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# The impact of a home-based spirituality teaching programme: qualitative exploration of participants' experiences

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## Abstract

**Context:** A growing body of research reports that spiritual well-being plays a significant role in mental wellness. Findings from a completed randomized controlled trial (RCT) indicate that a home-based, eight-week spirituality teaching programme lowers mood disturbance and increases quality of life. In this qualitative exploration the authors set out to understand how participants perceived the programme's impact.

**Methods:** This descriptive, qualitative exploration employed face-to-face, in-depth interviews with 13 individuals from Calgary, Canada. Participants were self-referred clients suffering from emotional distress and purposively sampled from the study population of the previously conducted RCT. Interviews consisted of open-ended questions that focused on how the spirituality teaching programme may have affected mood. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and a thematic analysis was undertaken by three of the authors.

**Results:** Clients described how their mood and life changed throughout and subsequent to the spirituality teaching programme. The following six thematic categories were identified: (1) expansion of spiritual beliefs; (2) changed life perspectives; (3) calmness/mental clarity; (4) relief of mood disorder symptoms; (5) improved relationships; (6) renewed physical energy. Interviewees perceived the first three themes, expanded spiritual beliefs, changed life perspective and calmness, as the core changes that led to improvements in interpersonal relationships, mental health and physical energy.

**Conclusion:** The findings suggest that the programme used with these participants impacts on mood by expanding spiritual beliefs and by shifting perspectives of life situations, in terms of both oneself and others. Spiritual teachings and practices could be an innovative and valuable adjunct intervention to improve mood. Copyright © 2007 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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1 **Key words:** spirituality, mental health, quality of life, meditation, qualitative interviews,  
2 depression

## 6 Introduction

8 Mental wellness is a cornerstone of overall  
9 health and well-being (World Health  
10 Organization, 2001). Mentally well people are  
11 able to cope with the inevitable stress and  
12 strain of daily life and have the resilience to  
13 rebound from challenging events such as  
14 trauma, tragedy, threats or other significant  
15 sources of stress (American Psychological  
16 Association, 2006). A growing body of  
17 research reports that spiritual well-being plays  
18 a significant role in mental wellness,  
19 specifically in bolstering resilience to  
20 challenging life events (Sherrill and Larson,  
21 1988; Connor et al., 2003; Cotton et al.,  
22 2005). In their research, Ng et al. (2005)  
23 found that spirituality comprises three distinct  
24 aspects: resilience, tranquillity and resistance  
25 to disorientation. In addition the authors  
26 found that these aspects are positively  
27 associated with mental well-being, positive  
28 affect, satisfaction with life and hope. Other  
29 experts also report that spirituality is  
30 associated with increased coping, greater  
31 resilience to stress, an optimistic life  
32 orientation and lower levels of anxiety  
33 (Pardini et al., 2000; Bartlett et al., 2003;  
34 Kinsel, 2005).

35 While epidemiological studies have  
36 consistently reported protective effects of  
37 spiritual beliefs on mental health (Levin,  
38 1994; Hassed, 2000; Koenig et al., 1998;  
39 Koenig, 2001), there is little research  
40 investigating whether spirituality can be used  
41 as an intervention to improve mental health.  
42 The Canadian Institute of Natural and  
43 Integrative Medicine (CINIM) and psychiatrist  
44 Dr Badri Ricki developed a home-based  
45 intervention, the CINIM Spirituality Teaching  
46 Program (Moritz et al., 2006). This

programme teaches individuals how to  
experience spirituality in their life, and by  
doing so become more resilient to life's  
challenges. Key issues raised in the course of  
the programme include the quest for meaning  
and purpose, connectedness (with others,  
nature and/or the divine) and values (e.g.  
compassion, love, justice and forgiveness).  
The programme avoids focusing on any  
particular religion and is applicable to people  
with various cultural backgrounds.

CINIM recently completed a randomized  
controlled trial (Moritz et al., 2006) to assess  
the value of the Spirituality Teaching Program  
for people experiencing emotional distress  
due to challenging life events. A total of 165  
emotionally distressed individuals were  
randomized to a spirituality teaching  
programme group, a mindfulness meditation-  
based stress-reduction group or to a waiting-  
list control group. Study participants were  
recruited on the basis of an elevated score in  
mood disturbance at baseline. Mood  
disturbance was the primary trial outcome  
and was measured by the Profile of Mood  
States (McNair et al., 1992). The spirituality  
group showed a 41% reduction in total mood  
disturbance compared with a 23% and 11%  
reduction respectively in the meditation group  
and the waiting-list control group.

To develop a richer understanding of these  
encouraging trial results, we decided to carry  
out a qualitative investigation to explore what  
trial participants experienced while enrolled  
in the Spirituality Teaching Program and  
how the programme impacted on mood,  
spirituality and life in general. We were also  
interested in learning whether participants felt  
that the benefits of the programme persisted  
in their lives after completion of the  
programme.

## Methods

### Study population

Informants were sampled from the group of individuals who had participated in the Spirituality Teaching Program arm of the randomized trial (Moritz et al., 2006). Individuals were considered eligible if they showed an improvement in their mood state, i.e. a reduction in their Profile of Mood States score following completion of the programme. The goal was to choose participants who would provide information on how the programme contributed to an improvement of their mood state. Participants were selected with the help of the research nurse who had regular contact with them during their study participation. They were identified by the research nurse on the basis of who could provide further insight into a particular area, or who might be expected to differ from previous patients. Of the 56 participants in the programme, a total of 13 interviews were conducted approximately one year following the spirituality intervention trial. All participants in this study were female, ranged from 35 to 63 years of age, and were well educated (nine participants reported college or university level training). Although three males had participated in the Spirituality Teaching Program, none agreed to be interviewed for this study. All 13 women experienced a reduction in mood disturbance (16–65 points on the Profile of Mood States measure, mean: 46) at the conclusion of the Spirituality Program which was representative of the mood improvement seen in the 56 programme participants. Overall, the characteristics of the 13 interviewees were similar to those of the 56 programme participants (see Table 1). The study received ethical approval from the Conjoint Ethics Board of the University of Calgary and informed consent was obtained from each participant.

### Spirituality Teaching Program

The self-study Spirituality Teaching Program (Moritz et al., 2006) that interviewees had participated in is delivered through CDs. It consists of eight teaching sessions and a daily guided meditation practice. The teaching sessions present concepts which help the user understand the influence of spirituality in his/her daily life while the visualization practice creates periods of tranquillity for the user. Sessions 1 and 2 explain the divine aspect of the Self and describe how certain life approaches can induce the feeling of being cut off from the divine. Negative life approaches mentioned include a focus on material needs; engaging in power struggles resulting in resentments, betrayals, disappointments and guilt; failure to face fears and practice of judgement. The idea of life struggles as spiritual teaching is introduced and the concepts of surrender, loving forgiveness and unconditional love even in challenging circumstances are illustrated through stories from the lives of spiritual teachers. The importance of committing to one's purpose in life is stressed and it is explained how living in the present and detaching emotions from judgement and fear can assist in determining one's life purpose. Having established these fundamental concepts concerning spirituality, the programme then moves on to introduce ways to practice spirituality in daily life. Session 3 teaches breathing and visualization practices that help to connect with the divine through prayer or mediation, let go of regrets and foster gratitude. Session 4 focuses on the practice of self-awareness relating to the use of the five senses. Examples and visualization practices relate to how the outside world is influenced and experienced by an individual and how becoming self-aware and accountable can resolve anger and disappointment and reduce hurtful behaviour. Session 5 explains the path of spirituality that begins with faith, and then leads to belief, to

**Table 1:** Participant characteristics

Characteristics	Interview participants (n = 13)	Spirituality teaching group participants (n = 56)
Age (years)	Mean = 48	Mean = 45
Gender:		
Female	13 (100%)	53 (95%)
Male	0	3 (5%)
Marital status		
Married	8 (61%)	34 (61%)
Single	5 (38%)	21 (38%)
Education:		
High school	2 (15%)	7 (13%)
College/university	10 (77%)	39 (70%)
Postgraduate degree	1 (8%)	10 (18%)
Employment status:		
Paid work	12 (92%)	36 (64%)
No paid work	1 (8%)	20 (36%)
Medication:		
No medication	6 (46%)	36 (64%)
Medication for depression	4 (31%)	13 (23%)
Medication for anxiety	2 (15%)	2 (4%)
Medication for depression and anxiety	1 (8%)	5 (9%)
Religious belief at entry:		
No religious membership	7 (54%)	26 (46%)
Christian	6 (46%)	25 (45%)
Other religions	0	5 (9%)
Mood disturbance change post intervention (mean POMS score change)	46	43

obtaining wisdom and finally understanding. A connection is drawn between a lack of faith and difficulties in accepting change, which in turn leads to the often crippling emotion of fear. A meditation practice on overcoming fear through faith in a divine presence is included. Session 6 addresses the notion of

building gratitude and connectedness with others. Daily practices of expressing thanks for the good things in life and sending love to others are introduced. Session 7 addresses the notion of holding no expectations and not judging outcomes. It is explained how by removing the ego and by ceasing to try to

control the uncontrollable, divine plans can manifest. A meditation practice of acceptance and loving kindness is included. Session 8 concludes the programme by summarizing the changes that occur when spirituality takes hold in life and by introducing a final visualization on strengthening the connection with others and the divine.

**Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by an experienced qualitative interviewer (MA). The interview guide was reviewed and modified by the interviewer in collaboration with another investigator (SM) throughout the process of the data collection. Interviews lasted on average 60 minutes. At the beginning of each interview permission was requested to record the conversation. Interviews were then audiotaped and later transcribed verbatim.

**Analysis**

Interview transcripts were read and coded using NVIVO computer software and a coding framework was developed by the research team. The data were read for meaning, coded line by line, and categories were developed from the data that described the nature of the changes in participants' mood improvement.

In order to verify that coding was anchored in the data and to provide proof of validation, the analysis was audited by two other qualitative researchers to correct for possible researcher bias. Categories and themes were identified in the coded transcripts and reviewed by the three researchers until consensus was reached regarding the meaning.

**Results**

From the clients' descriptions six major thematic categories were identified on how mood and life changed throughout the

programme in spirituality:

- (1) expanded spiritual beliefs;
- (2) a changed life perspective;
- (3) increased calmness/mental clarity;
- (4) improved interpersonal relationships;
- (5) relief of mood disorder symptoms;
- (6) renewed physical energy.

Interviewees perceived the first three changes as core changes that led to a positive shift in day-to-day areas of life that included in particular their relationships, mental well-being and physical energy. For instance, interviewees described experiencing a spiritual connection and then subsequent calmness and openness to others:

*... the sensation [during meditation] was kind of like the physical proof, I don't know, I'm a pretty logical thinking person, so maybe I needed that, maybe that was my little sign, like this really works, zap. I think being able to know, the appreciation of being able to know how to relax and calm down, and when you can do that, you can think more clearly, get through situations better, as you are more open to ideas and avenues and alternatives, you're more open to other people and other things around you. (02)*

Interviewees also described a change in their life-perspective and how this resulted in a sense of calmness and confidence to tackle whatever life presented:

*So, it's just got me a different way of thinking about how to deal with any stresses that happen. And more looking internally as opposed to looking externally for reasons why problems are occurring. ... I don't think there's a problem that I cannot deal with now. ... I was much more calm. ... Actually, it was after the program that it probably hit me even more. And it's almost continuously working still. Like I say actually about every*

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1 *three or four months, if not six months, I say,*  
 2 *like, I'm a lot better now. And yet six months*  
 3 *ago I thought I was pretty good. And it's*  
 4 *pretty exciting when that happens, when*  
 5 *people say, 'You look really happy. Let's*  
 6 *meet for lunch.' It's like there's a lot more*  
 7 *people attracted to me. (11)*

feeling of having moved forward on the life path of finding answers to fundamental questions:

*I feel like I'm close to the solution . . . so there's sense in this life, purpose to this life. I feel like everything on those tapes . . . make sense. And it's . . . like truths. It really helped me to find a purpose. . . . (04)*

8  
 9 The experience and learning of a spiritual orientation to life, provided by the programme, resulted in changes in the participants' inner and outer lives, as detailed in the following sections. Figure 1 provides a model for the interconnection of the six categories identified.

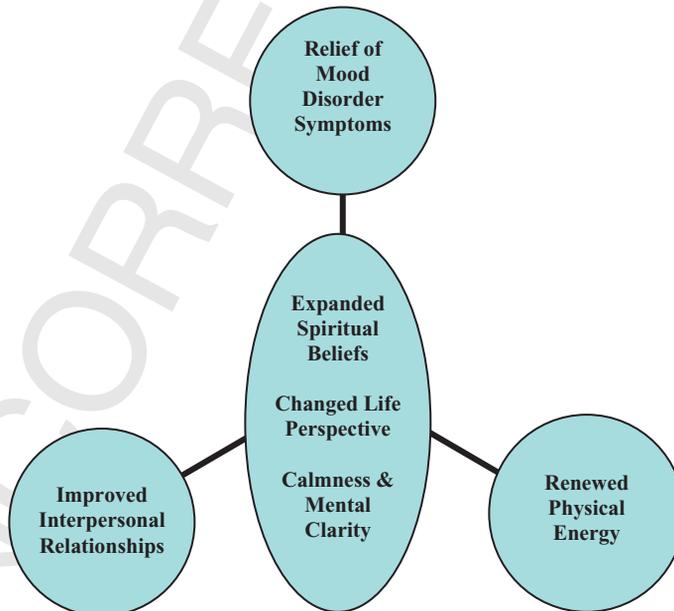
The cultivation of a sense of connectedness with other beings, nature, the universe or a higher power was a key perception that interviewees described:

*. . . the fact that I do have these physical sensations, the warmth and the floating and the lightness like there's something out there that connects us all. There's an energy. There is a way to tap into it, because I felt it. But you have to be open to things. (02)*

16 **Expansion of spiritual beliefs**

17  
 18 When participants were asked about spiritual insights they may have gained through the programme, they talked about a greater sense of purpose and meaning and the

30 Color Online, B&W in Print



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 42  
 43  
 44  
 45 **Figure 1:** The Spirituality Teaching Program and its impact on mood: thematic categories and their interconnectedness

... it's very, very connected. When you're down that deep in meditation. (10)

Interviewer: Connected to yourself?

To the higher power, I think. (10)

Twelve of the 13 participants described the programme as an experience that expanded, broadened and/or deepened the religious or spiritual beliefs they held at entry into the programme. One woman, who was a new Canadian and an exception to this outcome, stated that she felt disappointed by the termination of the programme and felt that she required additional spiritual support and guidance, having been denied any form of spirituality prior to leaving her country of birth.

Some participants articulated this renewed or new sense of spirituality as a universal energy operating in their life. Two participants stated a short period of adjustment was necessary, to shift from the idea of a personal Godhead to the idea of a universal energy, as represented in the programme. However, no one experienced the spirituality programme as being in conflict with their own religious beliefs, and most stated that the programme enhanced or deepened previously held beliefs.

Most participants defined religion and spirituality as separate and distinct phenomena, and several individuals expressed relief that they could now experience and practise spirituality in their lives without belonging to or attending a church. A few also commented that they appreciated the definition of spirituality in the programme as a one-to-one relationship with God or universal energy without an intermediary, and had found it to be extremely helpful in their lives. While participants described a cognitive change in their definition of spirituality, some also reported the experience of mystical states:

I fell into, I was left with a state of grace. And I had it for three days. Like ... what I imagine Nirvana ... communion with God, I had it for three days. And I still reflect on what I felt at that time. It was a mystical experience. (05)

Whereas another participant stated:

It was a, in my opinion, a divine presence that came to me. Because the light and love that I felt from this being, person, whatever you want to call it, was just, you know exuding, is that a word, exuding off this being. ... (13)

Interviewees saw spirituality as something that evolves on a lifelong path with the programme serving as a stepping stone. They stressed that to progress on this path required continuous commitment. The programme was not seen as a quick way to spirituality or as a new religion.

I don't think it's ever meant to be: 'this is it, the all-inclusive package, this is all you need. Spirit-and-go or something' – but it can be a backbone, and it has been a backbone in my routine. (06)

Participants constituted practising Christians and individuals with no religious affiliation; all stated that the teaching programme provided the basis for a positive experience of spirituality to operate in their lives.

**Change in life perspective**

Of the 13 participants, nine stated that they developed a new perspective on life as a result of their participation in the programme, and that this perspective provided them with new ways to cope with stressful situations, or provided a strategy to cope with distressing feelings that were associated with past, present or the anticipation of future circumstances. Six of the 13 participants stated that a new perspective on life

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1 developed through the release of stressful  
 2 memories from their past and learning to let  
 3 go of negative emotions or demands  
 4 associated with these memories and life  
 5 events. Others talked about discovering a new  
 6 willingness to persevere and finding a new  
 7 sense of motivation in their life, an ability to  
 8 reframe things and look at them differently,  
 9 and the acknowledgement of a shift from  
 10 despair to hope. Some participants (04)  
 11 described this new perspective as the ability  
 12 to maintain a positive outlook on life and to  
 13 practise positive thinking.

14 Three participants believed that the new  
 15 perspective they had developed was related to  
 16 the notion of gratitude. They discussed the  
 17 impact of being thankful for the good things  
 18 that were already working in their life and  
 19 the benefits of learning to be appreciative  
 20 of these things. A few stated that the ability  
 21 to cope better with stress was tied to the  
 22 creation of a better relationship with self, and  
 23 that they had developed a new sense of self-  
 24 awareness. One participant explained that the  
 25 new perspective on the self and the sense  
 26 of self-awareness had clarified emotional  
 27 boundaries between herself and others.  
 28 Finding a new perspective in life to cope  
 29 with difficulties entailed becoming open to  
 30 possibilities, possibilities of a positive future,  
 31 and possibilities of making peace with the  
 32 past and present:

34 *And so the door opened. It doesn't have to*  
 35 *be open very far for you to go through, and*  
 36 *once you go through I mean you have all the*  
 37 *possibility that you didn't have before. And*  
 38 *that would be a good way to describe it,*  
 39 *because like I say I don't remember now all*  
 40 *the details, and it seems to me that since*  
 41 *then, I opened up to a lot of other things.*  
 42 *And opened up my mind. (12)*

#### 43 **Calmness and mental clarity**

44 All of the 13 participants who were  
 45 interviewed described an improved mood  
 46

state following the spirituality intervention.  
 Twelve of these 13 participants reported  
 that the change in mood they experienced  
 was characterized by a sense of feeling  
 calmer in their day-to-day lives. Many  
 participants chose the word 'calm' during  
 the interview to describe how the  
 programme impacted on their mood state,  
 while others described a similar state that  
 they described as feeling 'a sense of peace',  
 or the ability to 'quiet the mind', or simply  
 being able to 'relax'.

Half of the participants interviewed  
 reported that they were able to extend the  
 experience and feeling of calmness in  
 their life to include a new-found ability to  
 remain more detached during emotionally  
 stressful life situations. They stated that  
 increased mental clarity or improved  
 mental concentration accompanied the  
 state of calmness and ability to remain  
 detached when under stress. For example,  
 one participant described the change as  
 follows:

*Listening to the tapes and the spirituality*  
*program, well they did change my mood, I*  
*was kind of more calmer and better able to*  
*relax and not get so wound up in what I was*  
*going through and being more open to try*  
*different things and sticking with them, and*  
*giving them a chance. So yeah it did improve*  
*my mood in that way. Definitely calmer, and a*  
*better sense of being: 'I'm still me even*  
*though this is happening to me . . .'. I think*  
*afterwards when you're calmer, then you can*  
*get to the state where you can think through*  
*things in a very calm or more rational sense*  
*without letting the problems just overtake*  
*you. (01)*

The experience of calmness in participants'  
 lives was more than a private experience; the  
 ability to remain calm throughout stressful  
 events provided benefits that positively  
 affected other parts of their life as well.

**Relief of mood disorder symptoms**

Interviewees described the relief from depressed and anxious feelings. As one participant stated concisely:

*And I have to backtrack a little bit and say that it's my belief that participating in this program not only changed my life, but it also brought me out of a severe depression. (13)*

Another participant describes the change in her mental health as follows:

*I just don't find I am as weepy as much and depressed as much . . . like the third week, the fourth week, I was feeling a bit better, was able to handle things. (03)*

For four of the seven participants who were taking medications for mood disorders, the Spirituality Program provided an alternative to pharmaceutical drugs as they had successfully discontinued their use. Two more of those seven participants expressed the desire or specific plan to discontinue their use of pharmaceutical drugs for mood disorders due to the beneficial influence of the programme. Another participant reported that the spirituality programme provided a much-needed complementary adjunct to the medications she was prescribed for her mood disorder.

**Improved interpersonal relationships**

Most participants reported positive changes in their interpersonal relationships, especially relationships with immediate family members or individuals with whom participants lived. Participants described a wide variety of ways in which interactions with their husbands, parents and children improved during the spirituality programme, and most of the exchanges that were described in interviews involved emotional communication patterns. Some of these changed interpersonal patterns

with family members included the following: 1  
the ability to verbalize and share feelings 2  
more openly; the ability to not overreact to 3  
others' challenging behaviours; the ability to 4  
listen and communicate more deeply with 5  
family members; being more attentive, 6  
forgiving and flexible with others; learning 7  
and including the values and needs of self, as 8  
well as others, in personal decisions. One 9  
participant describes the change as follows: 10

*I think I'm more understanding, more 11  
tolerant, more patient as a result of 12  
this . . . with my family, I'd say more 13  
generous spirited . . . aware of other people's 14  
problems . . . not aware, I think just more 15  
tolerant, more tolerant and more 16  
understanding. (09)* 17  
18  
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Almost half of the participants described 20  
more satisfying interpersonal interactions in 21  
general in their lives, although participants 22  
reported the improvement in slightly different 23  
terms. The predominant changes they 24  
reported were also characterized by 25  
interpersonal communication patterns: the 26  
willingness to treat others in a more caring 27  
fashion, the ability to examine one's own 28  
traits and behaviours when confronted with 29  
interpersonal conflicts, a more positive and/ 30  
or assertive attitude toward others, becoming 31  
a better listener, the experience and practice 32  
of self-acceptance, and the awareness of one's 33  
own needs in relation to others. 34

Four participants described improved 35  
interpersonal relationships at work. They 36  
stated that the Spirituality Program helped 37  
them to be less emotionally reactive in the 38  
workplace and to establish healthy personal 39  
boundaries with co-workers. As one of these 40  
participants reported, the programme assisted 41  
her in realizing that she could assert herself 42  
in the workplace while still maintaining 43  
positive relationships. Another woman 44  
attributed the improved communication and 45  
relations with work colleagues to a new-found 46

1 willingness to be more understanding and  
 2 patient with clients and co-workers. Over half  
 3 of the participants discussed the notion of  
 4 empathy to describe how their interpersonal  
 5 relationships changed as a result of the  
 6 programme:

7  
 8 *So when I looked at people I could just have*  
 9 *more empathy . . . you don't know what*  
 10 *happened to them or what's bugging*  
 11 *them . . . so probably less judgmental, yeah,*  
 12 *less judgmental . . . I just have a greater*  
 13 *appreciation of everyone else around me, as*  
 14 *well. (01)*

15  
 16 Six participants spoke specifically about  
 17 treating other people with more care, more  
 18 acceptance, and about becoming less critical  
 19 of others.

### 20 **Renewed physical energy**

21 Most of the participants found renewed  
 22 energy to return to activities they formerly  
 23 enjoyed or take up new interests and careers  
 24 after completing the Spirituality Program.  
 25 Participants described activities such as the  
 26 return to volunteer work, the start of a new  
 27 job, making a career change and the decision  
 28 to take a course. One participant stated that  
 29 she developed new interests outside work for  
 30 the first time, while another described the  
 31 enjoyment of a new outdoor pursuit, hiking  
 32 with friends.

33  
 34 Five participants stated that the Spirituality  
 35 Program kindled an interest in looking after  
 36 their physical body or engaging in self-care  
 37 activities, which in turn produced positive  
 38 changes:

39  
 40 *And because of that, too, I'm doing more*  
 41 *things for myself. You know, more healthier*  
 42 *things than, I mean I've always been a health*  
 43 *conscious person, but it's just like I needed*  
 44 *something more, so I'm reaching out for*  
 45 *more, like I'm doing a rejuvenating thing for*  
 46 *myself . . . and I get acupuncture done once a*

*month. Just things to take care of myself. But*  
*that's [the Spirituality Program] why I started*  
*to do it. (12)*

Daily exercising, especially walking, was the  
 activity most commonly reported by these  
 participants. Others made a commitment to  
 doing physical exercises, working to  
 improve posture, or practising self-care such  
 as acupuncture and qi gong, all of which  
 slowly and progressively returned positive  
 results:

*It's also given me more of a commitment to*  
*take care of my physical body. To actually go*  
*and do my exercises, things like that. I'm*  
*literally sitting up straighter than I used to. A*  
*lot straighter. (11)*

These six categories of change in participants'  
 lives, produced by active participation in the  
 Spirituality Program, involved their spiritual,  
 cognitive, emotional and physical lives to  
 maintain improved mental well-being.

## Discussion

This qualitative study explored how a teaching  
 programme about spirituality impacted on  
 participants and influenced participants'  
 mental well-being. Following completion of  
 a spirituality teaching programme with 56  
 participants (see Moritz et al., 2006, for  
 further details of the original randomized  
 trial involving 165 participants and showing  
 significant mood and quality of life  
 improvements over a waiting-list control  
 group and a meditation group), in-depth  
 interviews were completed with 13 women.  
 This purposive sample of women were  
 invited to articulate how their experience of  
 the programme had influenced them.

Consistent with the quantitative findings  
 from the conducted trial, interviewees  
 reported feeling calmer, more peaceful and  
 less depressed and anxious. Improvements in

their mental well-being enabled some participants to reduce their medication for mood disorders or provided a necessary treatment adjunct. Interviewees also felt that their energy levels had improved and that they were enjoying better relationships with those around them. When exploring how the reported changes came about, expanded spiritual beliefs, a changed life perspective and a general sense of calmness and clarity emerged as the core changes that influenced relationships, emotional well-being and energy levels (see Figure 1). Interviewees found it challenging to address the interrelationship of the reported core changes. However, the shift in life perspective (noted as experiencing less of an inward focus, less absorption with one's own personal issues and a sense of gratitude for the good things in life) points to an increase in self-transcendence, which is a core component of spirituality (Coward, 1996; Ellermann and Reed, 2001; Mueller et al., 2001). Likewise the experience of calmness and clarity can be linked to expanded spiritual beliefs and is frequently described by those who engage in spiritual practices (Shapiro and Walsh, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

As such our findings suggest that spiritual development occurred for the interviewees and was experienced as a core component of the described improvements in mental wellness. Epidemiological studies have frequently shown an association between spirituality and aspects of mental well-being such as greater resilience to stress, an optimistic life orientation, better coping abilities, and lower levels of anxiety and depression (Fehring et al., 1987, 1997; Kaczorowski, 1989; Gioiella et al., 1998; Pardini et al., 2000; Young et al., 2000; Bartlett et al., 2003; Kinsel, 2005; McCoubrie and Davies, 2006). However, fostering spiritual development to improve mental wellness has not been described as an intervention in the literature.

Exploring the link between spiritual development and mental well-being is a newly emerging research field and the authors are not aware of other studies that explored the mechanisms through which spiritual development is helpful. Looking at our study findings and drawing from the insights of psychotherapy, one could hypothesize that the described shifts in world-view and self-perception in our study can be interpreted as a change in negative thinking patterns associated with mental distress, toward more acceptance and calm. Such a shift in thinking patterns can be achieved through cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), which is known to improve mood (Teasdale et al., 1995). Similarly to CBT, the active and daily practice of a visualization exercise may have promoted the experience and maintenance of a state of calmness, interrupted cycles of negative thinking, and cascaded into improved emotional well-being, better relationships and improved physical self-care.

The described calmness and improvement of mood could also be linked to a relaxation response that may have been elicited through the various relaxation techniques (including visualization) that were a part of the programme. Training the relaxation response has been linked to better coping with stress and fewer anxious and depressed feelings (Jacobs, 2001).

While the above-described mechanisms may indeed be important, our study results suggest that the Spirituality Teaching Program affected participants in a more comprehensive way, impacting on their spiritual, cognitive, emotional and physical lives. Philosophical texts do indeed assign a much more wide-ranging role to spiritual development. Emmons (1999) wrote that 'spirituality can provide a unifying philosophy of life and serves as an integrating and stabilizing force in the face of constant environmental and cultural pressures that push for fragmentation, particularly in postmodern cultures'.

1 Baumeister explains: 'Spiritual striving may  
2 provide stability, support and direction even  
3 in critical times and could allow individuals  
4 to hold on to a sense of ultimate purpose and  
5 meaning' (Baumeister 1991). While these  
6 authors provide a valuable philosophical  
7 analysis, this research field is clearly in need  
8 of further empirical scrutiny.

9 This study has some limitations. It would  
10 have been of value to explore the views of  
11 participants in the mindfulness meditation  
12 arm of the trial. This was not possible  
13 because of budget restrictions. Also, the  
14 interviews for this study were conducted  
15 approximately one year after completion  
16 of the intervention. While this allowed  
17 exploration of the long-term effects of the  
18 intervention, recall of the programme's  
19 influence was a challenge for some  
20 interviewees. Also, due to the high female  
21 composition of the trial population we were  
22 only able to recruit women for this study. The  
23 small sample size of this exploratory study  
24 could be seen as another limitation. However,  
25 we feel that increasing repetition of  
26 previously mentioned themes was indicative  
27 of data saturation and that therefore the  
28 sample size was sufficient for the study  
29 purpose of exploring intervention effects  
30 qualitatively.

31 The consistent benefits from the  
32 spirituality programme that the participants  
33 described one year after completing the  
34 intervention suggest this to be a promising  
35 research area. Further qualitative work would  
36 need to explore how the presented model  
37 could be expanded. While the benefits of  
38 spiritual practices for mental health have been  
39 acknowledged in the literature, and appear to  
40 be consistent with this research, integrating  
41 spiritual teachings in medical practice would  
42 require further research. For instance it would  
43 have to be determined what practice settings  
44 would accommodate such a care approach,  
45 what resources are needed to introduce the  
46 approach to patients, and what patient groups

are responsive to the offer of spiritual  
teachings.

## Conclusion

Our study findings suggest that it is possible  
to assist individuals in the development of  
their spirituality and that doing so can  
potentially impact on their overall well-being.  
Spiritual teachings and practices could be an  
innovative and valuable adjunct intervention  
to improve mood in emotionally distressed  
individuals.

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