

Development of a Spiritually-Sensitive Intervention for College Students Experiencing Spiritual Struggles: Winding Road

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Winding Road² is a psycho-educational intervention that targets spiritual struggles among undergraduates. It was designed to help students articulate and clarify their spiritual struggles and assist them in engaging or disengaging in their struggles more productively within a non-denominational framework. The overall goals of the Winding Road intervention are to articulate and normalize spiritual struggles, encourage appreciation of the diversity of struggles, define one's own spiritual path, and broaden and deepen a spirituality that is flexible, integrated and differentiated. Students who have participated in this intervention exhibit many types of spiritual struggles, including difficulties, questions, and conflicts with the divine, with their life purpose or faith tradition, and with other people regarding matters of faith and religion. This intervention was recently piloted, and the pilot demonstrated promising results, both in terms of students' adaptations to spiritual struggles and improved psychological well-being. This article provides an overview of the development of this intervention.

History and Rationale

Although often overlooked as an element of developmental significance in emerging adulthood, spirituality can be an important factor in the maturation process among college students. Spirituality encompasses questions and issues of faith, purpose, meaning, identity, and perceptions of the transcendent. A landmark study done by Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2004) surveyed over 100,000 college freshmen from over 200 colleges and universities across the United States about several aspects of their spirituality, including their beliefs about the transcendent; meaning and purpose; spiritual and religious practices; and qualities such as compassion, kindness, generosity, and optimism. One of the many findings of this research relates to what has come to be known as "spiritual struggles," i.e., questions, doubts, and

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uncertainties regarding one's spiritual and religious beliefs and practices. Nearly half of those surveyed (48%) by Astin, Astin, and Lindholm described themselves as "doubting," "seeking," or "conflicted" about spiritual/religious matters. Researchers have recently begun to examine systematically such "spiritual struggles" and identified several correlates that indicate negative outcomes for those experiencing such difficulties (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2004; Bryant & Astin, 2008; Exline & Rose, 2005; Faigin & Pargament, 2008; Pargament, Murray-Swank, Magyar, & Ano, 2005). Among these outcomes are poor physical health; low self-esteem; increased negative mood, anxiety, and depression; and increased use of alcohol, suicidality, and a range of addictive behaviors (i.e., gambling, drug use, sex, shopping, food starving, tobacco use). Despite the prevalence and negative correlates of such struggles, it is still uncommon to find programs or services that address these difficulties on college campuses. Winding Road is a psychoeducational treatment that was developed in response to increasing awareness of the unique challenges and difficulties that spiritual struggles can present for university undergraduates.

Planning and Development

A team of graduate students and a faculty member of clinical psychology interested in spiritually-sensitive psychotherapy conceived of and developed Winding Road. It represents an integration of current research, theory, and practice related to spiritual struggles among college undergraduates, collegial and community-based program development, and the trend toward taking the practice of psychology out of the clinic and into the broader university community (see Pargament, 2007). As a cohort of therapists trained to be sensitive to diverse spiritual beliefs and experiences, we made several decisions early in the development of the program that guided this process. These decisions included clarifying the nature and purpose of the intervention as non-dogmatic, educational, and experiential (rather than therapeutic), and focused on encouraging students to seek their own answers rather than offering resolutions to their struggles. We also placed the intervention within the framework of the college years as a time of exploration and individuation and openly acknowledged this time in the students' lives as a "fork in the road." It was important to us to ensure that participants respected divergent spiritual beliefs and practices in the groups and to be explicit in communicating throughout the intervention the goal of broadening participants' awareness of their own spiritual perspectives, potential biases, and backgrounds.

Focus groups were conducted to assist us in clarifying spiritual struggles and issues that were relevant to college undergraduates, gauging the level of interest and availability of students for this intervention, and determining the response of undergraduates to several specific ideas we had about the content of the intervention sessions.

Implementation and Evaluation

Awareness of Winding Road was brought to the campus community in several ways; we posted flyers in dormitories and university buildings, made classroom announcements, wrote an article for the university newspaper, and hosted information tables in the student union. Students who were interested in the program were able to access more detailed information on the website. Those who were considering participation were asked to complete an internet survey that provided us with information about their specific struggles. We conducted individual interviews with those who expressed interest in participating. These sessions were used to orient potential participants to the group purpose and process and to screen out individuals who were not a good fit. Participants with disabling and untreated severe psychopathology or religious proselytizing

aims were excluded from consideration, and only those willing and able to attend all sessions were admitted to the program.

We ran two groups simultaneously. Each group was made up of six undergraduate students (female and male) and two facilitators. The participants were diverse in their religious affiliation and included Protestants, Catholics, atheists, Wiccans, agnostics, and religiously undecided individuals. The groups met for 9 weeks. Each 90-minute session opened and closed with the same ritual and centered on a unique theme that fit within the overarching conceptualization of a spiritual journey as a winding road. Themes of the individual sessions included spiritual autobiographies, spiritual struggles, spiritual heritage, spiritual identity, spiritual strivings, conceptualizations of the sacred, forgiveness, acceptance, and meaning-making. These themes were brought to life through experiential exercises, discussions, readings, images, and music. Session goals were reinforced through take-home activities and a resource list related to the topic of the week.

In order to assess the effectiveness of this intervention, group members completed both quantitative and qualitative surveys at the start and end of the program. They completed measures related to their spiritual struggles and psychological symptoms and were also interviewed individually following completion of the program.

Students' Experiences

Through these interviews and surveys, we discovered that students experienced some important changes as a result of taking part in the intervention. Following the program, students reported experiencing fewer spiritual struggles. Perhaps more importantly, they experienced fewer self-stigmatizing views of spiritual struggles. The program also was successful in raising awareness of the fact that struggles are a normal aspect of spiritual development and growth. Following the intervention, students reported experiencing less distress specific to spirituality as well as less general distress. They also experienced increased positive affect. Regarding the content of their beliefs, students became increasingly prone to perceive God or their concept of the sacred as accepting. Behaviorally, students reported having a greater sense of living in a manner that was consistent with their personal values.

These changes are brought to life by the statements that students made after they completed the intervention. Many describe a sense of relief from their spiritual struggle, for example:

Before [my struggle] was [pause] so horrible. [pause] Now that I'm past it, instead of it being this big huge boulder that it was before, it's this little pebble that doesn't seem so big now. [Winding Road] really helped to down-size it for me.

Others emphasized a new acceptance of struggling with spiritual issues:

I'm okay with the fact that I have struggle now. It's okay for me to be struggling with this. It's okay to not have the answer right now. That's a little scary, but okay. It's okay to be scared. It's okay to be confused.

Some even seemed to gain an appreciation for the experience of their struggle:

I'm happy that my spiritual struggle happened because it gave me the chance to reinvent myself and to grow as a person and to question some things. Before I was angry that it was happening. But now I'm happy that it happened. . . . I've come out a better person.

Facilitator Experiences

It was both enriching and challenging for us as facilitators to approach a group comprised of individuals with very diverse spiritual beliefs, orientations, and practices. It was inspirational to see group members make a deep connection with themselves, one another, and the sacred based on shared experience, even while some were moving toward and others were moving against their experience of religion. This required striking a balance in promoting the goals of the group while also attending to the specific needs of each individual. For example, early in the intervention, we developed a shared vocabulary about the sacred by exploring what words such as “God” or “sacred” meant to group members and coming to consensus about sacred language within the group going forward.

As facilitators we used our own experiences and emotions vis-à-vis the sacred in combination with our professional expertise as spiritually-sensitive psychotherapists and guides. During development of this intervention, we reshaped activities based on our perceptions and comfort levels regarding the activities. For example, some facilitators thought that the original opening ritual was too religious and the closing statement sounded too much like a prayer; others were concerned that some of the rituals felt contrived or forced. As a result of these exchanges and discussions, we reshaped the exercises to be more conversational in tone. By using our own personal and professional perspectives as guideposts during program development, we were able to be authentic as facilitators, flexible in implementing the intervention with our group members, and true to the intervention vision. This experience of shared program development, we believe, resulted in a richer and potentially more effective intervention.

We were deeply touched by being able to share in the Winding Road experience. It was an honor, for example, to witness group members talk about a physical representation of the sacred in their lives. In this exercise, they provided meaningful insight into themselves and spontaneously deepened as a group. It was exciting to see group members draw comfort and inspiration out of a visualized encounter with their future spiritual selves. It was moving to hear aloud the group laments that were created when members brought together their most troubling questions for the divine and expressed their associated feelings. Being witnesses to group members’ spiritual struggles and facilitating their movement through these challenges and difficulties were beyond our most fervent desires and hopes for this intervention.

Conclusions

Winding Road was carefully developed as an intervention that targets an underserved aspect of college students’ lives: spiritual struggles. This article provides a glimpse into the process of program development, from conceptualization through implementation and evaluation and a brief look at some of the responses from students and facilitators who participated in the first groups. Initial feedback from these participants indicates that this intervention addressed a relevant and significant aspect of their lives at a time when they were searching for a language and a means to express their spiritual doubts, conflicts, and difficulties. The feedback also suggests that interventions such as this one can normalize these struggles and contribute to both the psychological and spiritual well-being of students at a critical time in their development.

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