

“The Meaning of Life” Ageing New Zealanders talk about Spirituality

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Definitions -Spirituality and Religion

- Spirituality - reaching out for something beyond the tangible; finding “meaning” in life
- Religion - belief in a divine force

So – is religion only one aspect of spirituality?

Have the two concepts become decoupled?

A greater variety of ways to find personal meaning?

Spirituality and the life course – does spirituality increase with age?

- Increasing understanding and insight
- Generativity
- Turning inwards and disengagement
- Thoughts about death

What do New Zealanders think?

The Health, Work and Retirement Study

- A large-scale postal survey of a representative sample - people aged from 55 to 70, funded by Health Research Council
- 50 participants from the south of the North Island interviewed face-to-face in 2008 – included questions on spirituality
- 23 men and 27 women, fairly evenly spread between retired, working full-time and part-time. Average age 64

How important is spirituality to you?

- **Gender differences**
 - not at all - 12/23 men, 8/27 women
 - important or very important – 11/27 women, but 5/23 men (overall 32%)
- **Age** - No significant trends, but fewer under 60 said spirituality was important or very important and more said not at all important

What does spirituality mean to you?

- Over half mentioned **formal religion** but not necessarily church-going

I'm very strong with my beliefs but I'm not a churchy person (Ann)

I don't go to church, but I believe in heaven and after-life. It's important to think that you will meet people who have gone on before you (Sandra)

If we're talking about religion and after-life and things like that, it's hocus-pocus, superstition (Willie)

What does spirituality mean to you?

- **Belief in a Supreme Being or power** (not necessarily the Christian God)

Being aware of who I am, where I've come from and being in tune with my Maker (Martha).

There's something beyond ourselves and for me it's, I suppose it's God, who ever he or she is (Thomas)

Is there something else greater and bigger out there controlling it ? (Janice)

What does spirituality mean to you?

- **Spiritualism**

most people negative towards mediums,
“hearing voices” and reading the future

What does spirituality mean to you?

- **Nature**

You climb up a mountain on a fine day and you suddenly get a view across a beautiful landscape. You get hit by a strong emotion. I think it's all explainable and understandable but it could also be called spirituality (Charles)

I decided to walk to work today and I noticed that I could hear lots of birds singing and it's sort of connection with the world around me, but I'm not really a very spiritual person (Karen)

If there were no such thing as religion the spirituality would still be there. Looking up at the sky at night and seeing the glory of the stars, you can't help but be in awe of creation, whether it's a god did it or not (Thomas)

What does spirituality mean to you?

- **Social relationships and personal values** – the most common definition - being kind, doing the right thing for others, acting morally

To me it's an over-enveloping sense of belonging. Having a permanent attachment to your family or whanau (Eruera)

Insight into our own nature and our relationships with others and with the world we live in (Barbara)

I think there's too many hypocrites in it (formal religion). I think you can be a good person without it (Henry)

Have your views on spirituality changed in recent years?

- No – 3 out of 5 interviewees

I don't think there's a need to make a change. You set a standard, you adopt a lifestyle, you practice that. You respect others. Life goes on (James)

Well I have a sort of nagging suspicion that I should be more spiritual, but I haven't done anything about it which shows that it hasn't gone past the nagging feeling (Karen)

Have your views on spirituality changed?

- Yes - age

I'm more aware of the importance of silence and listening, not rushing round but giving space to my spirituality (Nancy)

- Yes – less

I've gradually become aware that I don't quite feel as – what's the word – 'involved'. I don't know if I can do a prayer whereas once I might have. I'm not sure how much I believe in it (Virginia)

- Yes - increased

reinforced, deepening, predominantly women. Often related to losing a relative or friends

How satisfied are you with spirituality in your life?

- The majority satisfied – including those who considered spirituality was important and those who did not
- Some not sure

Yes and no. You always keep wondering if it could be different, if there's something else but I don't generally have much time to think about it (Robert)

It would be an area that I would be interested in exploring, not in terms of conventional religion but in terms of - was there some possibility of making more meaning of life (Susan)

How satisfied are you with spirituality in your life?

- Not satisfied – 7 interviewees – all women

Maybe over the last three or four years I've stopped listening a bit and I think it's time I did a little bit more (Carol)

There can never be enough really. It depends, you know, on your journey. It changes. Spirituality is just not one thing, it's several, I think (Martha)

Probably not (satisfied) but I haven't done anything about that ...but one day I might. It's more likely to be something like Buddhism or something. A meditative connection (Karen)

Life Course Influences

- Family religious practices in childhood

I was brought up in a Christian home and so I practiced Christianity which was not spirituality at all, it was a ritual really (Susan)

- Partners

Through going to church (with a Catholic wife) I met the priest. (my wife) asked me if I wanted to convert so (I thought) “Oh, might as well” (Kenneth)

- Bereavement
 - Marriage break-up
 - Childbirth
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How do the theories stack up?

- Spirituality, in the sense of an awareness of a transcendent dimension, clearly understood by most interviewees
- Only one in three said that spirituality was important to them
- Many distinguish between spirituality and religion -they can be spiritual without being religious (decoupled)
- Some feel they can be religious (faith in God and an after-life) without being involved in formal religion

Change in spirituality over time

- Full commitment to organised religion was rare, although many had been brought up to it
- Many had not even thought about their spiritual lives. Most - both men and women, felt that it had not changed recently. The main change was movement away from organised religion
- Most, especially those who felt that spirituality was not important, were satisfied with their current position
- Life events – changes and crises - are influential, in both positive and negative ways

Does spirituality increase with age?

- Some felt they had developed a broader and more tolerant view of life
- Many exhibited complexity in their introspective insights
- There were indirect allusions to generativity
- Only one person mentioned their mortality, although bereavement sometimes triggered consideration of spirituality
- None could be described as becoming disengaged from life

Gender differences – are women more spiritual than men?

- Differences in levels and perceptions of spirituality by gender
- The women were far more likely to say that spirituality was important or very important to them and to have some commitment to organised religion
- All who were seeking greater satisfaction with their spiritual lives were women and so were those who perceived spirituality through their personal relationships

Working things out for themselves

Not an overt search for “the meaning of life”, but many actively seeking a better understanding of intangible factors in their lives. Taking an introspective view, looking within themselves, their ethics, values, experience and understanding, for the source of their spirituality

- constructive and intelligent?
- individualistic and irresponsible?
- the spiritual equivalent of the New Zealand “number eight fencing wire” approach?