

Understanding spirituality experientially

Matthew Cormack asks if training could use experiential learning to gain insight into clients' religious or spiritual feelings

Experiential learning enables us to bring a theory or idea to life in a way that helps us to experience it, which then leads to increased reflection and understanding.¹ For many counsellors, experiential learning is an important element of their training, and since qualifying, some of the best CPD I have done has included an experiential element. Perhaps this is simply something I connect well with, but I have often wondered how it could be used as a training method to deepen practitioners' felt understanding of a client's spirituality.

Many faiths and spiritualities include an experiential aspect or may even be predominantly experiential in nature. Baptisms, confirmations or weddings can be examples of these, where communities gather to participate in a ceremony or ritual. Funerals are too. That said, it is also worth remembering that these experiential dimensions can happen when we're alone. They do not need to be within a group or formal setting. An encounter with the divine does not need to take place within a specific ritual or ceremony. Often, they don't. My own Pagan faith has many different traditions. Some of these involve experiencing initiatory rites or actively making contact with gods and goddesses.²

Gaining personal insight

I sometimes go to sit in the woods, with the purpose of allowing myself to connect with the spirits of the land. I call on them and make offerings. This often becomes a liminal space, which exists outside my day-to-day life. It is a place where change may occur, which can feel similar to the counselling room. I may reflect on my experience and understanding of the gods, or my therapeutic practice. This experiential, reflective practice often becomes material for exploration within supervision. During these experiences, an idea or a form of practice may have come to my mind that could be useful in my counselling practice, and it feels necessary to explore this in supervision and to consider whether the ethics of this would be appropriate. Sometimes, in supervision, I have found myself

spontaneously linking a piece of counselling theory or literature to my faith. It can be valuable to investigate why these ideas are connecting.

Does spirituality have a place within supervision? I think so. Using our own experiential awareness to understand how spirituality may be for clients feels important. I notice a parallel between counselling and spirituality when it comes to this. People say that, to be a counsellor, you have to experience counselling yourself. And you may have heard the quote from Carl Jung: 'Learn your theories as well as you can, but put them aside when you touch the miracle of the living soul'.³ We can read dozens of theory books, journals or reflective accounts; however, being in the therapy room together is a unique experience. Being familiar with what having counselling can feel like helps us to empathise and connect with our clients. I propose that this may ring true for spirituality, faith and belief too: if we have personal insight into this kind of

While it wouldn't be practical to study the intricacies of different faiths, working experientially may offer trainees insight into how it feels to participate in something that has deep meaning

experience, it may help us to connect deeply with clients of faith. This is not to say that to understand these clients we need to practise many different faiths or any faith at all. The same as we do not need to try every modality of therapy available; I'm exhausted even considering the idea of that much therapy. One quality of experiential learning is that through practice we may discover parts of ourselves that we may not have been aware of before. Such approaches could therefore help us to understand, or connect with, feelings that may emerge for people

through their faith or spirituality, even if we are not spiritual or religious. For instance, painting, writing or other methods could help to connect with meaningful, personal aspects.

When we are working with a client, we may reach relational depth. Mick Cooper describes this as '...a state of profound contact and engagement between people'.⁴ For some, the idea of relational depth might be comparable to a spiritual experience in which you feel profoundly in sync with someone. This resonates with my personal encounters with relational depth. It can also happen within a group, perhaps when it is in the 'performing' stage of Tuckman's model.⁵ Members may be in a similar state of relational depth towards one another. I believe this may also be experienced within a faith group where it is acknowledged through a spiritual lens. The connection between group members feels beyond something we can articulate. It is powerful and meaningful. Thus, if you have ever participated in a group activity that has resonated with you in a non-religious setting, you may have experiential understanding of what collective experiences of spirituality could feel like for some clients. Potentially, this could happen in a CPD workshop or an activity in your training.

An effective use of time

There appear to be few counselling courses that spend any significant length of time exploring faith, belief and religion, experientially or otherwise. A current piece of research by Dr Jane Hunt at the Metanoia Institute is mapping this.⁶ Perhaps the gap in training is connected with the question of how to explore such a vast area with limited time, especially when there are people who dedicate their lives to understanding spirituality or faith. While it wouldn't be practical to study the intricacies of different faiths, working experientially may offer trainees insight into how it feels to participate in something that has deep meaning. I'm also curious if having some teaching about faith, belief and religion might encourage trainee counsellors to be more comfortable with sharing their own experiences.

Discussion



An experiential exercise

Currently, students who are on BACP approved or accredited courses and are interested in spirituality or faith can connect with the BACP Spirituality division and our student network group. The BACP Spirituality student network meeting happens three times a year and is an opportunity for trainee counsellors to meet with others and explore themes around spirituality, faith and religion. The student network group is relatively new and has been growing over this year. I have the pleasure of being one of the current organisers. At the end of May, I co-facilitated the network group with a couple of my colleagues. During our preparations for the meeting, I suggested that we create a group poem, an experiential activity, around the theme of 'What spirituality means to me'.

I have run this group poem exercise many times, in different forms, over the years, for both therapist groups and faith groups. It can be a way for the unspoken to come into the room or to notice feelings that may be shared. I find it striking how the poems flow when they are often written by 20 or 30 people. The poems never cease to surprise me.

When facilitating experiential activities, it is crucial for participation to be optional. There is never any pressure to participate or to share anything, unless participants would like to. In this case, the network group were given the theme: 'What spirituality means to me'. Those present were given some time to reflect and consider a word or sentence they would like to write. As we were working online, I shared a link to a site that would allow the participants to post this anonymously. Only I would see the results, and these would display in the order they were submitted. Once everyone who wanted to write something had done so, I asked members of the group to get into a comfortable space. This could be with

Such approaches could therefore help us to understand, or connect with, feelings that may emerge for people through their faith or spirituality, even if we are not spiritual or religious

eyes open or closed, camera on or off, whatever felt right for them in that moment. I invited the group to allow themselves to experience the group poem as it was read aloud, to really hear the words that had been created together.

I noticed several seconds of silence after the poem was read out. The silence was comfortable, or at least I experienced it as being so. The other organisers and I made sure that there was space for anyone to share reflections or feelings arising from listening to the poem. This experiential poem led to participants expressing a sense of feeling connected with one another, and members expressed that they noticed changes in how they perceived spirituality after taking part.

An experiential practice

I would like to invite you to take part in co-creating a poem, titled 'What does spirituality mean to me?'

Find a moment in a quiet place where you can reflect on the title question. You might want to reflect on your emotions, beliefs, experiences or anything that comes to you when thinking about this. Once you feel ready, write a word or a sentence expressing what has come up for you. After writing your word or sentence, you may wish to read it aloud, keep a copy of it, or discuss it in supervision.

To experience this in a group setting, you can visit the spirituality section of BACP's Communities of Practice (www.bacp.co.uk/events-and-resources/bacp-events/communities-of-practice) and, if you would like to, add your word or sentence to the poem created from this exercise.

After reading the poem, I invite you to notice how it felt for you to participate in this activity.

Biography



Matthew Cormack MBACP is a person-centred counsellor and is the mental health and wellbeing officer for the Scottish Pagan Federation. www.liminaljourneys.co.uk

References

- ¹<https://experientiallearninginstitute.org/resources/what-is-experiential-learning/> (accessed 30 July 2022).
- ² Crowley V. *Wicca*. London: Harper Collins Publishers; 2003.
- ³ Jung C. *Contributions to analytical psychology*. London: Truber and Co; 1928.
- ⁴<https://mick-cooper.squarespace.com/new-blog/2017/10/10/relational-depth-some-frequently-asked-questions>. (accessed 30 July 2022).
- ⁵ Amis K. *Becoming a counsellor: a student companion*. London: SAGE Publications; 2011.
- ⁶ Symons C, Full W, Hunt J. *Why research matters: Thresholds* 2022; July: 18–23.