Chapter 14

A Creative Approach to Assessment: Applications in Youth Spiritual Development

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the suitability of an arts-based approach to the spiritual assessment of adolescents. Spirituality is a notoriously difficult concept to define, much less to measure. However, many practitioners in both religious and secular settings are increasingly concerned about promoting spiritual development among the youth that they serve. Some quantitative assessment tools already exist to measure youth spirituality; however, these may be of limited practical use within real-world contexts. Complete instructions and rubrics for two assessment activities are provided, followed by sample responses and a discussion about how to use the results and extend the activities for maximum impact. Initial research suggests that these and similar activities show great promise as qualitative instruments, which can elicit deeper understandings of adolescents’ experiences of transcendence and ability to make meaning out of life circumstances.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces and describes an arts-based approach to spiritual assessment, which can be applied by practitioners in community-based youth development settings. The activities presented in this chapter are designed to be used both in trauma-specific contexts (e.g. counseling and support groups) and in general youth development settings (e.g. after-school programs). Therefore, the basic approach of this chapter combines the principles of positive youth development and trauma-informed care, maintaining that all youth-serving organizations can benefit from adopting a trauma-informed approach. Developing and using trauma-informed assessment tools is one essential component of trauma-informed care. Arts-based activities and assessment instruments – which rely primarily on nonverbal, symbolic language as

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A Creative Approach to Assessment

a starting point – show promise in helping trauma survivors process their experiences. Such tools seek to empower youth by elevating their own voice and perspective within the assessment process.

Indicators of spirituality include resilience, optimism, a sense of purpose, and the positive use of adversity (Lippman et al., 2009; Mariano & Damon, 2008; Zohar & Marshall, 2004). Developing and strengthening these traits can be crucial in helping a person to heal from trauma and, ultimately, to thrive. For this reason, it is important that youth workers – even those in non-religious settings – be equipped with tools to better understand, assess, and promote healthy spiritual development among the youth whom they serve.

The objectives of this chapter include the following:

• To present a model for youth programming that integrates the key features of positive youth development and trauma-informed care.
• To describe the role of spirituality within holistic youth development.
• To articulate the benefits of adopting an arts-based approach to spiritual assessment.
• To describe two different assessment activities that demonstrate the practical application of this approach.

SETTING THE STAGE: POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE

In recent years, positive youth development (PYD) has emerged as an approach to youth-based programming, aiming to “[create] a larger framework that promotes positive outcomes for all young people” (National Research Council, 2002, p. 3). As opposed to a risk prevention approach (which aims to minimize negative outcomes), PYD seeks to empower youth to develop both personal and social assets that promote holistic wellbeing and long-term success. The National Research Council (2002) has identified eight key features of positive youth development programs: physical and psychological safety; appropriate structure; supportive relationships; opportunities to belong; positive social norms; support for efficacy and mattering; opportunities for skill building; and integration of family, school, and community efforts.

Programs that employ a PYD approach may include schools, after-school programs, community organizations, and spiritual institutions (churches, synagogues, mosques, etc.). Participation is generally open to a wide range of youth, who may or may not disclose a history of trauma; and most programs are staffed by youth workers who lack a formal background in therapy or counseling. However, most if not all of these programs are – either knowingly or unknowingly – serving survivors of trauma. Therefore, it is essential that the programs be intentionally designed to support trauma survivors and promote healing and growth.

Adopting a trauma-informed approach requires program-wide commitment and a shift in organizational culture, policies, and procedures. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Association (2014), a trauma-informed approach is one that:

• Realizes the prevalence and impact of trauma.
• Recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma.
• Responds appropriately by incorporating trauma-informed principles throughout the system.
• Resists re-traumatization of clients and staff alike.