

The soul at work

Sukhi Sian explores the importance of being able to talk about spiritual beliefs in the workplace

As a therapist who actively works with spirituality, I am passionate about supporting practitioners and workplaces to consider the importance of exploring faith and beliefs at work. By developing a better understanding of spirituality, and its role within the workplace, we are better able to support all of our colleagues' wellbeing, and therapeutic and clinical practices, as part of our commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). I approach this from a few different perspectives: Regional Clinical Lead for Wales and Midlands at Place2Be, Executive Committee member of BACP Spirituality division, and private practice counsellor, clinical supervisor and energy healer.

Reflective spaces

In this article, I will invite you, as practitioners, to reflect upon how to create reflective spaces to explore and increase self-awareness around spirituality within the workplace. I will also encourage you to consider the personal and professional challenges involved in bringing spirituality into 'the room' and work environment. It's a chance to reflect upon the concept of the 'spiritual closet' - that is to say, the idea that therapists may hide our true 'spiritual' self within the counselling

profession, mostly due to fear and perhaps oppression.¹ It is first important to consider how well organisations and individuals embrace spirituality. While we look to embed EDI into the core of our practice, how much do we specifically bring spirituality into our therapeutic work?

Spiritual closet

For the past four years, I have been a network facilitator for BACP Spirituality division and have spoken to many practitioners about their beliefs and practices. Some have been in the profession for 20 years and are only now speaking openly about spirituality for the first time. This has been quite an eye-opener, as I have realised that therapists have potentially been practising in isolation when it comes to spirituality. I discovered that many therapists working across a variety of settings struggled to find a voice to express their spiritual views in relation to therapy. Seldom is a space created for such reflection and consideration of the soul within the workplace.

We may also stumble across these barriers in supervision, depending on how comfortable our supervisor feels about spirituality. This could relate to their training or limitations within the workplace. In an article I wrote for *Thresholds* called, 'Coming out of the

spiritual closet',¹ I shared my belief that counselling and spirituality go hand in hand, and that we must consider the mind, body and soul (spirit) in a holistic approach that includes the 'whole' person. We must encourage and give permission to use spiritual concepts, such as using the words, 'soul' and 'spirit', or making references to God. We must also have the opportunity to explore spirituality in clinical supervision.

If employers do not create time and space for spirituality, what message does its absence give? There seems to be an underlying sense of oppression and fear around spirituality. And yet, if we think about what the term 'spirituality' means to us, and its richness and importance to us as practitioners, what might it mean to clients?

Are we missing opportunities within our therapeutic and clinical work that could be really beneficial to support our clients, supervisees and colleagues with healing and growth? And how then can we build confidence and competence as practitioners?

Sensitive conversations

Generating safe and open conversations can be a starting point which allows clients to bring spirituality into the room and therapists to respond. Some of these conversations may also need to take place at an organisational level.

Finding sensitive ways to invite clients to talk about their spirituality/belief when needed can be helpful to them in therapy. Here are some suggested ways to do this:

- Recognise that due to stigma, fear or shame, clients may not openly bring spirituality into the room, so it is important for therapists to be able to encourage this exploration and give permission
- Think about how, as a therapist, you make it known that you welcome these discussions. Do you include it on your biography, counsellor profile and website?
- Increase awareness and knowledge around spirituality, including faith developmental models, and be aware that people's religious/spiritual beliefs can change over time
- Commit to continued professional development at both an individual and organisational level
- Reflect on how to best inform and develop the workforce. What resources and training are available for staff?
- Recognise how spirituality and religion or faith resources may support a client's wellbeing and recovery

- Use assessments to gather information on spiritual/religious beliefs so that protective factors can be identified
- Help clients, supervisees and colleagues to tap into their existing spiritual resources in the service of their mental health

Discussing spirituality-related topics enhanced self-awareness, enabling them to explore blind spots, discomfort, resistance, preconceptions and unconscious bias

- Adopt a strength-based approach that integrates spirituality as part of the therapeutic work
- Approach every conversation with curiosity and openness, and be aware of not imposing our own beliefs on others
- Be able to identify when spiritual/religious beliefs, experiences or practices hold the potential for harm to self or others, and be informed about child protection and safeguarding

- Be aware that, in the instance of spiritual abuse, it may present through emotional, physical and sexual abuse, and therefore be difficult to identify. Organisations may wish to consider this in safeguarding training.

Workplace considerations

As a therapist based in a workplace setting, it can also be helpful to identify how comfortable you feel about embracing spirituality at work, and if there is any sense of being in this 'spiritual closet'. It may be useful to reflect on the following questions:

- Does speaking about spirituality at work feel risky?
- Does an important part of you remain hidden from others?
- Is fear a significant factor? Do you worry about being judged, misunderstood or considered unprofessional by others?
- Do you have a desire to express your true self, but a sense of suppressing it?
- Is there a sense of disconnect or compartmentalisation?

It can take courage to embrace spirituality, especially when we feel at odds with others, and experience ourselves as a minority. It's important to remember that as therapists we work with the unknown and uncertainty.

Toolkit

We hold space for others, and we learn to trust the process. Therapists are safe containers for clients, who also need to be held in clinical supervision and other spaces in the workplace and organisation, in order to work safely and ethically.

I invite you to now reflect on how comfortable, confident and competent you feel about exploring spirituality at work. Think about your work with:

- Clients
- Peers/colleagues
- Supervisors/supervisees
- The wider context: teams, organisational forums, reflective spaces, training, learning and development settings.

It's important to remember that as therapists we work with the unknown and uncertainty

Notice where or who you feel most and least comfortable with. Do you notice any internal and or external barriers? Self-awareness is key here. This will determine how safe others may feel about bringing spirituality into the room, and it will influence how well we respond to it. Use clinical supervision and reflective spaces to explore and address barriers, ambivalence, conflicts, fears and, of course, as a place to share and celebrate good practice.

Personal, professional and organisational barriers

It can also be insightful to reflect on barriers. Are you able to identify any barriers that currently prevent you from embracing spirituality at work? Think of one individual barrier/challenge, and one organisational, or professional, barrier/challenge. Reflect on how may you begin to address these.

Sometimes, a first step could be to create a spirituality-friendly space at work. I would like to share the example of a Spirituality Special Interest Group (SIG), I piloted at Place2Be. Within the

organisation, we now refer to equity rather than equality because this wording more accurately represents our commitment to ensuring that everyone's unique needs are addressed. While equality assumes that all people should be treated the same, equity takes into consideration a person's unique circumstances, adjusting treatment accordingly so that the result is equal.

I have previously facilitated reflective spaces for practitioners (including non-clinical colleagues). We explored spirituality and how it may show up in our work.

First, we looked at the theme, 'How does looking through a 'spirituality' lens enhance our work as practitioners?'. Colleagues found this allowed a deeper exploration with clients/supervisees, which opened more opportunities. It helped with staff wellbeing and fitness to practise. Colleagues were involved in spiritual practices, such as meditation, yoga and prayer which helped them to manage stress and workloads. Discussing spirituality-related topics enhanced self-awareness, enabling them to explore blind spots, discomfort, resistance, preconceptions and unconscious bias. This in turn offers faith and hope when dealing with challenging situations.

We went on to explore, 'How may spirituality show up in our work with children and young people?'. We found that it helped to be curious about safeguarding. For example, if suicidal ideation was more prevalent in certain cultures, colleagues were able to notice patterns within communities. Working with spirituality with children and young people could show up in such areas as magical thinking, creativity, mindfulness, energy work, or when exploring tools such as crystals, prayer or mindfulness. It could also be openly explored when contemplating life after death following bereavement. We discussed enhancing the assessment process with parents by asking about spiritual and religious beliefs. In faith-based schools, we considered supporting children and young people with their spiritual identity. We considered questions of autonomy and choice where colleagues identified missed opportunities,

but recognised potential for future therapeutic work incorporating a spiritual approach.

Intersectionality

Place2Be is a member of the Coalition for Inclusion and Anti-Oppressive Practice,² and in October 2023, the *Race is complicated: a toolkit for psychological therapies training* was launched. This is the first resource for individual tutors, training providers and senior leadership in institutions, and is aimed at supporting the UK counselling and psychotherapy sectors to better understand and address race and diversity. The toolkit is an important step in increasing diversity in the counselling, psychotherapy and psychology professions by challenging the whole sector to be more inclusive. Although this focuses on race, I think it is a helpful tool to use when considering all aspects of spirituality as an intersection of EDI. The interactive PDF has practical tools and approaches to use in the right settings. It can be downloaded from the Place2Be website:

<https://tinyurl.com/mwvrzzz3> ●

Biography



Sukhi Sian is a psychodynamic counsellor who has predominantly worked with sexual violence and children's mental health. She is trained in holistic, energy based therapies and has developed a spiritually integrated holistic approach to therapeutic practice and clinical supervision. Sukhi is Regional Clinical Lead for Midlands and Wales at Place2Be and BACP Spirituality division Co-Deputy Chair.

References

- 1 Sian S. Coming out of the closet. *Thresholds* 2020; April: 20–22. www.bacp.co.uk/bacp-journals/thresholds/april-2020/coming-out-of-the-closet
- 2 Place2Be. Coalition for inclusion and anti-oppressive practice. [Online.] <https://tinyurl.com/bdzaxpes> (accessed February 2024).

This article is based on a talk that Sukhi gave about working with spirituality in the workplace at the BACP Spirituality 'Working with Soul' event in December. The theme of the event was 'Mind the Gap: exploring the intersectionality of aspects of EDI, religion and spirituality'.