THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSION OF PERSONALITY 
AND ITS ROLE IN MENTAL HEALTH

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Abstract: The concept of mental health is a global concept and is complementary to psychiatry. That is also because psychiatry disorder is often a deformed and caricatured image of mental health. Both mental health and psychiatric disorders implies physical body, psychiatry, as well as spiritual dimension of personality. Both of them interfere with individual and collective biography, with community traditions and customs, as well as with cultural, religious, and moral values. In the mental health and personality approaches the dimensional perspective plays a major role. According to this perspective, personality dimensions favor those spiritual experiences that enhance the coping abilities, self-determination, and are representing a way of cultivating those virtues which protect the mental health and allow the human being to respect also those things and events which don't depend of it.

Key words: mental health, personality, spiritual dimension

The term “spirituality” continues to be the subject of great controversy. The diversity of its definitions corresponds to its complexity (Cook, Powell, Sims 2009). No matter the perspective, the spiritual world is a vast territory which integrates not only existential meanings and goals and affective and cognitive references, but also transpersonal beliefs and experiences which lead to a deeper understanding of the connection between psychic normality and abnormality and the normality and abnormality of the personality.

Mental health is a global concept complementary to psychiatry which incorporates both a public health objective and a point of reference which is simultaneously individual and collective (Prelipeanu, Mihailescu, Teodorescu 2000). Thus, mental health promotes the totality of objective strategies which aim to protect the wellness of the community in both mind and spirit. It takes into account all the favorable factors, as well as the trigger factors for the diversity of psychic episodes and illnesses. A second component of mental health is the subjective individual and collective state of wellness which is a result of a harmonious personality which integrates and assumes life experiences in a coherent manner. They insure well-balanced interpersonal relationships as well as common access to authentic and liberating existential values.

Knowledge of the governing principles of mental health becomes a major factor in the prevention of mental diseases and contributes decisively to eliminating the stigma associated with mental illness and psychiatry in general. This is due to the fact that both mental wellness and mental illness are conditioned by biology, psychology and social culture, and thus must be discussed taking into account not only an individual's intentional subjectivity and ability to reflect, but also one's freedom to decide, act and transcend one's condition.

Five centuries ago already, the description of a series of vaguely delineated and fleeting psychiatric entities showed the connection between psychiatry and the social and economic environment. Using the health biography of two brothers from Basel, who upon returning to their city of residence, recovered from a severe mental condition, Hofer describes “nostalgia”, a condition which subsequently became very well known in Western Europe. A couple of centuries later, several other fleeting clinical psychiatric conditions such as the hysterical and epileptic pathological fugues, were identified and described. They were called “ambulatory automatism” in France, and “ambulatory determinisms” in Italy. At the end of the 20th century, “multiple personality” is described by Hacking (1995). The list of psychiatric disorders directly connected to socio-cultural dynamics can continue with impulse-control disorders, PTSD, and Gulf Syndrome which appeared after the Vietnam and Gulf Wars, as well as pathological post-traumatic states induced by certain sadistic abuses whose perpetrators have not been condemned as moral authors of the crime.

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Mental health and psychic diseases must be discussed in terms of the self-conscious human being since they both deal with the biology, psyche, and spiritual values of the individual. Besides, the role of interpersonal relationships, autobiography and collective biography, community traditions and customs, cultural values and religion must always be discussed and emphasized.

It is well known that contemporary society and culture are dominated by science, technology, religion, and community values which all inform, motivate and control the dynamics of contemporary life. Today's culture is one of overproduction and excessive consumption of goods and leisure. It promotes hedonistic living in the present moment as well as an individual's freedom to organize his or her life in a strictly subjective way. New models of success and false values which throw one's aspirations and motivations into disarray and confusion are constantly created. People communicate and befriend one-another through the internet where they are more likely to have superficial, soulless encounters. Though not everything is "proper", everything is permitted, and promoting moral norms and trust in the law become optional (Nireștean, 2011).

Culture is more and more removed from universal symbols that give it cohesion. It promotes form over substance and it feeds it to a public who readily digests it without discernment. In the spirit of the “new democracy”, everything goes in a world overwhelmed by individualism, which prefers the winners to those who live wisely, no matter the means of their success.

In contemporary society, human beings live for themselves and have a constant and insatiable desire for more. They make quick attempts at reaching peaks of real existential meanings, but are disadvantaged by selfishness and lack of self-control. The individual ego is hypertrophied but lacks substance. It turns within with an inauthentic and vulnerable self-esteem which is fed and sustained by a highly subjective interpretation of events and life experiences (Lipovetsky, 2007). This is the way human beings believe they can achieve the state of subjective wellbeing which is understood as a form of happiness- a main component of mental health.

One's self-image and self-esteem condition each-other in the whirlwind of the search for the perfect moment, of competitiveness and competition, where altruism and empathy have become undesirable. Individual identity is thus built on rationality and knowledge, not on interpersonal harmony, faith, or spiritual experiences. The contemporary “Homo Democraticus” is very different from “Homo Spiritualis”. Nevertheless, knowledge can also bring about wisdom when human beings open up to spiritual values and espouse - even for narcissistic reasons- the way of good intentions.

The structure of one's personality influences the somatic state of health- as is the case with certain cardio-vascular disease which are significantly affected- as well as one's psyche, in which it can be a breeding ground for addictions and a great diversity of psychic diseases. A mature personality takes coherent charge of its life experiences and has the ability to adapt to life's events and to its stress factors.

From a conceptual perspective, mental health must be defined in connection with the various stages of life and its critical periods, and from an utilitarian viewpoint, it is important to develop those factors which protect mental health and mental longevity.

The most appropriate way to understand the connection between personality and mental health is to consider the points of reference of the dimensional perspective. The most commonly used are the ones belonging to the seven factors. For example, during adolescence, a heightened search for novelty and childhood sensations can lead to impulse-control disorders, addictive behavior as well as impulsivity and aggression. During puberty and adolescence, heightened levels of nervousness can facilitate the onset of the metabolic syndrome and of obesity in the years to follow, while being more conscientious protects one's health and longevity. Also during adolescence, having a pleasant, attitude and being conscientious can positively influence self-control and the ability to learn, and protect one's health as an adult. The frequency of negative life events, addictive behavior and mortality rates also diminish. On the contrary, a low level of self-control leads to diminished activity, impulse-control disorders, hetero-aggressiveness, as well as high rates of suicide upon reaching adulthood. At the adolescent stage, the progressive and elaborate access to human values has a positive effect on mental health, in contrast with the transitory access to inauthentic and fleeting values which are so often promoted in contemporary culture.

In adults, having a high degree of nervousness, being unpleasant and not being conscientious can favor obesity, nicotine and alcohol addiction, as well as sustain a persistent pessimism and low self-esteem. On the contrary, being an extrovert means being active and sociable.

The structure of the personality as well as the concept of mental health integrates biological, psychological, social and spiritual components. The subjectivity and intentionality of each individual are constantly completed and changed by one's spiritual needs which connect the individual with the world of the senses, of existential motivations, and self-transcendence.

Spiritual needs reside at the foundation of the homonymous dimension of the personality. It molds together a diversity of attributes which are predominantly conditioned by culture, such as: intellectual abilities, curiosity, vision, originality, logic and depth, artistic and esthetic sense, wisdom, common sense, dignity, humor, but also the ability to control and transcend one's ego.

Other major virtues of a spiritual person are tolerance, prudence, the ability to communicate, empathy, gratefulfulness, the ability to forgive and believe and respect that which we do not understand and which does not depend on us. This diversity of attributes of our spiritual being represents both a source of vitality and motivation, and a major framework of support for building self-esteem and a sense of belonging to the energy of the universe. They can also be said to represent a “divine calling” (Nireștean, 2011).

In view of the above, the connection with the dominant attributes of mental wellness becomes evident. Among them are the self-control, the feeling of personal detachment, the ability to communicate intelligently and empathetically with those around you, the adaptability to stress and resilience or responsible involvement in one's life roles, accompanied by the ability to manage tasks.
which are seen as positive stimuli instead of sources of anxiety (Kobasa, Maddi, Zola, 1983). Optimism and self-assertion - which integrates both the ability to choose a professional option and that of developing feelings of friendship and love, are to be added to the list of characteristics of a mentally stable human being.

The complex notion of mental wellness also includes the capacity to access the traditions and products of culture, faith and religion- mystical experiences being among those that confirm the unity of all things... A corollary of this diverse mental health structure is the state of subjective wellbeing with its two components, the cognitive and the affective. This “type of happiness” is fifty percent dependent on the quality of one’s life and circumstances, but the rest correlates in an obvious manner to the dimensions of one’s personality. Thus, high levels of neuroticism negatively affect the subjective wellbeing, while high levels of neuroticism stimulate it. Low levels of neuroticism allow for the growth of personal aptitudes and talents, and a rise in self-control. They also diminish addictive tendencies, stimulate vigilance, activism, empathy in interpersonal relationships, and group cohesion due to higher correctness and cooperation. The individual’s moral stance is also enhanced, as he or she can only become whole and gain self-worth by being surrounded by others. In the same context, when one is more pleasant, conscientious and outgoing, one is more likely to be also drawn by meditation, the sacred, and prayer which often enhances one’s ability for self-transcendence. A variety of spiritual experiences are enhanced, which in their turn shape and mobilize these dimensions of the personality.

In general, the growth in spirituality significantly influences the individual’s psyche and behavior. People with a rich spiritual life can easily decide that God or Heaven is with them, and thus develop self-confidence and self-respect. Supportive, optimistic attitudes, thus sociability sustained by empathy and confidence in interpersonal relationships, are also influenced positively. The quality and duration of marriages grows, and in its turn favors longevity and the quality of life. It is a well known fact that the latter are clearly affected in people who live alone.

Efficiency and creativity are dominant behaviors, and thus the conditions necessary to living a purposeful life are always present. Consequently, periods of personal satisfaction are more frequent, and existential meanings and motivations diversify. Under these conditions, self-image and subjective wellbeing are enhanced and positively condition each-other and can shape narcissistic type tendencies. Structured in this manner, they have an obvious adaptive role to play, and create a protective framework against various psychic episodes and illnesses as well as behavioral disorders including suicide.

Nurturing one’s talents as well as spiritual practice - including religious practice - have an obvious therapeutic and rehabilitative non-medical role to play in one’s psychological state of being because they contribute to the awareness of illness and one’s attitude towards it, even in extreme situations. It also enhances one’s attitude of compliance to therapy. This role holds true not only for the superstitions and beliefs of proto-religions, but also under the conditions of religious liberalism and syncretism of contemporary society. All of the above show the complexity of the concept of mental wellness in which the physical person, the psyche, society and the supernatural coalesce.

Mental health is in the end a major attribute of human beings which is protected by the dimensions of personality such as, emotional balance, perseverance, imagination, common sense, wisdom, humor, faith, and the ability to transcend by accessing the sacred and the supernatural. This vast concept constitutes a major existential ideal, not only because “When God wants to punish humans, He first takes their minds away.”

Mature and truly self-aware individuals sometimes ask questions such as, "What is really important in life?"; "What can help us through difficulties?”, “Where and under what conditions do we feel good about ourselves?” “Are we capable of true faith or aligning ourselves with spiritual values?” For those who practice psychiatry, an exchange of ideas and experiences with priests, monks and spiritual counselors would certainly be of great value in answering these types of questions.

From the perspective of spiritual values, the concept of mental health- like the concept of personality- pleads for the union of man, society, nature and the universe. It is confirmed that spiritual beings have both a divine, contemplative, profound nature, and one that is worldly, and the union of the two can lead to all that is good, beautiful, right, emotionally supported and open toward transcendence in human existence. The harmony between the two teaches us to live “with something” and not “for something”, and gives us the freedom and authenticity which are being so strongly challenged in our world today.

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