

The Use of Prayer in Clinical Practice:
Implications for Professional Practice and Education

Michael J. Sheridan, PhD, MSW
Visiting Scholar and Director of Research
Center for Spirituality and Social Work
National School of Social Service
The Catholic University of America
(202) 319-6549
sheridam@cua.edu

Although research has grown considerably on spirituality and clinical practice in recent years, there has been little investigation concerning what mental health clinicians actually do with their clients and what influences their practice behaviors. One of the most controversial issues related to the inclusion of spiritually-derived interventions is the use of prayer. The current study investigated prayer-related activities and decision-making among a random sample of Licensed Clinical Social Workers in a mid-Atlantic state. A substantial percentage of clinicians reported having prayed for (55%) or having prayed/meditated with their clients (33%), while 18% stated that they did not view these practice behaviors as appropriate for clinical practice. To explore possible rationales for the use of prayer with clients, study participants were also asked to respond to four clinical vignettes, which were designed to test adherence to suggested ethical guidelines for practitioner behavior in this area (Canda, 1990; 1999). Results showed that the majority of respondents did not follow these guiding principles, but went beyond and/or fell below guidelines, both in terms of their own personal comfort with various practice behaviors and views regarding their ethical use for clinicians in general. Furthermore, over 84% reported receiving little or no instruction on religious and spiritual issues in their graduate education. Implications of study findings for the education and training of mental health practitioners relative to the ethical use of spiritually-oriented helping activities will be presented.