

WHOLE HEALTH: INFORMATION FOR VETERANS

Deciding What You Need for Spiritual Health



Whole Health is an approach to health care that empowers and enables YOU to take charge of your health and well-being and live your life to the fullest. It starts with YOU. It is fueled by the power of knowing yourself and what will really work for you in your life. Once you have some ideas about this, your team can help you with the skills, support, and follow up you need to reach your goals.

All resources provided in these handouts are reviewed by VHA clinicians and Veterans. No endorsement of any specific products is intended. Best wishes!

<https://www.va.gov/wholehealth/>

Deciding What You Need for Spiritual Health

This handout focuses on ways you might enhance your spiritual health. For a general introduction to spirituality and religion and how they relate to health please refer to the handout, [“An Introduction to Spirit and Soul for Whole Health.”](#)

What is “spiritual health?”

Spiritual health means different things to different people. Here are some things people mention when asked to define it.

- Connecting with something or someone bigger than yourself. This might include:
 - Living based on what matters and gives life meaning
 - Seeking God or a Higher Power
- Being the best person you can be. Examples might include:
 - Helping and serving others; being part of a community
 - Not giving up; meeting the challenges you face in life
 - Healing past traumas
 - Practicing forgiveness
 - Practicing gratitude (counting your blessings)
 - Finding meaning in suffering and bearing it with dignity¹

Which of these feel most important to you? Your answers may change over time as you check in with yourself every so often.

In most studies, religion and spirituality are linked to decreased illness and improved quality of life. For example, in some studies they are tied to decreased mental health problems, less substance abuse, and a healthier immune system, as well as less heart disease, lower blood pressure, fewer strokes, and less dementia and cancer.² It is good to know this, but it is up to each of us to decide how to bring religion and spirituality (or not) into our lives. There are many different ways to do this, and it may involve belonging to a religion, or it may not. It might mean focusing on service, or it may mean focusing on your own growth. It could be tied to a Higher Power, or it may not. Some people find spiritual health through 12-step programs. You decide.

What are spiritual “illnesses?”

There are many problems that are described as spiritual in nature. Working with the following illnesses can help to increase spiritual health:

- Moral injury. This is very important for Veterans. It ties into the difficult feelings Veterans may have because they did things that did not agree with their beliefs or values. It may be tied to feeling betrayed by the system or by unskilled leaders.³
- Guilt. Feeling like a Higher Power or other people could never love you because of what you have done. Wondering if you are being punished somehow. Wanting or needing to be forgiven.

- Shame. Feeling like you are “not enough.” Feeling like you are not included or not acceptable to others. Feeling not just that you did bad things, but that you are a bad person. Feeling the need to seek or reclaim honor.
- Powerlessness. Feeling out of control. Concerns about death and what happens after we die.
- Separation. Feeling cut off from others and from the world. Feeling disconnected from a Higher Power or from your highest self.
- Meaninglessness. Feeling distant from God or Higher Power. Being overcome by a crisis of belief or grief. Losing a sense of what matters.
- Anxiety. Wondering if you can be forgiven. Feeling afraid because of how much you do not know.

What are some ways I can focus on “Spirit and Soul” as part of my self-care?

The way to work through spiritual illnesses might involve starting (or continuing) some sort of spiritual practice. There are many options. You can try a few things out to decide what might work for you. A spiritual practice is something you do regularly that taps into what gives you a sense of meaning and purpose in your life. The following are some examples:

- Be clear on what you value. This means asking yourself what matters most to you. Refer to the handout, [“What Matters Most? Exploring Your Values.”](#)
- Seek a spiritual and/or religious guide. Talk with:
 - A community of faith leader. This may be someone you already know, or not. If you have had bad experience with spirituality and/or religion in the past, that is important to work through too.
 - A VA chaplain. The VA has more options for working with chaplains than any other care system. Talk to them for advice and support. They are trained to listen non-judgmentally and will treat all conversations as private. Refer to the handout, [“Chaplains.”](#)
- Others on their journey toward spiritual healing.
- Set aside regular times—and perhaps places—for spiritual activities. Holidays can be important. Some people find meaning in praying, reading sacred writings, or going to a religious service. Others find meaning through a walk in nature or spending time with a loved one
- Use 1 or more practices that support spiritual health, such as the following:
 - Prayer. Explore one of the many traditional forms of prayer and/or meditation. Refer to the [“Spiritual Anchors”](#) handout.
 - Use of a sacred word or phrase, or an image such as centering prayer or mantram meditation.
 - Reviewing your day and seek to improve for the next day.
 - Reading sacred writings.
 - Forgiveness. Forgiveness is not easy, and working through past difficulties or injuries may require getting some help. Those who move through the process find it helpful.⁴ Forgiveness is not about saying it was okay that someone hurt you; it is about setting yourself free so the power of that

experience can no longer hurt you. It is also about being able to learn to forgive yourself.

- Gratitude practice. A gratitude practice can be as simple as looking back at the end of each day and listing 3 things you are thankful for. For more information, refer to the "[Create a Gratitude Practice](#)" handout.
- Self-compassion practice. Learning to be kind to yourself and to share this compassion with others. Refer to the "[Compassion Practice](#)" handout.
- "Working the 12 Steps." Work on healing in a community with others facing similar struggles. This can include being part of a 12 Step Group
- Mindful awareness activities. These can support a spiritual practice. It may help to review the Mindful Awareness handouts for ideas.
- Use a spiritual anchor. For example, carry something with you (a ring, a picture, a small object) that you can look at any time to remind yourself about what really matters to you. Refer to the "[Spiritual Anchors](#)" handout for more information.
- Serve others. This does not have to be just about you. It is also about service. Veterans understand this better than many other people. You could do some volunteering, or try to help out someone else and find joy through that.

For you to consider:

- Do you feel like you are suffering from any of the spiritual illnesses described above?
- Where can you start with a spiritual practice? Are you interested in trying any of the options listed in this handout?
- Who could help you out as you explore this aspect of your health?

The information in this handout is general. **Please work with your health care team to use the information in the best way possible to promote your health and happiness.**

For more information:

ORGANIZATION	RESOURCES	WEBSITE
Veterans Health Administration	A variety of Whole Health handouts on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Spirit and Soul ● Personal Development ● Mindful Awareness 	https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/veteran-handouts/index.asp
VHA Office of Patient Centered Care	Multiple videos on Whole Health, including a "Multimedia" section with videos related to mindfulness	https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/video/videos.asp

This handout was written for the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) by Adam Rindfleisch, MPhil, MD, Director, Integrative Health Program, University of Wisconsin Department of Family Medicine and Community Health. The handout was reviewed and edited by Veterans and VHA subject matter experts.

References

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3. Currier JM, Holland JM, Malott J. Moral injury, meaning making, and mental health in returning veterans. *J Clin Psychol*. 2015;71(3):229-240. doi: 10.1002/jclp.22134.
4. Rindfleisch A. Forgiveness. In: Rakei D, ed. *Integrative Medicine*. 4th ed. Philadelphia, PA: Elsevier; 2017:940-944.

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