

Spirituality and Well-Being

By Marcia Pottenger, B.A.

As we get older, many of us begin to think less frequently about those new golf clubs or trying out the latest restaurant and more about the meaning of life and the legacy we wish to leave. A famous psychologist, Erik Erikson, called this stage of life “integrity vs. despair.” Thinking of these two terms on a continuum, at one end is integrity and at the other despair. Integrity in this context includes a sense of contentment and fulfillment—being able to look back on a life filled with meaning and valuable contributions. Despair, on the other hand, is looking back on one’s life and viewing it as a failure. People on this end of the continuum tend to fear death, thinking, “What was the point of life? Was it worth it?” Spirituality is a common theme upon which people tend to reflect at this later life stage.

Spirituality in this sense is not limited to religious beliefs and practices but recognizes the meaning and value-making inherent in all life. In the broadest sense, it pertains to one’s inner resources, or the basic value around which all other values are focused (Snodgrass & Sorajjakool, 2011). Spirituality also encompasses compassion, hope, and a sense of meaning and purpose in life. According to Lavretsky (2010), research shows that at least 88% of Americans report being spiritual.

People who turn to their spiritual beliefs tend to have better ways of coping with life’s adversities, and they experience decreased anxiety and depression, as well as a greater sense of emotional well-being and better overall health (Richards, Bartz, & O’Grady, 2009). As we grow older, the question of how we are living now and the meaning our lives have is at the core of our existence.

What are some practical steps one can take toward moving from despair to integrity on Erikson’s continuum? First, take some time to reflect on your life. What gives you meaning? During what times in your life were you able to live with purpose? How were you able to cope with loss? What did these times mean to you in terms of how you will live going forward?

Second, it is important to engage in meaningful conversations with others. The next time you have lunch or coffee with a loved one or a friend, instead of discussing the latest movie, the most recent happening in the lives of grandchildren or how well your garden is doing, try starting a conversation on the meaning of life. Discuss each other’s life purpose to uncover your deepest values and hopes. Delve into the thoughts of your loved one or friend, and see where it leads. Articulating your own thoughts on spirituality can help guide you to a more purposeful way of moving through your later years.

Finally, if you are feeling isolated, reach out to a professional mental health therapist to help guide you through these existential questions. A therapist can walk with you through these vital issues and help you learn new ways to cope with grief or loss and other stressors. In addition, good nutrition and physical health will boost your resilience and are linked with spirituality (Lavretsky, 2010). Actively re-engaging with your spirituality, in whatever form that may take, has the potential of leading to more satisfaction and peace as we age.

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