Investigating spiritual and meditation-induced crises – historical developments and current state

IGPP

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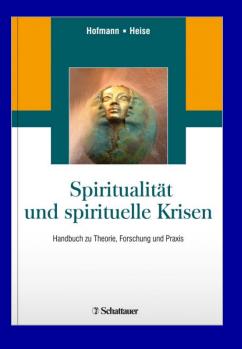
Freiburg, Germany

Symposium and Roundtable

The dark night of meditation:

Understanding and overcoming difficulties on spiritual paths and in mindfulness practice

29 February 2020, University of Edinburgh

Spirituality and spiritual crises
Handbook on theory, research and practice

Hofmann ▪ Heise

Spiritualität
und spirituelle Krisen

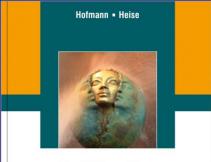Handbuch zu Theorie, Forschung und Praxis

Schattauer

Focus of the handbook

The focus is on possible problems and crises which may arise in the context of spiritual development, orientation and practice.

The DSM-IV V-Code "religious or spiritual problem" also receives special regard, for it constitutes a major interface of the topic to the psychiatric and psychological mainstream.

Details & structure of the handbook

Hofmann ▪ Heise

Spiritualität und spirituelle Krisen

Handbuch zu Theorie, Forschung und Praxis

Schattauer

- Editors: Liane Hofmann & Patrizia Heise

- 528 pages, 33 chapters, 7 sections

- 31 authors from different disciplines and fields of application

- Publishing company: Schattauer

- Financially supported by the IGPP

- (Available in German only)

Backgrounds of the handbook

- Spiritual turn: Increasing spread of individual forms of personal, experiential and non-institutional spirituality in western societies;

- Prognosis of an increase in the incidence of spiritual crises by clinical practitioners

Important representatives and stations of an increasing psychotherapeutic and scientific engagement with the topic

- William James „Varieties of religious experiences" (1901/02)

- Roberto Assagioli „Self-realization and psychological disturbances" (1930s)

- The swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961)

- Stanislav and Christina Grof „Spiritual Emergencies" (1989/ 1990)

- Lukoff, Lu & Turner, DSM-V-Code „Religious or spiritual Problem" (DSM-IV, 1994)

- Currently: massive spreading of mindfulness meditation and mindfulness based treatment approaches

The concept of spiritual emergency according to Grof and Grof:

Spiritual emergencies are episodes of crisis-type, altered states of consciousness, which particularly revolve around transpersonal and spiritual issues. Following their "holotropic model", the Grofs consider such states to be a healing self-purification process of the psyche, which is directed towards freeing itself from developmentally inhibiting and pathogenic impressions and patterns from the different layers of the unconscious. Furthermore, the spiritual emergency is understood as an expression of a spiritual opening process, as a transformative crisis of growth in the course of human development, which is directed towards more comprehensive wholeness and transpersonal levels of consciousness development.

Constitutive assumptions of the concept of spiritual emergency according to Grof & Grof

- healing potential of certain forms of ASCs and transpersonal experiences

- need for extended cartographies of the human psyche

- views and images of man from different eras and cultures are incorporated into the conceptualisation

- prognosis of an increase in the incidence of spiritual crises

- nosological uniqueness of the spiritual emergency

- continuum of spiritual emergence and spiritual emergency

Differentiating spiritual emergence from spiritual emergency

"…in spiritual emergence there is a gradual unfolding of spiritual potential with minimal disruption in psychological/ social/ occupational functioning",

whereas

"… in spiritual emergency there is an uncontrolled occurrence of spiritual phenomena with significant disruption in psychological/ social/ occupational functioning."

(Lukoff, Lu & Turner, 1995, 477)

Central objectives of the movement

- raising the awareness of the spiritual-transpersonal dimension of human experience and development

- depathologization of specific crisis-type mental states

- development and implementation of appropriate approaches to support and treatment

Indicators of a crisis of spiritual opening (Grof & Grof, 1989/1990; Assagioli, 1989/2008):

- episodes of altered states of consciousness with experiences that go beyond the personal ego-identity

- inflow of light and energy, sensations of "energies" flowing through the body

- a wide range of psycho-somatic-vegetative symptoms

- mental instability, alternation between extremely positive and negative emotional states

- strong activation of the personal and collective layers of the unconscious

(Hofmann & Heise, 2017, 142)

„The dark side of meditation", University of Edinburgh © Liane Hofmann

Indicators of a crisis of spiritual opening according to Grof & Grof and Assagioli

- confrontation with archetypal energies and mythological themes

- innerpsychic confrontation with the theme of death and dying

- intensification of inner psychological processes, withdrawal of attention from the outer world

- impairments in personal, occupational and psycho-social functioning

- unusual acoustic and visual perceptions

(Hofmann & Heise, 2017, 142)

Indicators of a crisis of spiritual opening according to Grof & Grof and Assagioli

- development of sensitive abilities, occurrence of paranormal phenomena

- increased occurrence of synchronistic events

- massive shattering of the previous understanding of self and world

- familiar belief systems break down

- fear of the unknown, fear of losing control, fear of going crazy

(Hofmann & Heise, 2017, 142)

Possible triggers of spiritual crises found in the literature

- Psycho-spiritual practices and techniques for inducing altered states of consciousness (eg. meditation)

- Life-world and situational factors:

  Emotionally stressful life events, psychological and physical extreme situations, states of physical exhaustion, intense sexual experiences, the birth of a child or the use of drugs

- Spontaneous spiritual awakening (assuming a certain stage of psycho-spiritual maturity)

(Hofmann & Heise, 2017, 144)

Possible triggers of spiritual crises found in the literature

- Overall, a strong heterogeneity of possible triggering situations:

  In principle, the entire spectrum of physiological, psychopharmacological, psychological and psycho-social inducers of altered states of consciousness has to be considered as possible triggers for processes following the pattern of a spiritual emergency

  (Hofmann & Heise, 2017, 145)

Current developments

- research-focus on meditation-induced problems and crises

- background: high popularity of mindfulness meditation and mindfulness-based treatment approaches

- for a long time exclusive focus on the positive effects of such procedures

- growing awareness that mindfulness is not helpful for everyone and under all conditions

- increasing discussion and empirical investigation of the possible negative and undesirable side effects of meditation

- more sophisticated and systematic research approaches

Examples

- Willoughby Britton: Varieties of contemplative experiences (Brown University, USA)

- Ulrich Ott & Michael Tremmel: Replication of the Britton Study with German-speaking participants (Bender Institute of Neuroimaging, Giessen University)

- Cebolla et. al (University of Valencia)

- David Treleaven: Traumasensitive Mindfulness

- Revision and refinement of the safety procedures within institutions that offer mindfulness training

- Revision and continuous improvement of preventive measures in retreat centers

Possible risk-factors

Factors that

(a) are situated **in the person** (vulnerability)

(b) are determined by the **specific context** ('setting') of the practice

(c) relate to the specific **characteristics of each method** and the **nature of its application** or

(d) are based on the personality of the teacher or the interaction between teacher and spiritual disciple/student

(Hofmann & Heise, 2017, 141; Scharfetter, 2004)

Key issues of our handbook on „Spirituality and spiritual crises"

- How did the topic "crises of spiritual development" and the concept of "spiritual emergency" develop in the history of psychology? Who were the relevant protagonists and what were their positions and motives?

- Of what relevance is the topic for our contemporary society and the health-sciences?

- What types of clinically relevant problems and crisis-prone processes of spiritual development have been described?

- How can such clinically relevant problems be evaluated in terms of diagnosis and differential diagnosis?

Key issues of our handbook

- Which individual and contextual factors predispose to problematical courses in the context of spiritual development and practice and which protective factors can be deduced as a consequence of this?

- Which scientific-empirical findings are available concerning the topic? And which are the current research desiderata?

- Which general procedures are indicated when treating people with such problems and which specific clinical strategies have been developed?

Key Issues of our handbook

- Which institutional resources are available for the understanding of spiritual crises and the support of the people concerned (clinics, counseling and information centres, networks, online resources)?

- In what way is the topic of spiritual crisis reflected in the larger picture of society?

Many thanks for your kind attention!

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Further Informations: http://www.igpp.de/eks/liane_hofmann_EN.htm

Further English language publications:

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