

**HOW SPIRITUALITY**

**HELPS WITH**

**ADDICTION**

**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN  
SPIRITUALITY AND ADDICTION RECOVERY.**

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While addiction research has evolved over the years, some researchers have concluded that addiction affects the body, the mind, and the spirit. Along with treatment tools based on psychological, physical, and social needs, spirituality has long played a role in recovery from addiction.

This focus stems in large part from the influence of the “12-Step” program popularized by Alcoholics Anonymous, one of the country’s oldest recovery programs, which specifically calls for spiritually based actions such as meditation, prayer, conscious contact with a “power greater than ourselves,” and personal searching.

**The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University finds Connections Between Spirituality and Addiction:**

- More than 80 percent of Americans believe in God or some other greater power
- Adults and adolescents who attend religious services regularly are less likely to use illicit drugs, tobacco, or alcohol
- Adolescents who don’t attend religious services are four times more likely to use illicit drugs and three times more likely to binge drink as those that regularly attend services
- Adults who don’t attend religious services are five times more likely to use illicit drugs and seven times more likely to binge drink than adults who regularly attend services

## MANY INDIVIDUALS IN RECOVERY CREDIT THEIR HEALING IN PART TO SPIRITUALITY

Many scientific studies support the use of spirituality as a tool in addiction recovery, leading to the development of multiple tools that incorporate spiritual reflection and action. According to research by Project MATCH, a program of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, spiritually focused addiction treatment programs have resulted in up to a 10 percent greater abstinence rates than other forms of treatment.

Other studies indicate an inverse relationship between religious involvement and substance dependence, as well as an inverse relationship between meditation practices and substance use.

Given the long history and majority of scientific evidence as to the benefits of spirituality, the growing popularity of Christian addiction treatment and Catholic addiction treatment programs doesn't come as a surprise. Many recent change models incorporate spirituality with psychological, physical, and social variables in order to provide comprehensive treatment.

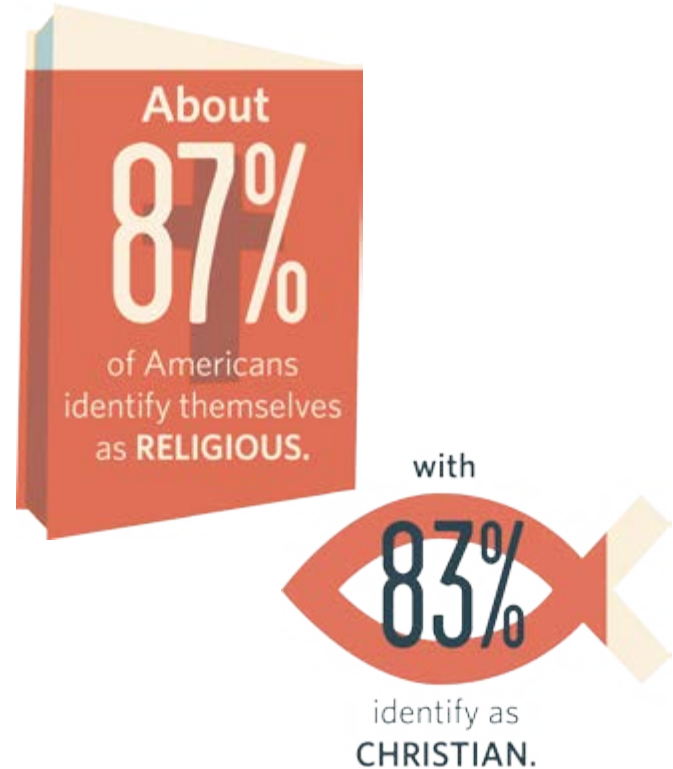


## HOW DOES SPIRITUALITY INTERSECT WITH ADDICTION AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE TREATMENT?

About 87 percent of Americans identify themselves as religious, with 83 percent identifying as Christian. Given this significant majority, it's not difficult to understand how religion, and its close cousin, spirituality, can play such an important part in treatment and recovery.

But what is spirituality, and how is it defined in the context of addiction treatment? While the dictionary may define spiritual as "relating to a person's spirit," "relating to a person's religion or religious beliefs," or "pertaining to God or the soul," in reality, spirituality is perceived differently, and subjectively, by each person.

Perhaps a better definition may be that it provides an individual's life with meaning and purpose.



## SPIRITUALITY IS NOT THE SAME TO EVERYONE

Spirituality may be theistic, based on a belief in a god, or non-theistic, based on ideas of inner strength or certain moral values. Spirituality may be associated with a certain set of religious beliefs, or represent a broader, non-denominational sense of interest in the spiritual. Spirituality doesn't require church attendance or even a belief in a higher power.

For some, spirituality is simply defined through the actual experience of spirituality, such as:

- Heightened awareness
- Acute clarity
- Feelings of understanding and empathy
- Authenticity
- Increased sense of meaning and purpose

Despite a lack of a certain definition for "spirituality," it's relevant to addiction treatment in that it often incorporates therapies and treatments of related issues, such as depression and anxiety.

Multiple studies have found a correlation between spirituality or religious devotion and the ability to deal with stress, essentially serving as a buffer.



## TRACING THE ROOTS OF SPIRIT BASED TREATMENT

The role of spirituality and substance abuse treatment in the U.S. can be traced back to the late 18th century, when Native American cultural and religious movements incorporated spirituality into alcohol cessation movements.

A few decades later in the mid-1800's, six individuals who abused alcohol wished to support each other through the recovery process founded the Washingtonian Society. This small group swelled into a large temperance, or prohibition, movement that based their methods on belief in God.

In the early 1900's, therapists began incorporating religious theology into treatment and recovery methods, with early pioneers such as Richard Peabody and Courtenay Baylor. Known as the lay therapy movement, these new treatment methods paved the way for the creation of what's perhaps the best known treatment program based on spirituality, Alcoholics Anonymous.



## THE ROLE ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS IN SPIRITUALITY

Alcoholics Anonymous was among the first popular recovery program to explicitly connect spirituality with addiction treatment and recovery, linking the spiritual aspects of addiction recovery with the physical and mental aspects. Several steps in the organization's 12-step model reference a higher power, or a creative intelligence, and those following the program should actively seek the spiritual aspect, as well as spread the message to others.

Since Alcoholics Anonymous was founded in the 1930s, many treatment programs have adopted spirituality as part of their methods. The spiritual model often refers to the use of drugs, alcohol, and illicit substances as attempts to fill a spiritual emptiness; many also advocate turning to a higher power in order to overcome addiction.

Such programs may emphasize:

- Experiencing addiction as a spiritual, mental, physical, and social symptom
- Believing and trusting in a power that's greater than one's own willpower
- Exploring and re-evaluating one's purpose in life
- Committing to moral and ethical behavior
- Developing hope that one can recover from addiction
- Performing an honest, thorough moral inventory of oneself
- Admitting wrongs to oneself, others, and a higher power
- Making amends to those that one has hurt in the past
- Using prayer, meditation to consciously connect with a higher power





## HOW DOES SPIRITUALITY INFLUENCE SUBSTANCE ABUSE?

Research has shown that being a part of a faith-based community, participating in religious activities, or associating with a network of individuals who share similar beliefs increases self-esteem, wellbeing, and a feeling of belonging.

**Spiritual beliefs and practices impacts addiction in three potential ways:**

1. A member of a certain religion may be less likely to engage in illicit drug use if that religion prohibits it
2. Participation in a religious or like-minded community may fill social voids, providing both a sense of belonging and acceptance
3. Connection or closeness to a higher power provides a feeling of optimism for the future, as well as strength to resist substance use

Many religious groups prohibit substance use. For instance, Christianity doesn't prohibit alcohol use, but it cautions against drunkenness and promotes self-control. Several passages in the Bible emphasize the inconsistency between living a God-centered life and alcohol misuse. Judaism, Christianity's precursor, has similar advice, advocating for moderation in alcohol consumption and avoiding substance use with the exception of tobacco.

Some Christian sects follow more prohibitive rules, however. In the 19th century, Protestant denominations led the fight for alcohol prohibition; Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians all created policies prohibiting the use of alcohol and tobacco. Other denominations, such as the Seventh Day Adventists and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, followed suit, taking the prohibitions one step farther to include caffeine.

As recently as 1999, the Catholic Church issued a statement that those who choose not to drink alcohol or smoke tobacco are performing a purifying penance and preparing for the afterlife.



## EASTERN RELIGIOUS VIEW POINTS

Many Eastern religions speak out against substance abuse, as well. Islam has stricter substance rules than most forms of Christianity and Judaism, prohibiting the use of alcohol and any other intoxicating substances. Hinduism discourages using alcohol to excess, while the teachings of Buddhism contain strong warnings against the use of intoxicating substances, including “drugs that cause carelessness.”

Religious prohibition is common across cultures and belief systems, and studies show that it has a dampening effect on drug abuse and addiction. Members of these groups may abstain from drug and alcohol misuse in order to avoid being sanctioned by their religious community. They believe strongly that this behavior violates religious law, because they see the behavior as a violation of divinity or dignity, or they just believe substance abuse to be harmful.

Surveys by CASA indicate that adults who feel that their religion is important to them, which was more than 86 percent were:

- Three times less likely to engage in binge drinking
- One and one-half times less likely to smoke tobacco
- Six times less likely to use marijuana
- Eight times less likely to use illicit drugs



## THE IMPACT OF RELIGION ON TEEN SUBSTANCE ABUSE

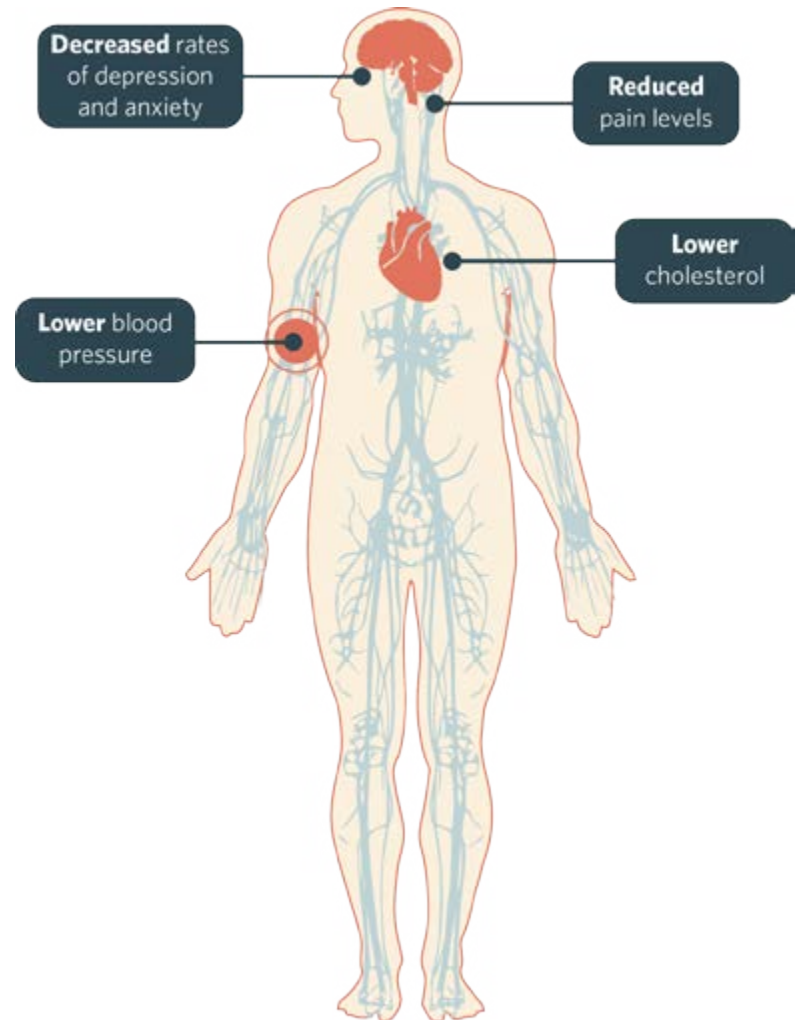
Risks of illicit drug and substance use were lower for religiously involved teens, as well. While more than 63 percent of religiously self-identified teens felt that they possessed vast knowledge about the risks of drug abuse, only 41 percent of teens who weren't religiously identified felt that they knew a lot about the risks of drug use.

Research on adolescents found that early intervention in the form of spiritually based 12-step programs improved the lifetime rates of sobriety, as well as leading to an improved treatment response. Similarly, other studies suggest that participation in 12-step programs modeled on the Alcoholics Anonymous model, leads to greater religious acceptance, which in turn leads to more positive treatment and recovery outcomes over time.

Studies also indicate that those who hold religious beliefs, attend services, or spend time practicing meditation are not only at less risk of abusing drugs, they also tend to have:

- Lower blood pressure
- Lower cholesterol
- Decreased rates of depression and anxiety
- Fewer and shorter hospital stays
- Reduced pain levels
- More positive health behaviors
- Twenty-nine percent longer average life spans

These factors support spirituality's important role in addiction treatment and recovery, as part of a holistic program that incorporates treatment for the body, mind, and spirit.



## WHAT ARE THE TECHNIQUES AND GOALS OF SPIRITUAL TREATMENT METHODS?

Every year in the U.S., as many as 40 million Americans, which is almost 13 percent of the population — either abused or were dependent on alcohol, prescription drugs, or other illicit substances, according to the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University. Each of these individuals has their own unique perspective on spirituality, including their own belief system, morals, and theistic or non-theistic beliefs.

There are a variety of spiritual treatment tools and programs. These range from Christian addiction treatment to Jewish addiction treatment, Catholic addiction treatment to Islamic addiction treatment and many in between, including secular or humanist-based programs. However, given the Christian majority in the U.S., most faith-based treatment programs focus on Christian addiction treatment methods. Though every program is different, addiction recovery programs based on spirituality tend to share a few common techniques and goals.

One common factor is the way that the spiritual and religious elements are presented to those participating in addiction recovery. Programs with a focus on negativity, punishment and ritual, as well as extremely restrictive programs, have been found to be less effective than faith and spiritually based programs, with a focus on providing support and nurturing.



## THE IMPACT OF SUPPORT AND COMMUNITY

Another common ground between spiritual addiction recovery programs is that of support and community. Studies have found that feeling supported by a spiritual community is an essential component in recovery, and successful treatment programs often incorporate support from others, such as family and peers.

For teens, families offer modeling behaviors with both negative and positive reinforcement, while peers can help strengthen resolve and reinforce belief systems. For adults, peers with similar belief systems provide common experiences, a feeling of acceptance and belonging, and act as a protective buffer against the urge to abuse substances.

Spirituality in addiction recovery also helps protect program participants from feelings of panic that may accompany sobriety. While early stages of addiction treatment consist of abstaining from substances and fixing the damage caused by substance abuse, once a participant is sober, they may experience anxiety and wonder what to do next, now that they've reached their initial recovery goals. Spirituality can help individuals navigate their new lives, creating a framework to guide them down the path of recovery.



## WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF SPIRITUAL ADDICTION RECOVERY PROGRAMS?

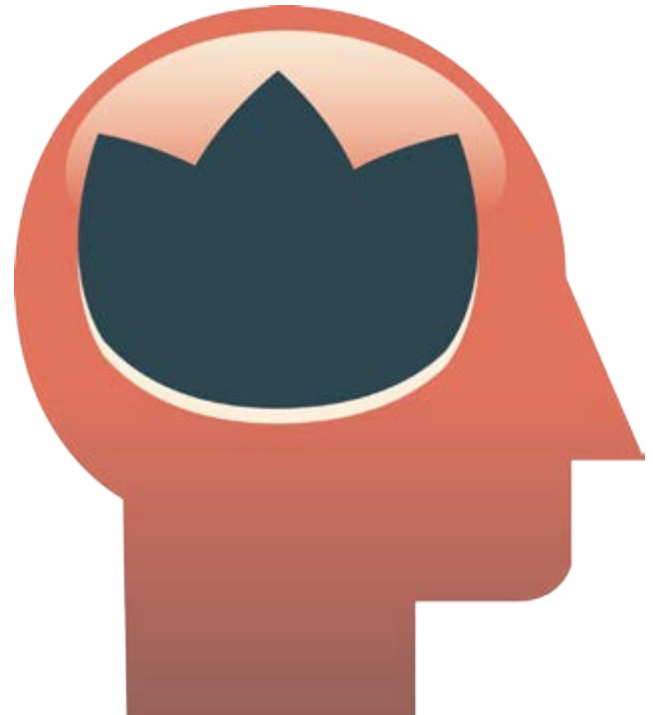
Researchers have well established that spirituality and religious involvement play a role reducing substance abuse. The research points to a number of other benefits.

Individuals in recovery report that a spiritual element in treatment programs provided them with:

- A more optimistic, hopeful outlook on life
- An increased sense of social support
- Less anxiety
- Greater resilience to stress

## FACTORS THAT PLAY A ROLE IN RECOVERY

Multiple studies have indicated a correlation between attending regular religious services and long-term recovery. This leads to the suggestion of a positive link between sobriety and spirituality. Spirituality in an addiction recovery program helps the participants gain better coping skills, which in turn helps them to remain sober. Many participants in Christian addiction treatment programs undergo a “spiritual awakening” during treatment, which provides them with strength to remain abstinent.



## CHRISTIAN AND CATHOLIC ADDICTION TREATMENT

Spiritually based treatment programs are based in a wide range of belief systems; however, in the U.S., most programs are based on Christian addiction treatment and Catholic addiction treatment.

Though each program is unique, they often share some commonalities, such as:

- Believing in God
- Practicing prayer
- Turning one's will over to a higher power, i.e. "placing the addiction in God's hands"
- Creating a moral inventory of one's self
- Admitting sins and transgressions to God
- Sharing sins and transgressions with others in the program
- Seeking forgiveness from those one has wronged due to addiction and substance abuse
- Attributing meaning to one's life experiences
- Educating participants about spiritual principles
- Relying on Biblical principles
- Participating in a faith-based community
- Helping others overcome addiction
- Carrying the message to others suffering from addiction
- Drug addiction education and counseling
- Detox and guided withdrawal process
- Relapse prevention training and techniques



## A MULTIPURPOSE MODALITY

Faith-based recovery programs both serve to treat addictions and to strengthen faith. Many Christian and Catholic addiction treatment programs are based on the assumption that individuals turn to drugs and alcohol in order to fill a gap in their life that's caused by a lack of connection to God. By adding God or a higher power back into the individuals's life, that gap will be filled, and the urge toward addictive behavior will be reduced.

If you'd like to learn more about addiction treatment and recovery options, [contact us at Alternatives in Treatment.](#)

