Spirituality and Aging: A Guide for Seniors on Faith, Meaning, and Connection



A lot of people believe that spirituality and aging go hand in hand. And they're probably right (at least when it comes to most of today's seniors). After all, getting older tends to deepen a person's longing for the very things that a spiritual life can provide—things like a sense of comfort, meaning, purpose, and connection.

That's why seniors who want to age well often choose to focus more of their attention on their spiritual needs and aspirations. It's a way to renew their outlook on life, become more attuned to their place in the world, and benefit from the potentially restorative nature of life-affirming spiritual practices. In short, having faith or a feeling of interconnectedness can make a person's heart sing. And that's something everyone deserves, regardless of age.

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What Is Spirituality?

Everyone answers this question a little differently. That's because spirituality tends to be a very personal matter. For some people, spirituality is defined by their belief in God or their practice of a particular religion. For other people, it's defined by certain kinds of deeply felt emotion, and it may or may not involve belief in a higher power, belief in a supernatural realm, or a devotion to any single philosophy or set of beliefs.

At its core, spirituality is an aspect of human life that frequently involves a search for answers to fundamental questions about our existence, such as:

- Why are we here?
- What is our purpose?
- What happens after we die?
- Can we transcend the material world?
- How should we live our lives?
- What matters most?
- Is each of us alone, or are we all connected?

When people talk about their spirit, they are often referring to the hard-to-describe force that animates the core of their inner being. By extension, anything that enlivens our spirit or helps us attune to it can be described as spiritual. That's why many people say that they've had spiritual experiences when they've been deeply moved by certain activities, events, personal interactions, or moments of profound insight or inspiration.

Although beliefs and opinions vary substantially, a lot of people see a clear distinction between spirituality and religion. In fact, religion is often said to be just one possible path to spirituality. Despite some overlap, other distinctions can also be made.

Spirituality is often perceived or described as:

- A broad, subjective, and unifying concept
- Informal and non-denominational
- Highly personal and not dogmatic
- Feeling-oriented
- An inward experience

Religion is often perceived or described as:

- Well-defined and highly structured
- Formal and denominational
- Focused on community, rituals, and specific doctrines
- Behavior-oriented
- An outward experience with inward benefits

Does Spirituality Become More Important As You Age?

For many people, spirituality does become more important. But it's a highly individualized experience. No two people are the same. We all have distinct needs, perceptions, personalities, and life histories. Some seniors see aging itself as a spiritual journey, whereas others turn to spiritual development as a way to find more richness, meaning, inner strength, or comfort in their lives as they reflect on the past and think about what's still to come.

Many factors can affect a senior's desire to explore more of his or her spirituality. For example, a senior or elderly American may be drawn closer to spirituality or religious faith because of factors like:

- **Retirement**—This stage of life often comes with big changes to our daily activities, the roles we play, and the way we see ourselves. Although it is often an exciting and fulfilling time, it can also feel unfamiliar. That's particularly true for people who retire from full-time careers or who no longer spend the bulk of their time raising or supporting a family.
- **Grieving**—As we get older, more of our friends and family members are likely to pass away. As a result, we may go through the grieving process more frequently than when we were younger. Faith or spirituality can provide us with extra stability as we cope with the loss of our loved ones and reflect on what they've meant to us.
- **Decreased independence**—Another reason why aging and spirituality are so closely linked is that many of us experience some physical decline during our later years. We may need assistance with certain aspects of everyday living, which can make us feel embarrassed or uncomfortable. We may even wonder who we've become if the way we perceive ourselves doesn't match reality. Spirituality can help us bridge that gap.
- **Increased time to reflect**—One of the gifts of getting older is that we often have more time each day to ponder the mysteries of life and reflect on everything we've done so far. We get to review our achievements as well as our setbacks while beginning to recognize a meaningful narrative that ties it all together. We may even start to see deeper connections between our life and the lives of people from past or future generations. In fact, one major aspect of the spirituality of aging is that, upon extra reflection, our perspective may shift in surprisingly profound and positive ways.
- **A growing awareness of one's own mortality**—Many of us fear passing away. We don't know what the experience will be like or whether our spirit (or soul) will continue to live on. Will our consciousness remain intact? What will happen to the loved ones we leave behind? Have we created a meaningful legacy that will live on? What will we be remembered for? Spirituality or religious faith can help us make peace with our mortality.

As part of their experiences with aging and spirituality, seniors may adopt new habits or ways of living. For example, many spiritually inclined seniors:

- Place more focus on their inner lives than on external expectations
- Speak from their hearts more frequently
- Put more effort into making meaningful connections with other people
- Develop more patience and attentiveness
- Seek more opportunities for silence and solitude
- Change their perception of time by living more in the moment
- Allow more time for reflection, sharing, and loving

How Popular Is Religion Among American Seniors?

Based on a nationwide survey from 2014 by the Pew Research Center, religion is very popular among older adults. In fact, 85 percent of Americans above the age of 65 rated religion as either very or somewhat important—the highest percentage of all age groups. In addition, among people who were 65 or older:[1]

- 74 percent said they believe in heaven
- 70 percent said they believe in God with absolute certainty
- 65 percent said they pray at least once a day
- 56 percent said they believe in hell
- 48 percent said they attend religious services at least weekly
- 40 percent said they use religion as their main source of moral guidance

So, what are the most popular religions? When it comes to American adults above the age of 65, Christian religions are the most widely practiced. About 83 percent of people in this age group described themselves as Christians. More specifically:[1]

- 29 percent said they were Evangelical Protestant
- 24 percent said they were Catholic
- 22 percent said they were Mainline Protestant

People in other Christian religions, such as historically black Protestants and Mormons, represented much smaller percentages (six percent and one percent, respectively). About five percent of seniors over age 65 identified with non-Christian faiths such as:[1]

- Judaism—3 percent
- Buddhism—1 percent
- Islam—less than 1 percent
- Hinduism—less than 1 percent

The remaining 12 percent of older adults in this age group had no religious affiliations. In fact, two percent of them described themselves as atheists, and another two percent of them said they were agnostic.[1]

Can You Be an Atheist and Spiritual at the Same Time?

That depends on your individual perspective. Many people of faith think that a spiritual life requires belief in God or a supreme being. But atheists, by definition, do not believe in the existence of a literal God. However, many atheists do consider themselves to be spiritual, just not in a way that conforms to how some religious people tend to think of spirituality.

For "spiritual atheists," meaning, connection, purpose, and morality are not derived from religious doctrines or ideas about the supernatural. Instead, they are derived from everyday experiences, observations, philosophical reflection, logical reasoning, and from what we continue to learn about the physical universe through science. All of those things are compatible with a definition of spirituality that's based on profound emotion and a search for answers about the biggest mysteries of life.

Simply put, many atheists feel a deep sense of connection to the world and have a desire and willingness to improve themselves and help their fellow human beings. It's all part of their own search for meaning in a constantly changing universe.

When Does a Senior Need Spiritual Care?

A person's well-being is defined by much more than just his or her physical health. People also have mental and spiritual needs. That's why many seniors with mental or physical conditions benefit from holistic care and counseling that addresses their spirituality. In fact, some older adults experience faster or more complete healing from injuries, emotional grief, or other afflictions when they have the support of a chaplain or spiritual counselor. And, of course, spiritual guidance can provide a sense of peace, comfort, and courage when a person is battling a terminal illness or nearing death.

Other positive outcomes of receiving spiritual care can include:

- Improved confidence and self-esteem
- Restored relationships
- A more hopeful outlook
- A higher sense of purpose and meaning
- A greater sense of personal dignity

For seniors who devoutly practice certain religions, faith-specific spiritual care is frequently very important. After all, they may want to observe specific rituals or follow other practices related to aspects like their diet. Faith-specific care is often especially vital when a devoutly religious person is close to passing away.

What Are the Best Spiritual Activities for Seniors?

As an older American, you can do all kinds of things to get more in tune with your spiritual core. And by doing activities that promote a deeper sense of connection, wholeness, meaning, and purpose, you can awaken new perceptions that renew your outlook and give you inner strength for the rest of your human journey.

Every religion offers spiritual practices that are designed to bring you closer to a sense of the divine. They include activities like praying, chanting, fasting, taking part in rituals, celebrating special milestones, and many other practices. But you don't necessarily need to follow any particular religious practices in order to enliven your spirituality. Anything that you love doing, that makes you feel whole or truly alive, or that gives you a feeling of deeper connection to the world can be considered a spiritual activity. For example, consider pursuits such as:

- **Volunteering**—Providing your time and efforts to a worthy cause can generate many positive emotions that feel deeply rooted in your spiritual core.
- **Spending time with nature**—The world is full of natural wonders—big and small—that can help you sustain an inspiring enchantment with life. Activities can be as simple as

watching the night sky, sitting under a large tree, planting some flowers, walking through a garden, listening to ocean waves, or watching or playing with animals.

- **Meditating**—In a 2014 survey of American seniors over age 65, about 53 percent of them said they meditate at least once a week. [1] Among several other benefits, meditation can increase your self-awareness as well as your ability to accept aspects of life that may be out of your control.
- **Participating in prayer groups**—Praying with other people provides a great opportunity for social engagement. But it can also help you stay encouraged and hopeful since you get to witness and be part of a collective spiritual effort.
- **Sharing stories**—Talking about good memories with other people can help you feel more grounded and interconnected.
- **Playing or listening to music**—It's called a universal language for a reason. Music has the power to make almost anybody feel more in tune with the world, especially since it draws people into the present moment. In addition, favorite songs from your past can reawaken positive memories, provide comfort, and renew your spirit.
- **Getting a massage**—Human touch and physical pleasure can strip away your worries and immerse you deeply in the present moment, which is often a good way to experience a sense of unity with the world.
- **Dancing**—Moving in rhythm to stirring music can make you feel one with the universe. And when you dance with other people, that feeling of unity can become even more intense and expansive.
- **Yoga**—Beyond its many physical benefits, the practice of yoga can help you achieve a higher state of consciousness since it requires strong attention on what's happening in the current moment.
- **Reading or writing**—Words often have a lot of transformative power. Reading the thoughts or stories of good writers can open new pathways for your spiritual core to make itself known. And writing down your own words—as part of your personal reflection or storytelling—can enable you to learn more about yourself, your beliefs, your place in the universe, and what gives you meaning.
- **Arts and crafts**—What could be more spiritual than the act of creation? Making something that has never existed before can generate an energizing sense of harmony and possibility. Drawing, painting, sculpting, and many other kinds of arts and crafts offer the chance to experience meditative and transcendent acts of creation.
- **Holding hands or gazing into someone's eyes**—Simple yet intimate acts of interpersonal connection offer the chance to feel unified with the spiritual cores of other people.
- **Doing absolutely nothing**—By freeing yourself of distractions and sitting alone, in silence, you can pay closer attention to your thoughts and feelings, which can provide clues to where your spiritual core may be hiding.

Ultimately, no matter what you believe in, the activities that you enjoy most—or that bring you closer to other people or make a positive difference in the world—are the ones that are likely to feel most spiritual to you. So play, laugh, love, create, and remember that almost everyone, regardless of age, shares the same fundamental questions about the deep mysteries of life.