

## **Spirituality and health: Designing spiritual life groups for health care benefits**

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The correlation between religious practice and health benefits has been the subject of many recent studies. However, the physiological mechanisms have not been clearly identified. In a project developed at Glendale Adventist Medical Center, Spiritual Life Groups have been developed and implemented, which draw on an array of inter-disciplinary insights from psychoneuroimmunology (PNI) and complexity theory. The 12-week groups facilitate spiritual transformation to increase homeostasis-preserving influences that improve stress management. Participants also learn to achieve personal “creative breakthroughs” that restructure perceptual orientation and facilitate adaptive response. Recently, an evaluation team comprising a psychologist and sociologist described the Spiritual Life Group as “highly successful.” According to Stanley Tan and Lee Berk, PNI medical researchers, the mechanism at work in its success arises from the differential cleaving of the neuropeptide proopiomelanocortin (POMC) in the pituitary. When life circumstances are perceived as threatening POMC is cleaved into stress hormones. However, when perceptual changes occur that constructively alter perceptions of threat, POMC is differentially metabolized as beta-endorphin, which produces feelings of euphoria characteristically associated with “creative breakthroughs” and spiritual transformations. The correlation between PNI parameters and emotional affect are well established, which means improved emotional well-being correlates with improved neuroendocrine and neuroimmune function. Successful outcomes for Spiritual Life Group participants may not only mean creatively discovering more effective responses to life challenges; it may also mean better health outcomes. Nonetheless, group process employs the traditional language and imagery of spirituality to aid discovery of the benefit spiritual resources may provide in health care.

**Program Selection:** Alternative and Complementary Health Practices

**Topic Selection:** Spiritual or Self-awareness Practices Aimed at Health Promotion or Disease Recovery

**Keywords:** Religion/Spirituality, Health Promotion

**Learning Objectives:** 1. Describe a potential neuropeptide mechanism that may be involved in “creative breakthroughs” and spiritual transformations. 2. Discuss the potential health promotion benefits of successful outcomes for Spiritual Life Group participants.