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## ***The Winding Road: A Promising Approach to Addressing the Spiritual Struggles of College Students***

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*Researchers from Bowling Green State University piloted Winding Road to target college students who are struggling with spiritual issues, assuming that these struggles are a normal part of the developmental process. This spiritually-sensitive intervention aims to help participants articulate and normalize their struggles while learning and practicing coping strategies. Winding Road is presented as a model for how to create opportunities to discuss spiritual struggles within our campus environments in an effort to bring these conversations into the mainstream culture of higher education.*

Although the college years are often thought of as a time of spiritual dormancy, many college students involve themselves in religious and spiritual practices, actively seek to learn about beliefs and faiths different from their own, while questioning and/or struggling with their spirituality as they experience the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Recent research suggests that approximately half of the undergraduate students in the United States experience spiritual struggles (Astin & Astin, 2004; Johnson, Sheets, & Kristeller, 2006). Pargament, Murray-Swank, Magyar, & Ano (2005) describe spiritual struggles as questions and conflicts regarding the divine, questions about one's life purpose or faith tradition, or tension with others related to religious or spiritual matters.

With few exceptions, such struggles have been consistently linked to signs of poorer health and well-being in college students, including lower self-esteem, poorer physical health, increased negative mood, anxiety, depression, alcohol use; increases in a wide range of addictive behaviors from gambling, recreational drug use, and sex, to shopping, food starving, and tobacco use have also been correlated with spiritual struggle (Bryant & Astin, 2008; Exline, Yali & Sanderson, 2000; Johnson, Sheets & Kristeller, 2008; Astin &

Astin, 2004; Pargament, Zinnbauer, Scott, Butter, Zerowin, & Stanik, 1998; Faigin & Pargament, 2008). Given the prevalence of spiritual struggles and their negative effects on the health and well-being of college students, interventions that target the development of a healthy spirituality are needed in order to offer students resources to better understand and deal with their struggles during these critical developmental years.

Some promising efforts to develop spiritual interventions have already been undertaken in this regard with other populations. Spiritually-oriented group interventions have proven to be helpful in decreasing depression and spiritual struggles among community members coping with HIV (Tarakeshwar, Pearce, & Sikkema, 2005), improving spiritual well-being and positive religious coping in females who experienced sexual abuse as children (Murray-Swank & Pargament, 2005), and in decreasing heroin and cocaine use and drug craving and increasing motivation for abstinence in individuals recovering from drug addiction (Avants, Beitel, & Margolin, 2005).

Although these studies suggest that spiritually-sensitive group interventions can improve the health and well-being of community members, to date there is only one spiritually-oriented intervention targeted specifically for college students. Oman and colleagues (2008) recently described an innovative experiential college course designed to help students draw from spiritual models and engage in spiritual practices, such as meditation, to promote spiritual growth. They found that these techniques were effective in changing negative perceptions of the divine (Oman, Shapiro, Thoresen, Flinders, Driskil, & Plante, 2007; Oman, Flinders, & Thoresen, 2008).

## **WINDING ROAD: STUDENT SAMPLE & PROGRAM DESCRIPTION**

Building upon the insights gained from these interventions, we developed and pilot-tested a spiritually-sensitive program called *Winding Road* for undergraduate college students who are struggling with spiritual issues. Students were recruited from a state university in Northwest Ohio through flyers, campus announcement emails, campus newsletters, the student newspaper, and classroom announcements. Twelve, 18 to 23 year-old undergraduate students of diverse religious identities participated in the intervention, including five Protestants, two Catholics, two Wiccans, one Atheist, one Agnostic, and one student who indicated 'not sure.'

*Winding Road* is a manualized group intervention based on Pargament's (2007) model of spirituality that considers spiritual struggles to be a normal part of spiritual development and evolution. The program grew out of research, clinical writings, and therapeutic interventions in the areas of religiousness, spirituality, and development in emerging adulthood and among college students. In addition, we conducted qualitative assessments and focus groups with college students to help in designing the intervention.

*Winding Road* is spiritually-sensitive, but does not promote a specific theological perspective; group members are encouraged to participate in a manner that is consistent with their personal spiritual values. The intervention aims to help participants articulate and normalize their spiritual struggles, develop their personal spiritual identity, expand their

concepts of God and the sacred, broaden their coping responses, engage in psycho-spiritual self-care, and move towards acceptance and forgiveness of themselves and others. The intervention consists of nine, 90-minute sessions (see Table 1). Opening and closing rituals in each session distinguish the special status of the time and space devoted to participants' spiritual struggles. The program content is conveyed through experiential exercises, discussions, readings, rituals, and music.

Take-home activities, called "Spiritual Enhancement Exercises," included such activities as "strengthening your wings" (i.e. actively using spiritual resources that move participants toward their spiritual goals and aspirations) doing the Loving Kindness meditation throughout the week, and identifying something that captures participants' conceptualization of the sacred and bringing it in to share with the group; these exercises are encouraged each week to promote the session goals and prepare participants for the upcoming topic. In addition, each session offers participants a resource list related to the topic. Students completed quantitative measures, including the Brief Symptom Index (BSI), as well as interviews before and after the *Winding Road* to assess its impact on them spiritually and psychologically.

Table 1: Overview of the Sessions

<b>Session</b>	<b>Illustrative Activities</b>
1. Starting down the Winding Road	* Sharing of spiritual autobiography
2. Sharing Spiritual Struggles	* Sharing each individual's spiritual struggles
3. Understanding Your Spiritual Heritage	* Creating a spiritual genogram
4. Your Spiritual Self	* Visualization of one's ideal future spiritual self: Participants reflection on the specific values and strivings that would lead them to their ideal spiritual selves
5. Sizing up your Sacred	*Sharing of objects that symbolize the sacred to each participant * Slideshow of various images and conceptualizations of the sacred
6. Forgiveness: A Bridge to Wholeness	* Loving Kindness Mediation: Participants meditate on directing thoughts of well-being at themselves and others
7. The Path to Acceptance	* Surrender Ritual: Participants are able to surrender topics that are outside of their control by symbolically placing them in a bowl at the center of the circle
8. Meaning Making: Seeing the Road from Another Point of View	* Two-way Lament: Participants write a lament as a group about their spiritual struggles; this is followed by participants individually reflecting on God's response to their lament
9. Conclusion	* Fire Ceremony: Participants light candles together and share reflections on the group process and the hopes and concerns they have for their future paths

## PROGRAM FINDINGS AND STUDENT VOICES

All participants indicated that they were experiencing a number of spiritual struggles. Some described spiritual struggles with other people; they felt misunderstood, judged, or rejected by others for their religious beliefs and behaviors. Spiritual conflicts with family members were especially poignant:

*I've been raised Catholic, with a very involved family...within the past two years I have found myself feeling called toward Wicca. The problem I have here is that if I follow where I want to go I'll not only hurt my family, but leave a terrible example to my 4 younger brothers and sisters, not to mention lose trust with mom. I don't have any clue what dad might do. I guess it just feels like no matter where I choose to go spiritually, I'll fuck up something and thus I can't go anywhere but the in-between hell it's turning into.*

The spiritual struggles of other students were more intrapersonal in nature. A number of these struggles focused on uncertainty and confusion about what to believe:

*I have doubts of the existence of God. Being raised in a secular family, I have come to believe that God is just an aspect of our imaginations. More specifically, the idea that God(s) and religion exist to quench a psychological need. I do doubt these beliefs I hold and question my resiliency to theist beliefs. I can't help to wonder if I have constructed walls around myself or if God really exists.*

Finally, some of our participants appeared to be wrestling with issues relating to God or the sacred. These divine spiritual struggles were marked by feelings of being punished or abandoned by God:

*Often when I sin, and something bad happens to me, I feel like God is punishing me. I got really sick a couple years ago, and at the time I felt as if God was punishing me for some of the things I had done. I learned that He loves me and wouldn't cause such great pain to me, but it still happens sometimes.*

These struggles were not simply intellectual in nature – they were deeply felt. The struggles of these students were linked with frustration, terror, panic, anger, hopelessness, trouble concentrating, and even suicidal thoughts. According to our pre-intervention assessments, all but one participant showed elevated levels of psychological distress on the Brief Symptom Index (BSI).

Based on their participation in *Winding Road*, all students showed statistically and clinically significant improvements as a group on indices of psychological distress, spiritual struggle, emotion regulation, congruence between personal behavior and spiritual values, and stigmatization of spiritual struggles; these findings are particularly striking given the small sample size.

Interviews with the students also revealed a marked decrease in their experience of spiritual struggle from the beginning to the end of the intervention. In the words of one participant:

*Before [my struggle] was...so horrible...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.*

Participants also reported an increased sense of acceptance from God or the divine. One participant shared the following:

*Before I felt I was being punished for certain things and I felt that I wasn't a good enough person for God. Through the discussions [in group], I realized that God's love is unconditional and I started to display that love and cradle myself in that love.*

Although students reported spiritual benefits, the resolution of spiritual struggle was not an aim of the group. Rather, students were encouraged to engage their most difficult spiritual questions in a context free from stigmatizing attitudes. Students responded well to the notion that spiritual struggles are a natural and normal part of life and, as a result, grew in acceptance of their struggle. Comments from one student in particular illustrate this shift:

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

Many students either feared, or had experienced alienation when talking about their struggles in the past. The group atmosphere was particularly helpful in reducing the stigmatization that often accompanies the experience of spiritual struggle. As one participant put it:

*It [Winding Road] helped me to see I wasn't the only one going through it. It was helpful to see that you weren't alone...We came to discover that we could really open up to each other without worrying about judgment or anything.*

It is especially important to note that students used what they learned in the intervention to engage their spiritual struggle. They reported significant increases in their ability to cope effectively with their experience of spiritual struggle. Quotes from two students below illustrate the ways in which they applied material from the group to their own lives:

*I have more tools to deal with my [spiritual struggle]...The big one that stands out is realizing what effect people have and just being able to keep that in mind. And also knowing that I'm not the only one going through spiritual struggles and that they're always going to be there and that they're an important part of life even.*

*Meditation...was an enjoyable experience for me. A sense of having accomplished something. I can do this anytime I want – there's a profundity to it. I wouldn't have thought of it – it's just a really different way than my typical task-oriented way. This was lighter.*

In addition to experiencing spiritual changes, participants reported significantly less psychological distress following the intervention. There were clear increases in positive psychological outcomes as well. Several participants shared their experiences of the intervention:

*I'm more positive. I have more self-esteem, more confidence...it made me realize I am fine with the way I am. I don't need to change for anyone else. Just because I'm not like everybody else doesn't make me a bad person...It just makes me, me.*

*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 had two or three spiritual struggles and I've always come out a better person. So, I think they're necessary.*

## **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

Based on research and practice, it is becoming increasingly clear that the college years are a time of spiritual exploration and growth. Likewise, findings from our experience with *Winding Road* indicate that many college students are struggling, emotionally as well as intellectually, with profound spiritual issues. Although often overlooked, these spiritual struggles can be understood as part of the adolescent's larger task of identity development and individuation. It follows that efforts to assist students in the clarification of the "spiritual self" may be accompanied by broader psychological, social, and educational benefits.

In fact, participants in the *Winding Road* showed remarkable changes psychologically as well as spiritually over the course of this relatively brief program. Excerpts from the interviews of *Winding Road* participants also indicated that this intervention was very well-received. The program responded to a clear need on the part of these college students for spiritually-sensitive programming of the kind unavailable to them through other curricular or extra-curricular activities. The willingness of the participants in the *Winding Road* to devote considerable time and energy to this nine-week program in the midst of their busy schedules speaks to the importance of the "interior dimension" of their lives and their yearning for spiritual dialogue and support (Lindholm 2007, p. 10).

Our experience with the *Winding Road* suggests that it is now time to bring spiritual struggles into the mainstream of higher education. To do so, educators must create opportunities for spiritual conversation on the college campus through the curriculum, extra-curricular activities, residence life, campus ministry, or special programs such as *Winding Road*. Educators must help to normalize the process of spiritual questioning, while remaining respectful of spirituality itself. By reassuring students that struggles are a natural part of spiritual life, challenging the stigma associated with spiritual doubts, and acknowledging the significance of these questions educators may help students develop through their spiritual struggles while in college.

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**Carol Ann Faigin**, M.A., is a student in the clinical psychology program at Bowling Green State University in Bowling Green, Ohio. She is currently working on her doctoral dissertation, "Assessing the Impact of a Computer-Based Psychoeducational Intervention for Spiritual Struggles on the Addictive Behavior of College Freshmen." Faigin hopes to apply knowledge learned about spiritual struggles interventions for use in college populations and for working with military combat veterans struggling with PTSD.

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