

Balancing Reality and Spirituality

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Essay Prompt: In his publication “Principles of Inner Work: Psychological and Spiritual,” John Welwood coined the term “spiritual bypass” (1). It can refer to using faith or religion to avoid the reality of difficult or intense emotions. Did any of the patients that were interviewed in the NSCI 1000 class display this psychological defense? Can you think of an example from the media or your personal experiences where this process was at play? In the space below, please 1) briefly describe one example of spiritual bypass from one of these sources, and 2) discuss how spiritual bypass may be harmful or helpful depending on the situation.

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Spiritual bypass is a term coined for setting aside reality and giving into escapism. Spiritual beliefs and practices are often biased in terms of giving into emotions and certain beliefs that may offer comfort to a difficult situation. In the case of the need for guidance, spiritual bypass is used to provide a solution to an unknown and unresolved challenge (1).

Hunter Eby, a patient with epilepsy who was interviewed in our NSCI 1000 class, mentioned that when he first received his diagnosis, he felt that he did something entirely wrong. Hunter believed that God gave him a brain he couldn't control. He felt that he unknowingly committed

a sin which is why he was diagnosed with epilepsy.

In some cultures, epilepsy (or any similar condition) is believed to be a spiritual calling. From personal experience, my family always tells anyone with such medical conditions that they are blessed by God because they spend “moments” in the spiritual world. However, the medical reality is quite different from the spiritual reality. Scientific evidence shows that epilepsy causes an electrical instability in the brain (2). Epilepsy can be very damaging to brain health and can hinder the lives of many patients with such a condition.

Ignoring the reality by being caught in spiritual bypass can lead to false realizations. In Hunter's situation, his spiritual bypass perspective was more negative. Thus, his mental health was impacted as he believed in the spirituality of his condition. On the other hand, since my family has a more positive belief, they ignore reality, which is just as harmful. Although it is good to be positive, acceptance and treatment is also important. Using spirituality to escape reality is part of being a human. However, embracing a more balanced approach that integrates spirituality while also accepting reality is the way to authentically live through certain circumstances. Relying solely on spiritual bypass can be detrimental as it may distance individuals from reality and contribute to a decline in mental health.

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