concerns. Due to the dangerous evolution this issue has undergone, it must be treated using scientifically proven therapeutic methods. One of the most successful psychological treatments is spiritual therapy, which has been substantiated by evidence, studies, and scientific experiments. It is considered one of the primary psychological treatments for overcoming addiction and preventing relapse. Given the studies confirming the effectiveness of this type of therapy and its underutilization in Iraq, the researcher urges its implementation in treating addicts.

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