

Touching the Spirit



How to Develop Programs that Enrich a Senior's Spirituality

by Donna Childress

her world an understanding and perspective, said Koepke.

For those who work with the aging, helping a senior tap his or her spirituality can add many layers of depth to the person's life.

The Definition of Spirituality

Because humans are made up of mind, body, and spirit, aging-field professionals should pay attention to their clients' spiritual side. "If we do not address the spirit, we are only addressing two-thirds of a person's life," said Koepke, who presented the seminar "Touching the Inner Life in a Multi-Religious World" to NCOA members last June. The National Interfaith Coalition on Aging (NICA) and the National Institute for Senior Centers (NISC), both constituent groups of The National Council on the Aging (NCOA), sponsored the Webcast.

But what is spirit?

Koepke shared a quote from author Kathleen Fischer saying that spirituality is "the deepest dimension of all life" and is "the ultimate ground of all our questions, hopes, fears, and loves." Koepke then added his own interpretation of spirituality. "It is not a piece of the pie; it is the pie plate. In my experience, the spirit undergirds everything." How a person handles trauma, whether he or she sees life as good or bad—these are all part of spirit, he said.

Some time ago, The Rev. Donald Koepke, director of the Center for Spirituality and Aging in Anaheim, CA, counseled an elderly woman who was nearing the end of her life. She was a Communist and did not believe in an afterlife.

Intrigued, Koepke asked her what she saw coming next. She replied that it was time for her to move over and make way for younger people. She then grew philosophical, saying she believed the purpose of human life was to make the world a better place. She explained how she had done that through her involvement in the American labor movement. She was seeing herself at the end of life, having fulfilled her mission.

She did not claim a religion, but she did have a spirituality—a view of life that gave

When people talk about what a great spirit someone has, it usually is in relation to how that person handles the stress of everyday life, agreed Henry Simmons, professor of religion and aging at Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond, VA.

All people have spirituality, even though they may not have a religion, said Koepke. He draws a distinction between formal and functional beliefs. Formal beliefs are the realm of religion and of the head, and are what people think they should believe, Koepke said. Functional beliefs are the realm of spirituality and of the heart, and are what people actually believe. For example, a nun might be afraid to die or a Lutheran Christian might feel guilty for his actions even though Lutherans believe they are saved by grace alone. This tension reflects the difference between formal and functional beliefs.

Giving Good Care

Caregivers who wish to enhance seniors' spirituality should focus on each client's functional beliefs and narrow in on what that client deems important, Koepke said. "How does their faith inform their experience of aging?" Koepke asks. The client and caregiver can explore the answers to this question even if the caregiver comes from "a place of unknowing," said Koepke. In this way, the caregiver can evoke the *client's* understanding of faith, he said.

Aging-field professionals should be careful to separate their own beliefs from that of their clients. "It's not what I believe that matters," Koepke said. "It's what the client believes."

He suggested asking what he calls the faith question: "Do you have a faith that helps you cope?" Then encourage the client to explore the answer to that question more fully. You don't have to ask about religion—but religion has to be an okay topic if the client raises it.

"Part of the function of old age is to reflect on your life and resolve it," Koepke said. "Aging ultimately is a spiritual journey" because the mental, physical, and social

changes that are a part of aging prompt elders to ask spiritual questions. Was my time well spent? Did I love the right people and the right things? Did I help the next generation?

"Sometimes the answer is no," he said. "If so, there has to be an exploration of that." Be prepared to listen to and work with those who believe they have not fulfilled their life's mission. "That is good care—it is not religion," Koepke said.

Being Present

An unbiased listener is precisely what some elderly want. The "ministry of presence" is important, said Jan McGilliard, executive director of ElderCare Connections in Blacksburg, VA. "Not everyone needs or wants comfort, but those who do would benefit from someone nonjudgmental sitting with them, simply spending time."

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This companionship is the purview of parish nurses. While not a theological expert, a parish nurse may focus on “being present with people on their journey through their faith and their health,” said Sharon Adkins, president of the Health Ministries Association in Nashville, TN. Good nurses give “the gift of a listening ear with open acceptance. The key is to really be present.”

Time constraints are real, she acknowledged. But the length of a visit does not always indicate how beneficial it is. “It’s the quality of time—it’s really being there when you’re there,” she said. “The biggest thing is to be willing to listen fully and not be mentally making your grocery list.”

Remember, too, that elders may be seeking refuge from shadowy feelings. “What nags at the human spirit is guilt,” said Simmons. “It haunts people.”

“Part of the function of old age is to reflect on your life and resolve it.”

—*The Rev. Donald Koepke*

Often these people are stuck in a particular perception or belief system and simply need to think through their issues, said Koepke. “It’s a human experience to try to

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With a little creativity, aging-field professionals can help seniors reach their spiritual nature through myriad ways. Some examples include:

- **Get Personal.** Companionship is a spiritual aspect of caregiving. Assisting a senior with personal needs such as housing and healthcare and aiding that person in using his or her own gifts and resources is “touching a spiritual aspect,” McGilliard said. “When basic needs are met, people are more able to explore their spiritual side.”

Use individual gifts to reach others, she said. For example, take a carefully chosen piece of music or a poem to a senior and tell them, “I heard this and thought of you.”

- **Hold a Group Discussion.** Gathering people for discussion is a recipe for spiritual sharing, since “people feel safest in a small group,” McGilliard said. A group can take various forms—from a church class to a non-denominational book club. Regardless of its structure, the group must be nonjudgmental, and members must respect different personalities and different beliefs. Members also must promise not to share what is said within the group with others. “Confidentiality would be an important component of people feeling safe,” she said. Give people the opportunity to speak, or to be quiet. For some, being actively involved is the most beneficial, while for others, the quiet time is the most meaningful.

Grief and caregiver support groups are beneficial because they enable people to move beyond their loneliness and deal with issues, Adkins said. Mentoring programs that look at spiritual development do the same. Spiritual study groups focus on “mining the spirit, or tilling the soil, as it were,” she said.

The idea of lifelong learning jazzes up “joiners” or “conference junkies,” said McGilliard. These people find meaning in hearing speakers on various topics, going to book clubs, or even taking classes at a university.

Choose group leaders carefully. They should know their groups and accurately gauge what is and isn’t appropriate to discuss. Leaders also must do their homework and be well on their way in their own spiritual journey, McGilliard said. “My goal is not to lead everything myself, but to inspire others to lead,” she said.

- **Conduct a Life Review.** Life reviews help seniors delve into their life’s stories or themes and to reflect on where their current beliefs lie. To conduct a life review, tease out clients’ answers to important questions. What do I need to accomplish? Do I need to make peace with folks or forgive someone? Do I still believe the things I was taught? Do I have a family history to impart to my descendants? “People are usually sifting things through to the end,” McGilliard said.

resolve significant conflicts with significant people,” he said.

Aging-field professionals can attempt to address a client’s guilt through one-on-one discussions or in groups. Senior centers, for example, can schedule a program on resolving guilt, bring in a psychologist or theologian to speak to the group, then steer appropriate clients to it, said Koepke.

Spiritual Programming Principles

Deep conversations or heartfelt listening sessions with clients can be priceless. But how can professionals incorporate care of the spirit into everyday programming? Koepke’s seminar gave some guidance.

He emphasized that every person is both capable of and responsible for his or her own soul care. To create the most effective spiritually based programming, professionals should focus on stimulation and growth—using the participant’s definition of spiritual growth.

Foster a place of sharing, not teaching. Spiritual programming should ask questions that lead clients to their own conclusions, not through lectures that tell them how they should think or what they should believe. “Spirituality comes through insight, not information,” Koepke said. Become multi-religious rather than a-religious, and do not require participants to adhere to the beliefs or practices of particular denominations.

- **Tell Stories and Create Legacies.** Encourage participants to reminisce. Ask them to tell a story chronologically—what happened when—or about certain life events. Or elicit a story with key words and phrases, such as “Tell me a story about ...”
Legacy is “where last will and testament becomes testament, as opposed to giving away the house,” said Simmons. It involves “on a personal level, telling our own story.” Considering a legacy is more than talking about the good times; it also digs up the times that were not so good. Getting it all right takes courage and persistence, he said.
- **Prepare Ethical Wills.** Ethical wills sum up a person’s spiritual beliefs, and preparing the wills gives seniors an opportunity to think deeply. These wills enable older adults to leave their code of ethics for posterity, either as an attachment to a legal will or as a separate message to survivors. Seniors can write them, tape record them, videotape them, or dictate them to a note taker.
- **Share Thoughts for the Day.** Sharing thoughts for the day exercises seniors’ minds and spirits. Books of quotes Koepke recommended include *Autumn Wisdom: Finding Meaning in Life’s Later Years* by James Miller and *My Grandfather’s Blessing: Stories of Strength, Refuge and Belonging* by Rachael Naomi Remen.
- **Read and Discuss Books.** The humanities can be inspirational. Reading a good book—or hearing a gifted reader say the words—nourishes the human spirit, said Simmons. Inductive book studies, where sen-

iors ponder and answer questions on books they have read, are useful as well. On Koepke’s reading list are *Tuesdays with Morrie* by Mitch Albom, *Counting on Kindness* by Wendy Lustbader, and *Man’s Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl.

- **Play Music.** Play moving music, and ask seniors to discuss how they feel when they listen to it. Try the Grand Canyon Suite or the third movement from Saint-Saen’s “Organ” Symphony, said Koepke.
“Music has great power for triggering memories or feeling a certain way,” said McGilliard. For example, a harpist she knows selects music to play based on the listener’s mood and health.
- **Move.** Dance can have a spiritual side, as can yoga, drawing, or modeling clay, McGilliard said. “The ways we reach people often may not be very verbal.”
- **Hold a Memorial Service.** Memorial services can be a balm for the spirit. Simmons suggests a service to remember those at the senior center who have died. At one such service, “not only did they remember people tenderly, but people thought they would be remembered like that when they died,” he said.
- **Save the Environment.** The concept of responsible citizenship—and of saving the environment—may be meaningful to older adults, as well, said Simmons. While seniors did not grow up with environmentalism, many are familiar with the concept of conservation and not wasting resources. Because their grandchildren often have learned earth-friendly ways such as recycling and planting trees, these activities are something the whole family can share.

Then, ask how programs address the four spiritual needs:

1. The need for meaning and purpose.
2. The need to give love.
3. The need to receive love.
4. The need for forgiveness, hope, and creativity.

“Every person seeks to fulfill these needs,” he said.

Above all, look for what sparks meaning in a client’s life. Psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, author of *Man’s Search for Meaning*, said man finds meaning through creativity, experience, and attitude. These are good concepts on which to base programming, said Koepke.

Above all, look for what sparks meaning in a client’s life.

Use caution, though, in naming programs. The word “spirituality” came into being only 30-40 years ago and to the older generation, it may mean being self-involved rather than interacting with a congregation or working in the world for justice, said Simmons. “Older adults not only don’t relate to the word ‘spirituality,’ but it has some negative connota-

tions,” he said. Koepke agreed, noting that while many boomers have rejected the word “religion” in favor of the word “spirituality,” the older generation perceives them as one and the same.

However, pinpointing a more-favorable term to describe caring for the spirit is challenging. “I do this with my students at the seminary, and they can’t come up with a term,” Simmons said.

Adkins suggests asking questions instead. What does your life mean? What brings you joy? Koepke recommended using words like “meaning,” “purpose,” and “focus.” Talking about programming that is “sensitive to the human spirit” or that revolves around a person’s legacy may be palatable, as well, said Simmons.

The key to spiritual programming is not the manner in which it is implemented, but that it is personally relevant and meaningful to the client. These interactions are the ones that truly touch a client.

Adkins shared a favorite quote from Pierre Teilhard De Chardin that may guide others when planning programs related to the spirit: “We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.” ♦

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Environmental activities also give seniors the possibility of taking on leadership roles and making a positive difference. In this context, responsible citizenship is akin to legacy. It becomes “what we are leaving for our children and grandchildren for a sustainable, habitable world,” Simmons said.

- **Take a Walk.** Spiritual walking journeys also nurture the spirit, Adkins said. In them, seniors walk a certain distance on a regular basis

in their own neighborhoods, then plot that mileage to a corresponding spot on a map of the holy lands so that they “walk” closer to a certain sacred destination each day.

In addition, walking a labyrinth is becoming more accepted as a spiritual endeavor, she said. Those who are blind or have difficulty walking can trace the paths with finger labyrinths. ♦