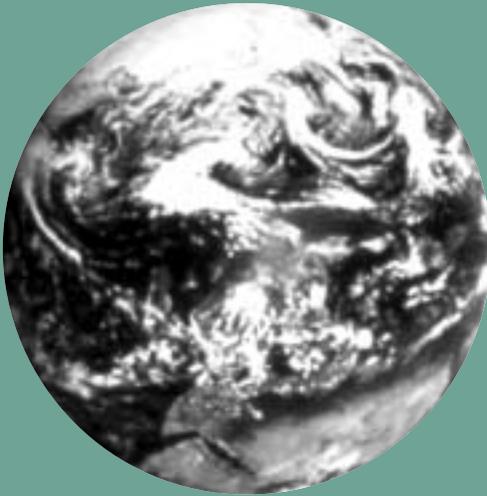


The Mind guide to spiritual practices



The Mind guide to spiritual practices

This booklet is a practical guide to things that people can do to explore and express their spirituality, whatever that may be. It does not attempt to cover the huge, and unmapped territory of philosophy, theology, anthropology, psychology or other related areas.

What is meant by spiritual practices?

From the earliest recorded times, we know that people have asked questions about themselves, about the world, and about the purpose and meaning of life. They have sought explanations not just for physical realities (which is now the business of science) but also for feelings, connections and inexplicable – almost unnameable – perceptions and sensibilities.

They have not just thought about these questions, but have explored possible answers through an extraordinary range of actions. Of course, these actions have included thinking, but they have also included rituals, art, exercise, prayer, mythmaking (storytelling) and lifestyles. Some of these explorations – usually tying together several of these areas – have been shaped into the larger, shared patterns or cultures called religions or faiths. Some have been more individual and private.

Those who have got lasting satisfaction from these activities would probably agree that they couldn't be one-off acts. They have to be explored carefully, worked on, thought about and developed. In other words, they have to be practised. The verb 'to practise' has two related but different meanings. It means simply to do something, as in 'practical', and as in a doctor's (or other practitioner's) 'practice'.

It also means to do something repeatedly, in the knowledge that you will only get better at it if you accept that you are bound to do it badly at first, as in piano practice. In this booklet, 'spiritual practices' is used in both these senses.

What is spirituality?

Spirituality, in the sense we have been using it in the mental health and self-help movements, is a very modern word. It's so new that it doesn't yet have a very fixed meaning, and people use it in a number of different ways. It's no longer confined to describing the civic powers of the Church of England (for example, The Lords Spiritual, who were bishops sitting in the House of Lords) or, more rarely, various techniques for private prayer.

Some people use the word to describe fully worked out practices and beliefs, either attached to a traditional religion, or more independent. So, they might say, 'My spirituality is based on Carmelite contemplation, with a particular emphasis on praise rather than penance.' Other people use it much more loosely, to describe sets of feelings and emotions about ultimate meaning in the world, about transcendence and about a sense of the 'numinous'. They might say, 'Everyone has a spirituality because everything has a spiritual dimension.' Both groups are clearly using the word to mean two different things, but neither is right or wrong. We need to listen very carefully to ourselves and to others when we try and talk about spirituality.

For the purposes of this booklet, 'spirituality' means how we express, explore and live out underlying beliefs about who we are as individuals and how we connect to the whole of the world.

Many people sense that descriptions of the world based solely on science, on reason (rationalist) or on the idea that nothing exists but matter (materialist), leave out too much of their experience. You could argue that spirituality is everything that these explanations leave out. Or you could argue that spirituality means a particular approach to, or a different (or additional) interpretation of, exactly the same things.

Some people are contented with the purely scientific–materialist–rationalist explanation of both their own selves and the universe. You could call this their 'spirituality', although they might not like this word, and would deserve to have their feelings respected, too. This would also widen the meaning even further.

What is the difference between spirituality and religion?

A common way of answering this question is to say something like, 'Religion is about outward belief and spirituality is about inward expression.' But this is too simple. Outward and inward can't be separated so crudely; it doesn't reflect the nature of human beings.

Some people find that enough of that underlying belief (mentioned above) is reflected within a particular religion. A particular religion offers them a good enough story to work on and through. They can be believers and worshippers. They can use the imagery, beliefs, structures and rituals of a religion authentically.

Other people don't find this connection in any religion (or don't want to look for it there), but find it somewhere else. Some of the more usual places are rooted in intimacy, political engagement, nature, and art, but many are unique to the individual. For others, the search for connection is itself the core. This quest is their spirituality.

What are some of the more common practices?

Almost anything that is done with awareness and intention can be a spiritual exercise. Many people who run or walk have integrated this into their own spirituality. Listening to, and particularly playing music, painting, pottery and needlecrafts are also frequently mentioned. These all have in common repetitive, physical movements that don't require great intellectual effort and which are free of competition or stress.

This parallels many of the more traditional spiritual exercises from a wide range of traditions, such as the great meditation techniques of both the West and the East. The idea is to bring the whole self into a unified but open state. For most of us, this means stilling the mind and focusing the body. Activities like chanting, dancing and other pre-set movements, repeating simple phrases (like mantras or the rosary), or fixing your attention on a meaningful object all have the same purpose. These activities are rarely ends in themselves. They are designed to make the person more receptive to what is outside the self or ego.

This way of thinking has led to practices or 'disciplines' that are, in the best sense of this misused word, a form of training. Just as a healthy person needs some degree of physical fitness, so most spiritual practitioners work on spiritual fitness. Yoga, the classical forms of the martial arts, breathing techniques, fasting, pilgrimage, sleep control (vigils) and periods of solitude should be seen as options in a spiritual gym. They should never be seen as a means of punishing the body. Such practices develop self-knowledge and self-awareness (physical, mental, social and emotional). This is one strand of spiritual practice.

Another strand is activities that link us with the world beyond ourselves. Such practices include storytelling, mythmaking, sharing rituals, eating meals, and physical acts of trust (in a game, for instance).

There are certain activities, such as astrology, telling tea leaves, Tarot, the I-Ching and throwing runes, which give rise to suspicion because they appear to involve magic or non-human forces. If such activities encourage passivity, helplessness or a sense of being under someone or something's control, there should be cause for concern. But they can also be used as means not ends, and can encourage listening, self-reflection and sensitivity. They certainly have a very long and honourable history. Consciously or unconsciously, most people use some version of such traditions to some extent, such as not walking under ladders, or touching wood for luck.

What does this have to do with mental health problems?

At one level, absolutely nothing. This may be the point. Spirituality is about the whole person, and indeed about the whole world. There is a 'me', and a world that continues to exist outside of any difficulties I may be experiencing. A soundly based spirituality may allow people to see themselves beyond their mental health problems. It may help them feel integrated even when their lives are fragmenting. It may support a sense of connection even in the most painful isolation. Developing spiritual practices may give people a resource outside of, and beyond, their mental health agenda, precisely because 'faith' and meaning are universal human concerns.

At other levels, though, this has quite a lot to do with mental health.

A great deal of distress, and related mental health issues, stem from a baffled or frustrated search for meaning or purpose, in my view. To turn that baffled frustration into a 'symptom' is not going to help anyone, but finding some answers, or some framework for seeking answers, may.

Many (not all) service professionals have a set of ideas about mental health, and practices for expressing it, which are based on their own underlying beliefs about how the world is. This is the 'medical model', which says all mental health problems are to do with chemical make-up (a belief neither more nor less reasonable than believing in angels). This belief can be as strict and as disrespectful of other faiths as the most fervent fundamentalist's. If service users develop a strong practice and experience of where their own sense of being lies, it may make their relationship with service-providers more equal, and therefore more effective. Everyone has the right to have his or her spirituality respected. It's easier to command this respect if you actively respect it in yourself. Practising your own spiritual beliefs allows you to be better grounded and less at the mercy of reactive emotions at times of stress.

Over the past few years, the diagnosis of schizophrenia has come increasingly under question. Some researchers have come up with a new term, 'schizotypy'. This describes certain personality traits that may make people vulnerable to psychosis, but which may also give them more access to certain forms of spirituality, especially the classic, mystical experiences. Experts are beginning to feel that some individuals with intense spiritual lives have been misdiagnosed as 'mad' because twentieth century psychiatry had no way of dealing with that particular dimension of human experience. Certainly, some of the greatest spiritual practitioners of history would have difficulty getting out of a closed ward today.

Some researchers have gone further and suggested that the real difference between the mystical and psychotic lies in whether the person with the experiences has found a way of handling them, of 'getting back again'; in other words, of being able to return to the ordinary, daily world more easily. A clear and personal spiritual practice may provide such a person with a 'narrative of return' and a way of making sense of such vivid, chaotic, exciting and frightening experiences. This suggests that an authentic spiritual practice may both give you some insight into what is happening to you and offer some real safety. This does not mean that everyone who appears to be delusional is really intensely holy, or that anyone who can't see the experience in this way is somehow either cruel or inferior. But it does suggest that being securely at home in your own world of the imagination, the emotions and the spiritual may offer some real protection and save you a great deal of suffering. All this is new work in a very complex and sensitive area.

For these and other reasons, exploring issues of spirituality and developing secure and authentic practices might be of special value to those with mental health issues in their lives.

What are the other benefits?

As well as the benefits already discussed, there are some practical advantages to spiritual activity. Because of the nature of spirituality, it can be difficult to generalise. For obvious reasons, most research has been done with organised religious groups (rather than independent practitioners). However, where a benefit seems to be common to several religions, it's reasonable to assume that this is the result of spiritual activity in general, rather than the content of a particular faith.

Raised self-esteem, a sense of membership and community and faster rates of recovery from illness have been found among those who attend regular religious services, regardless of the specific religion.

All forms of meditation, and especially those involving breathing control, such as yoga, are measurably good for your health. They lower stress and anxiety, increase a sense of personal control, calm and direct thought patterns, and reduce drug and alcohol dependency. They may even help in treating problems with addiction. According to some research, they also lower the risk of heart disease, high blood pressure and muscular strains.

Spiritual activities provide an arena for structured sociability – and a valid excuse to avoid socialising, if that's what you want! Most spiritual practices are also very cheap.

More seriously, many people have found that developing their own sense of spirituality has given them a greater feeling of wholeness, identity, self-management and self-awareness.

What are the dangers?

If there is real content to the idea of spirituality, then at the very least we are dealing with a huge and powerful area. So it's sensible to exercise some care and discretion, just as it would be if you decided to take up mountaineering, or any other high-risk physical activity.

If developing their spirituality makes people more open and sensitive to things outside themselves, it will also make them more vulnerable to exploitation, by others and by their own imagination.

Spiritual power can corrupt as much as other sorts of power. Perhaps the safest course is never to put all one's trust in one individual – including oneself. Good teachers (whatever they are teaching) will never suggest to a student that they have all the answers. Anyone who does (even if it is you yourself) should be treated with great caution. So should anyone who threatens you with punishment of any kind or does anything to frighten you for not believing exactly what he or she believes. This applies to spiritual forces as much as human beings. (Just because you believe in them, it doesn't mean you have to do what they say.)

Lots of people do not believe in spirituality, or only believe in their own version. They may laugh at you or criticise you in painful ways. They may also tell you that you are 'mad'. Treat yourself with respect – do not talk too openly about your spiritual adventures until you know you are safe with your listeners.

Don't try and run before you can walk. You wouldn't run a marathon without any training.

What could I do next?

Answering this question is a bit like trying to tell someone how to be a good lover. Yes, you can tell them the facts of life; but you can't tell them 'how to do it'. However, if you have read this far, you may well be interested in exploring some of these issues for yourself. Here are a few suggestions about ways to start. They are not mutually exclusive; you can try them all. Don't expect instant results, but do experiment optimistically, anticipating that something interesting might happen.

-
- If you come from any established religious tradition, try reconnecting with it. Go to a ceremony or service. Go quietly and listen, look, be in that place. Remember that even the most committed people don't get one hundred per cent satisfaction out of every act of worship they attend.
 - Visit an art gallery. Walk round quite slowly, but without a guide or catalogue, just looking attentively at the pictures. Then ask yourself which painting you like best. Go back, look at it more carefully and ask yourself why you like it, especially, and what it communicates to you.
 - Visit the children's section of your public library. They will have a selection of myths, legends and stories from different cultures. Read some and see which engages you most. Next, find an adult collection from that tradition. Read it slowly.
 - Visit a wild place on your own. You don't have to go to a distant land, to mountains or jungles. Sit on a beach or beside a river, climb a hill, watch the moon, get really wet in a downpour – even just sit in a park or garden. Look and listen.
 - Commit yourself to ten minutes a day in silence, for ten days. Be comfortable, be warm, unplug the phone, and, if you can, dim the lighting. See what happens.
 - Music fills a gap between alarming silence and busy words. It's worth finding and using music that supports particular moods.

Where can I find more information?

There are now a great many books about spirituality – and particularly about specific forms of practice. Large booksellers often have relevant sections with a reasonable choice of books. Larger towns usually have an alternative bookshop of one kind or another. (The Yellow Pages directory, also lists centres for most of the larger religions under the heading Places of Worship.) You may be interested in the books listed in the reference section below. Your public library and the internet are always good sources of information. There are many specialist sites, including Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, Judaic and Christian, as well as those which are broader and less sectarian.

There are innumerable classes, open days, retreats, sessions and so on, in all sorts of practices. Keep an eye on your local press and discreetly interrogate people you already respect. Remember that going to a class or group does not commit you to anything – staying at home commits you to not learning anything.

References

Exploring Spirituality S. Ruthven, A. Medbh-Mara (How to Books 2001)

Spirituality and Psychotherapy eds. S. King-Spooner, C. Newnes (PCCS Books 2001)

The World's Religions N. Smart (Cambridge University Press 1998)

How to find out more

The Muslim Educational Trust

130 Stroud Green Road, London N4 3RZ
tel. 020 7272 8502, fax: 020 7281 3457
e-mail: info@muslim-ed-trust.org.uk
web: www.muslim-ed-trust.org.uk/publications.html
Publishes a range books and posters on Islam

The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK)

Holy Trinity Church, Marylebone Road, London NW1 4DU
tel. 020 7643 0382, fax: 020 7643 0391
e-mail: bookshops@spck.org.uk web: www.spck.org.uk
SPCK works to help people deepen their faith

Wisdom Books

25 Stanley Road, Ilford, Essex IG1 1RW
tel. 08553 5020, fax: 0208 553 5122
e-mail : sales@wisdom-books.com web: www.wisdom-books.com
Runs a shop containing a large collection of books on Buddhism

Useful websites

web: www.spiritualityandmentalhealth.co.uk

Promoting the importance of the spiritual dimension in the treatment of mental distress. Contains first-person stories and opinions

web: www.spiritualsearch.net/files

Spiritual search engine for a wide range of world-wide faiths, including Hinduism and Judaism

Further reading and order form

- Accepting Voices* eds Prof M. Romme, S. Escher (Mind 1993) £13.99
- Going Mad? Understanding mental illness* M. Corry, A. Tubridy (Newleaf 2001) £8.99
- How to Help Someone who is Suicidal* (Mind 2002) £1
- How to Improve your Mental Wellbeing* (Mind 2002) £1
- How to Increase Your Self-esteem* (Mind 2001) £1
- How to Look After Yourself* (Mind 2002) £1
- How to Rebuild Your Life After Breakdown* (Mind 2000) £1
- How to Recognise the Early Signs of Mental Distress* (Mind 2002) £1
- How to Stop Worrying* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to Survive Family Life* (Mind 2002) £1
- How to Survive Mid-life Crisis* (Mind 2002) £1
- Madness: A brief history* R. Porter (Oxford University Press 2002) £11.99
- Making Sense of Herbal Remedies* (Mind 2000) £3.50
- Making Sense of Homeopathy* (Mind 2001) £3.50
- Making Sense of Traditional Chinese Medicine* (Mind 2001) £3.50
- The Mind Guide to Food and Mood* (Mind 2000) £1
- The Mind Guide to Managing Stress* (Mind 2002) £1
- The Mind Guide to Physical Activity* (Mind 2001) £1
- The Mind Guide to Relaxation* (Mind 2001) £1
- The Mind Guide to Yoga* (Mind 2001) £1
- Troubleshooters: Stress* (Mind 2001) 50p
- Troubleshooters: Panic attacks* (Mind 2002) 50p
- Understanding Anxiety* (Mind 2002) £1
- Understanding Bereavement* (Mind 2002) £1
- Understanding Childhood Distress* (Mind 2002) £1
- Understanding Depression* (Mind 2003) £1
- Understanding Mental Illness* (Mind 2002) £1
- Understanding Schizophrenia* (Mind 2002) £1
- Understanding Talking Treatments* (Mind 2002) £1
- Voices of Reason, Voices of Insanity* I. Leudar, P. Thomas (Routledge 2000) £15.99

For a catalogue of publications from Mind, send an A4 SAE to the address below.

If you would like to order any of the titles listed here, please photocopy or tear out these pages, and indicate in the appropriate boxes the number of each title that you require.

Please add 10 per cent for postage and packing, and enclose a cheque for the whole amount, payable to Mind. Return your completed order form together with your cheque to:

Mind Publications
15-19 Broadway
London
E15 4BQ

tel. 020 8221 9666
fax: 020 8534 6399
e-mail: publications@mind.org.uk
(Allow 28 days for delivery).

Please send me the titles marked above. I enclose a cheque
(including 10 per cent for p&p) payable to Mind for £

Name
Address
Postcode
tel.

Mind works for a better life for everyone with experience of mental distress

Mind does this by:

- advancing the views, needs and ambitions of people with experience of mental distress
- promoting inclusion through challenging discrimination
- influencing policy through campaigning and education
- inspiring the development of quality services which reflect expressed need and diversity
- achieving equal civil and legal rights through campaigning and education.

The values and principles which underpin Mind's work are:
autonomy, equality, knowledge, participation and respect.

For details of your nearest Mind association and of local services contact Mind's helpline, *MindinfoLine*: 0845 7660 163 Monday to Friday 9.15am–5.15pm. For interpretation, *MindinfoLine* has access to 100 languages via Language Line. For deaf or speech impaired enquirers, *MindinfoLine*'s textphone number is 0845 330 1585 (if you are using BT Textdirect add the prefix 18001).

Scottish Association for Mental Health tel. 0141 568 7000.

Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health tel. 02890 328474.



This booklet was written by Sara Maitland. © Mind 2003

ISBN 1-903567-41-6

No reproduction without permission

Mind is a registered charity No. 219830

Mind (National Association for Mental Health)

15-19 Broadway, London E15 4BQ

tel. 020 8519 2122, fax: 020 8522 1725

web: www.mind.org.uk