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Spiritual Fitness and Resilience

A Review of Relevant Constructs, Measures, and Links to Well-Being

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For many people, spiritual beliefs may tremendously influence their outlook on the world, offer solace in turbulent times, or provide support from a like-minded community. These beliefs may thus contribute to resilience and well-being and result in improved force readiness and performance. This report discusses spiritual fitness as defined by the Air Force and as conceptualized by the empirical literature. We first explored how spiritual fitness has been measured. The Army’s Global Assessment Tool is one of the few spirituality metrics to focus on service members. Next, we identified key constructs of spiritual fitness, their relationship to well-being and resilience, and interventions that attempted to address these.

First, most spirituality literature includes a conceptualization of a spiritual worldview that includes beliefs in transcendent meaning and purpose, which also include, but are not limited to, organized religious beliefs. Possessing a sense of meaning and purpose in life is strongly positively related to quality of life. Second, personal religious and spiritual practices are linked to improved health and functioning (e.g., protective against substance use). Spiritual meditation may also help improve health (e.g., pain tolerance, buffer physiological stress). Third, there is indirect but converging evidence that support from a spiritual community is generally beneficial to health and well-being. Finally, spiritual coping that is related to purpose in life (i.e., using spiritual beliefs to cope with stressors) drives post-traumatic growth and improved well-being, as opposed to coping that is more narrowly religious. However, spiritual coping is not necessarily effective in coping with such physical stressors as pain. Several constructs of spiritual fitness may be linked to suicidality, such as religious affiliation.

Many of the spiritual interventions and empirical evidence we identified were programs that focused on providing a sense of purpose in life. Although these studies’ research designs ranged from observational correlational studies to fully randomized clinical trials, we found diverse types of spiritual interventions that were linked to improved resilience and well-being. Finally, the importance of cultural appropriateness was also very apparent in this literature. Going forward, it will be important to understand how to support not only individuals of, for example, diverse race/ethnicity but also secular individuals as well as Airmen and families within the major religious traditions.