

# Bridging Patient and Physician Perspectives on Addiction Recovery and Spirituality



JOHNS HOPKINS  
MEDICINE

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## INTRODUCTION

- Substance use disorder (SUD) is a common medical problem, affecting nearly 20 million Americans, and it is a major cause of preventable morbidity and mortality.<sup>1</sup>
- Spirituality has been shown to be associated with recovery and positive treatment outcomes for some people with SUD.<sup>2-3</sup>
- Spirituality:** that which provides transcendent or existential meaning in life, which may include, but is not limited to, the practice of religion.<sup>4</sup>
- Little is known about patient and physician preferences regarding discussion of spirituality in the context of addiction treatment.<sup>5</sup>

## STUDY OBJECTIVE

To learn about the role of spirituality in recovery for people with SUDs, and to explore how these individuals and the primary care physicians who care for them perceive the discussion of spirituality in medical settings.

## METHODS

**Study Design:** Semi-structured interviews of 1) patients with a history of SUD and 2) primary care physicians who treat patients with SUDs.

**Setting:** Patients were recruited at the Helping Up Mission, a residential and Christian-affiliated rehabilitation center in Baltimore, MD. Physicians were recruited from from internal medicine clinics at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore, MD.

### Population:

**Inclusion criteria for patients:** Having seen a medical provider to treat their SUD at least once in the past year

**Inclusion criteria for physicians:** Having cared for patients with SUD with at least 3 visits

**Data Collection:** Interviews were conducted over Zoom by two researchers.

**Analysis:** All transcripts were read and independently coded by two researchers using standard content analysis to generate themes that reflected participants' experiences.

## RESULTS

Table 1: Demographics

Characteristic	Patients	Physicians
<b>Age (Mean)</b>	44.6 years	43.6 years
<b>Race</b>		
Black	9 (60%)	1 (11%)
White	6 (40%)	6 (67%)
Asian	0 (0%)	2 (22%)
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	15 (100%)	3 (33%)
Female	0 (0%)	6 (67%)
<b>Spiritual affiliation</b>		
Christian	7 (47%)	5 (50%)
Spiritual	6 (40%)	0 (0%)
Jewish	0 (0%)	2 (20%)
Muslim	0 (0%)	1 (10%)
Sikh	0 (0%)	1 (10%)
None	2 (13%)	1 (10%)

Figure 1: Role of Spirituality in Addiction Recovery

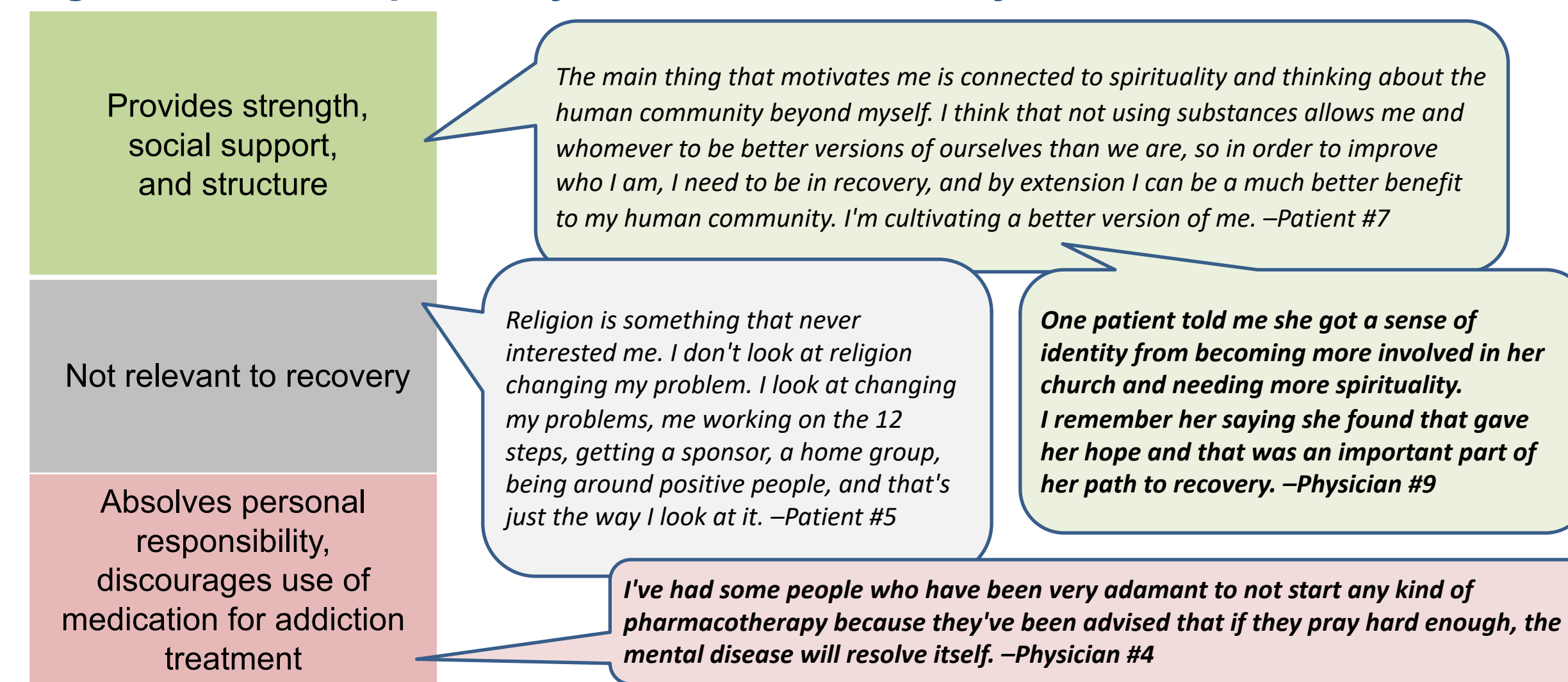


Figure 3: Perspectives on Discussing Spirituality in a Clinical Setting

### Positive

Five patients felt positively about being asked about their spirituality by a medical provider. They felt that it would help their providers understand what matters to them and the best way to support them in their recovery. All physicians interviewed were open to discussing spirituality, especially if their patients were experiencing emotional distress or struggling with mental health conditions such as addiction. They felt that understanding their patients' spirituality could help them see them as whole people, increase trust and communication about their addiction recovery, and help them connect their patients to the people and resources that would best serve them.

I think that's particularly true in addiction. And it's really your job to help make a safe space for them to feel like they can bring things up. I think the more that we see people as full people who are complicated just like we are complicated, the better. Once you know someone's faith background is a strength for them, that becomes an asset. It also gives you a place that you can rally support. You can be like, "Hey, who else in your church knows that this is going on with you? Could we find someone, you know, somebody on the ministry staff who you feel like you could trust, who you can talk to about holding you accountable?" —Physician #2

### Neutral

The majority of patients (7) felt neutral about discussing spirituality in a clinical setting, stating that they did not feel it was necessary but they would not mind discussing it.

I'd be alright with it. It wouldn't bother me. I've just never had it happen. I mean, they don't do that. But I wouldn't have a problem with it. —Patient #14

### Negative

Three patients felt negatively about being asked about their spirituality because they felt that it was not relevant to their care or feared that their provider might be judgmental. Many patients, even those who were open to discussing spirituality, had a strong perception that physicians preferred to keep medicine and spirituality separate. Physicians cited several barriers to discussing spirituality with their patients—most commonly, a lack of time, as well as the risk of damaging their rapport with their patients.

As far as in a medical setting, I don't think I would really want that. I wouldn't want a doctor or nurse to really ask me about my religion. Because I think it's a personal issue, I don't think it has anything to do with my physical needs. You know? —Patient #11

And not that I don't see faith as a helpful piece of that. But I worry if I bring it up, that I may close off a door or a rapport, trust, or openness to whatever the patient may need to bring up to the surface together. I don't always [talk about spirituality], especially if there's a time crunch or a blood pressure issue, but if things are good, and they bring up a comment, I will pick it up with them and we can share and we can pray together, but that is a minority of the experiences I get to have with my patients. —Physician #10

I think with healthcare, that's separate from any sort of religion or any sort of belief system for me. ... I mean, like I said, there's nothing in my religion or my health that would need those two to combine. But that's not the same for everyone. —Patient #8

## CONCLUSIONS

- Patients have diverse perspectives on the role of spirituality in their addiction recovery.
- Most participants did not expect medical providers to inquire into their spirituality but were open to discussing with their provider.
- Some patients and most physicians interviewed believe that discussing patients' spiritual beliefs can help their providers better understand them and support them in their recovery.
- Limitations:** Participants self-selected to participate in this study and are more likely to be spiritual or comfortable discussing spirituality. Study participants represent a limited range of gender, race, and spiritual background. Participants often equated spirituality with religion, even though they are considered distinct entities in this study.
- Implications:** Discussing patient spirituality in the context of addiction recovery can help providers better support their patients in recovery, but there is no one-size-fits-all approach to inquiring about spirituality. Experienced clinicians do not routinely ask all patients with SUDs about their spiritual orientation, but rather only when they think it could be relevant to their care or lead to a deeper understanding of a person's beliefs, motivations, and support systems.

## AUTHOR DISCLOSURES

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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