

# Science of Spirituality

(Basis for the Design Engineer Priesthood)

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The science of spirituality explores how spiritual practices and experiences influence human wellbeing, examining their impact on mental health, happiness, and overall life satisfaction. Spirituality has been linked to better mental health outcomes, including lower levels of depression and anxiety, and a greater ability to cope with life's challenges.

Science is a very valuable part of humanity. However, it hasn't yet explained it all. Stepping fully into a meaningful life requires a shift in the way we show up for ourselves and others.

Building the science of spirituality into a Spiritual Order takes intention and effort. The benefits are far-reaching, even if perfect scientific experimentation is somewhat elusive.

## Defining Spirituality

Spirituality can be defined broadly as a sense of connection to something higher than ourselves. Many people search for meaning in their lives. The sense of [transcendence](#) experienced in spirituality is a universal experience. Some find it in monotheistic religion, while others find it in meditation.

While the understanding of spirituality differs across religions and belief systems, it can be described by finding meaning and purpose in life. Religion and spirituality are not understood in the same way, though they often overlap. Spirituality describes a much broader understanding of an individual's connection with the transcendent aspects of life.

Seeking a meaningful connection with something bigger than yourself can result in increased positive emotions. Transcendent moments are filled

with peace, awe, and contentment. Emotional and spiritual well-being overlap, like most aspects of well-being.

Self-transcendent emotions are linked to increased spirituality. It is hypothesized that spirituality is related to the *broaden and build theory* (while negative emotions narrow thought-action repertoires, positive emotions *broaden* these repertoires, enabling us to draw on a wide array of possible cognitions and behaviors in response to emotional stimuli). Though not all positive emotions stimulate a self-transcendent state, some increase with practices in spirituality.

## Relationship Between Spirituality and Science

The relationship between spirituality and science is not necessarily contentious, but it has certainly had its difficulties.

Scientifically tracking emotions can be like searching for meaning in the shapes we see in the clouds. While the experience of emotions varies from person to person, the experience of transcendent emotions can be seen as more universal and is connected to spirituality.

Self-transcendent emotions connect us all through prosocial behavior. Emotions like *gratitude*, compassion, and awe connect us all through their prosocial capacity. Transcendent emotions promote behaviors that connect human beings and stabilize prosocial connections.

Self-transcendent emotions include:

- Compassion
- Awe
- Gratitude
- Appreciation
- Inspiration
- Admiration
- Elevation

These emotions have a particular capability of bonding individuals together. They are linked with higher levels of spirituality. As self-transcendent emotions are focused on others, more meaningful, purpose-filled interactions are possible.

Many positive psychology interventions are grounded in ancient religious and spiritual teachings, which are not typically included in treatment for psychopathology. There are empirically validated interventions for the following four virtues: hope, gratitude, forgiveness, and self-compassion.

By exploring the psychological theory behind these four virtues, science and spirituality can collectively serve more people.

The psychology of hope began in the 1950s. The explanation of hope was, at that time, focused on goal attainment. In positive psychology, it has expanded to explain the process of goal attainment better.

The theory includes both pathways to goal attainment and agency. Hopeful thought reflects the belief that one can find pathways to desired goals and become motivated to use those pathways. Hope, by this definition, drives the emotions and well-being of human beings.

Depending on one's worldview, hope interventions can help find pathways to connect with the divine and improve one's well-being. It will differ by religion and one's understanding of the role of the divine in the agency of hope. Interventions that respect the individual's worldview will clearly be more accepted and helpful.

The psychology of gratitude is conceptualized as a higher emotion connected to morality. Gratitude has been described in science as a prosocial moral emotion that is useful for two key reasons:

- a) It functions as a moral barometer because it indicates when interpersonal interaction is perceived as beneficial.
- b) It reminds us that our power is limited.

The benefits of the practice of gratitude are far-reaching, regardless of religious ideology.

The psychology of forgiveness has various definitions. The broadest definition is an adaptive human instinct activated in certain social situations. By this definition, forgiveness does not require a future relationship with someone who has wronged you. It frees you instead of the instinct for vengeance.

The psychology of self-compassion has been empirically backed. Self-compassion is conceptualized in three components:

1. Expressing kindness toward oneself and viewing one's shortcomings with a nonjudgmental attitude
2. Connecting one's experience of suffering with that of the collective human experience
3. Become mindful of suffering without becoming attached or making it a part of one's identity

These four virtues of hope, gratitude, forgiveness, and self-compassion are found in all areas of religion in various ways. Spirituality and science overlap in foundational ways to allow for human experience to bond us in a collective experience. Interventions that value the unique worldview of each individual will be more impactful, as they allow for individual belief systems to be enhanced by science.

## **Science vs. Spirituality: Skeptical Take**

It can be challenging to weave science and spirituality together.

Spirituality is universally connected to the realization that suffering is a part of human existence. Science and tough-minded folks often try to downplay the role that innate spiritual practice has in well-being.

Even well-meaning psychologists may have a negativity bias toward interventions offered in positive psychology. With a traditional focus on diagnosis and pathology treatment, less attention is spent on

psychological health. Opening minds to interventions that encompass spirituality might help aid the individual in treatment.

There have been over 300 studies seeking to understand the relationship between spirituality and health. Yet, there remain many who question the validity of the impact spirituality can have on well-being. Many practitioners in the hard sciences have a healthy skepticism toward data and hypotheses that are correlational rather than causal.

One might say to the skeptics, though, “*What will it hurt?*” Discussing an individual’s spirituality in treatment could be a spark that they need to ignite their hope and motivation toward personal goals. A descriptive, rather than prescriptive, understanding of spirituality may do more good than harm, especially when action is later self-motivated.

## **Proven Benefits of Spirituality**

Increased social stressors have been linked to physiological problems like respiratory illnesses and increased risk for cardiovascular problems.

Theorists, as early as William James have hypothesized that an individual’s spiritual practices can influence physiological and psychological well-being.

With so many links to immune system boosts and higher survival rates in heart surgery survivors, it is important to have a look at the proven benefits of spirituality.

Though the causality of spiritual influence in physiological well-being is more challenging to prove, there is ample evidence to highlight the benefits one might experience by having a spiritual practice.

Most studies are correlational. However, most are also empirically proven across religions. Most people would agree that they don’t need experiential evidence to intuit that spirituality will help them have higher rates of overall well-being and life satisfaction.

A meta-analysis of over 40 independent samples reported that religious involvement is significantly and positively associated with longevity. People live longer, have more satisfying, meaningful lives, and have lower rates of depressive states.

Though more studies need to be done to explore the mechanisms by which spirituality improves well-being, the studies that already exist indicate they're at the very least related.

A study on Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction showed improvement in overall life satisfaction and physical and mental health.

Through participation in a meditation program, increases in spirituality, lowered instances of depression. By becoming more mindful, a correlation with Gestalt psychology was noted, as a basis for reducing depressive thoughts in real time.

Several studies have shown an increase in job satisfaction with an increase in spirituality in the workplace. The studies conclude that by building interconnective experiences into a workplace, people will be more productive and have greater satisfaction in their work.

Pharmaceuticals have not had great success in eliminating the problem of rising levels of depression. A specific form of prayer that is said to have a healing effect on depressive symptoms is meditative/centering prayer.

Lowering blood pressure and hypertensive levels has been shown as a benefit of spirituality. A study on the effects of Transactional Psychophysiological Therapy showed a significant impact on patients who participated. With proper training, nurses can help patients lower their blood pressure by finding "inner peace."

This spiritual concept is found through intentional speech and specific religious/spiritual connection in patient interactions. According to research, spiritual people engage in practices known to reduce levels of stress. For example, spiritual people are more likely to:

- Volunteer or donate to the poor. Regular community service can serve as a buffer against the effects of stress, thus leading to longer lives.
- Meditate to cope with stress. Forty-two percent (42%) of spiritual people meditate when stressed rather than overeat or indulge in unhealthy coping behaviors. Meditation has all kinds of benefits, from improved health, happiness, and focus to decreased pain and depression.
- Live with a built-in community. After food and shelter, social connection is the top predictor of health, authentic happiness, and longevity. Religious people are more likely to spend time with family and feel a strong sense of belonging to a community of like-minded people.
- Turn to prayer. Research suggests prayer helps people find comfort by assisting them to deal with difficult emotions, encourages forgiveness, and leads to healthier relationships.

Of course, these findings could also indicate a placebo effect. We tend to feel better when we believe something will make us feel better.

Even if they are placebo effects, can it hurt to volunteer at a homeless shelter or attend a silent retreat? The benefits may be worthwhile.

Higher levels of psychological resilience, positive emotions, and improved immune response have all been linked with spirituality. Spirituality is not a simple subject for experimental study. However, knowing that there is such a high correlation with physical and psychological well-being, most practitioners would agree that improvement in how care providers include spirituality in practice is warranted.

## **17 Exercises for Mindfulness & Meditation**

Use these 17 Mindfulness & Meditation Exercises to help build life-changing habits and enhance well-being with the physical and psychological benefits of mindfulness.

- **Body Scan Meditation-**  
A form of mindfulness training that teaches how to recognize and experience physical sensations.
- **Breathing together-**  
Enhance personal mindfulness practice as well as deepen interpersonal connection and empathy.
- **Cooking Mindfully-**  
Helps to develop both mindfulness and savoring skills in the context of cooking, eating, and beyond.
- **Creating Quiet Time-**  
Helps incorporate quiet time into everyday life, in order to become more aware of and familiar with their internal experiences.
- **Cultivating Mindfulness through Single-tasking-**  
Demonstrate the illusion of multi-tasking and offer concrete guidelines for adopting a more mindful (single-tasking) approach to life.
- **Enjoying Food Mindfully-**  
Practicing eating tasty food in a mindful way helps to reduce emotional eating and establish healthier food behaviors.
- **Informal Mindfulness Practices-**  
Cultivate mindfulness by making mindfulness part of daily life.
- **Walking Down the Street-**  
Helps to experience how thoughts shape and trigger feelings, and how a negative cycle of thinking can be prevented.
- **Using Story Telling to Elicit Automatic Judgments-**  
Helps practitioners become aware of the automatic tendency of their minds. A valuable starting point for introducing the value of non-judgmental awareness.
- **Three Minute Breathing Space-**  
This tool provides a direct way of coping, characterized by awareness and willingness to experience what is present.
- **Sitting Meditation-**  
This exercise teaches the thinking mind how to perceive and provides insight into the nature and patterns of thought in general.
- **Open Monitoring Meditation-**

The OM practice strengthens the ability to observe thoughts, feelings, and emotions, enabling individuals to more readily transform cognitive and emotional habits.

- **Mindfulness Meditation Troubleshooting Guide-**

Provide an overview of and solutions to common problems and challenges that arise when you start to meditate or wish to continue meditating.

- **Mindful Walking-**

Cultivate awareness of the present moment, in this case by using the feet as an anchor for attention.

- **Mindful Speaking-**

Improve individual communication skills through practicing mindful, purposeful speaking.

- **Mindful Listening-**

Explore the concept of mindful listening by experiencing what it is like to listen to others in a mindful way and talk when others listen mindfully.

- **Increasing Awareness of Cognitive Distortions-**

Helps us to recognize distorted thinking and reduce the negative impact of these thinking patterns.

The world is often in a state of tremendous suffering. Globally, humans are desperate to make sense of tragedy, psychological pain, and impermanence. From this vantage point, the only way through it is with spirituality.

Spirituality is ultimately the need to grow our understanding of the meaning of life, the purpose we have within it, and the love we share for humanity, which is eternal. Stepping fully into what matters for humanity will aid our collective survival and keep our lives flourishing.