

The Art of Mental and Spiritual Self-Care

What is the relationship between mental and spiritual health?

Statistics for depression and suicide in the general public are alarming. According to the [Canadian Mental Health Association](#), 20% of Canadians will personally experience a mental illness in their lifetime, with 8% experiencing a serious bout of depression. Suicide accounts for 24% of all deaths among 15 – 24 year olds, yet stigma presents a serious problem to acceptance, diagnosis and treatment of mental health problems.

The mind-body connection and the effect of our beliefs on our physical reality, far from being a product of overactive imaginations, are now supported by a solid body of research. It follows that we can affect our own mental health through conscious choices. Granted, there are genetic dispositions, as there are in many diseases. On the other hand, gene expression is affected by our environment. This can range from nutrition and activities to attitudes and beliefs, with a range of factors in between.

One particularly significant aspect that lies within our control is our search for meaning in life. In his book *Being Mortal*, author Atul Gawande quotes research done in the early 20th century by Josiah Royce, which seems even more valid today in an age of individualism. “Royce”, he wrote, “wanted to understand why simply existing... seems empty and meaningless to us. What more is it that we need in order to feel that life is worthwhile? The answer, he believed, is that we all seek a cause beyond ourselves. This was, to him, an intrinsic human need. The cause could be large (family, country, principle) or small (a building project, the care of a pet). The important thing was that, in ascribing value to the cause and seeing it as worth making sacrifices for, we give our lives meaning.”

That passage struck a chord for me. When my motivation is service or sacrifice for some greater good, I feel aligned and connected to a transcendent reality no less than through prayer and meditation, and sometimes more. Creative activities and group activities have led to that same sense of spiritual connection. The trick is, not every activity qualifies. Some equally absorbing distractions are empty and transient, like sugar highs.

So how do we discover what our “cause” or route to the transcendent should be? Do we simply choose something randomly, for the sake of our own mental health?

The writer David Brooks speaks of the concept of responding to a calling. "In this method, you don't ask, What do I want from life? You ask a different set of questions: What does life want from me? What are my circumstances calling me to do?"

In *Man's Search for Meaning*, Victor Frankl, a Jewish psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, underlines the need for responsiveness to our small inner voice. "It did not really matter what we expected from life," he wrote, "but rather what life expected from

us. We needed to stop asking the meaning of life, and instead think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life – daily and hourly."

On October 14, a multi-faith group will be hosting an event called [*The Art of Mental and Spiritual Self-Care, Forum & Fair*](#), at 5:00 p.m., at Vertigo in the SUB, University of Victoria, to explore this very intimate connection with our most profound selves.

The event will begin with a keynote on the connection between spiritual and mental health by therapist Dana Oakley. A panel of four professionals from the university and greater community will discuss the ways people find or create happiness, meaning and purpose in their lives, followed by group discussions.

Exhibits will offer information and services to enhance spiritual and mental health, including the Expressive Arts, activities centred on mind-body-spirit, local mental health organizations, and volunteer opportunities.

The event is designed to be an eye-opener for all of us who seek greater personal and societal involvement in spiritual and mental health.

Sheila Flood practices the [Bahá'í Faith](#), is active in the above [Spirit of Health](#) project, and hosts a potluck discussion on spiritual matters.

You can read more from our interfaith blog, Spiritually Speaking [HERE](#).