**SUMMARY**

There is a growing body of literature emerging from the health and social care professions, which suggests that spirituality is a basic human need and indeed a human right which is a necessary component of both mental and physical health. Up to now, this dimension of the experience of people with learning disabilities has not been explored in any detail. Therefore, in 1999, Dr John Swinton of the University of Aberdeen was commissioned by the Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities to carry out a feasibility study looking at the role of spirituality in the lives of people with learning disabilities.

**Key findings:**

- Spirituality is a common human phenomenon which includes but is not defined by religion.
- There is evidence to suggest that spirituality does play a significant role in the lives of many people with learning disabilities.
- Carers and support workers are often unaware of the significance of this dimension and consequently fail to address it.
- Training is required to enable those supporting people with learning disabilities to recognise and support this aspect of their experiences.
- People with learning disabilities need to be given accessible information and opportunities in order that they can make informed spiritual choices.
- Faith communities have the potential to offer support and friendship. However, they also need to be aware that certain exclusive forms of practice can serve to exclude and oppress people with learning disabilities.

**BACKGROUND**

- Spirituality has increasingly been recognised as a basic human need and is a necessary component of both mental and physical health.
- The meaning of spirituality has changed and widened. Spirituality is no longer assumed to be a specifically religious concept, although it does include religion. Rather it is defined as the human quest for “meaning, purpose, self-transcending knowledge, meaningful relationships, love and commitment, as well as the sense of the Holy amongst us” (Swinton 1999). Spirituality has relevance to the care of all people, and not only those with an overt religious commitment.
The particular significance of spirituality for people with learning disabilities remains a relatively unexplored area of research and reflection. There is a scarcity of knowledge as to how people with learning disabilities live their spiritual lives, express their spiritual needs and view their own spirituality.

The evidence which does exist, suggests that spirituality may be of importance to many people with learning disabilities including those with profound learning disabilities. Spirituality can be a valuable source of social and psychological support, friendship, acceptance and self-worth and give meaning to people’s lives. As such it may well be beneficial in helping to overcome the stigma, social isolation, low self-esteem, hopelessness, and loneliness experienced by many people with learning disabilities.

THE PROJECT

The study was an information gathering exercise that could provide pointers and insights into the spiritual needs of people with learning disabilities, which might feed into a wider, more substantial piece of research work. The study comprised two strands: a literature search and also a series of individual and focus group interviews conducted with people with learning disabilities, support workers, service providers and representatives from religious and spiritual traditions at various locations in Scotland and England.

THE FINDINGS

It’s me and Elaine…that’s all I want from life, my life…to get married…get a house…be happy.

God is a wonderful man, who cares about us.

God is an entity. We don’t know what it is and we don’t know for certain if it exists.

Spirituality was found to be a significant aspect of the lives of many of the people with learning disabilities who participated in the study.

For some, spirituality was expressed in religious terms. However for others, the search for meaning, hope, purpose, love and relationship was worked out through their relationships with others. Friendship was found to be of particular importance as a primary conduit for the expression of spirituality.

Many carers acknowledged the significance of spirituality, but felt that they were ill prepared to give support effectively within this area.

Faith communities were found, in terms of potential, to be a valuable source of support and integration.

Faith communities could also be exclusive and unaccepting places. They often had little knowledge or experience of being with people who have learning disabilities. Also, certain ways in which faiths and tradition are framed can demand a level of cognitive ability which excludes many people with learning disabilities.
Spirituality is not something that is taught to people with learning disabilities. Often it is something that others learn from them. The study concluded that carers and support workers had as much to learn from people with learning disabilities about spirituality as they had to teach them and that it is a reciprocal process.

**IMPLICATIONS**

- **Research:** There is a need for further research to deepen knowledge and improve practice. In order to take seriously the suggestion that spirituality is something that is learned as well as taught, any such research will need to be participatory, aiming to reflect on spiritual issues with people who have learning disabilities and seeking to include them at every stage of the research process. In order to capture the subtle and often deeply personal nuances of spiritual experience, research will have to be narrative based, seeking to explore the personal accounts of people with learning disabilities and those who seek to offer care and support.

- **Training:** The consciousness of carers and support workers needs to be raised to the significance of spirituality. This would mean developing ways of incorporating education about this dimension into training programmes and continuing professional development.

- **Faith communities:** There is a need to educate faith communities on disability issues. There is a need to encourage faith communities and other caring communities to reflect critically on their current practices and to consider possible ways in which they can be revised and changed.

- **Friendship:** The role of friendship in meeting the spiritual needs of people with learning disabilities should be more fully acknowledged. People with learning disabilities should be supported to make and sustain friendships.
**FURTHER READING**


The foundation for people with learning disabilities is part of the Mental Health Foundation

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*This Update was written by Dr. John Swinton, The School of Divinity and Religious Studies, The University of Aberdeen.*

The preliminary report by Dr John Swinton on meeting the spiritual needs of people with learning disabilities is in production and is to be published by the Mental Health Foundation.

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