

Psychic and Psycho-Spiritual Development

This information sheet discusses personal growth with reference to psychic and mystical experiences. It does not discuss the healing of other persons (see information sheet on healing).

Mishlove lists three types of psychic development (21).

Accidental: Occurs spontaneously after certain events, such as an accident, surgery, near-death experience, guru contact, or "UFO encounter".

Non-intentional: Occurs as a by-product of training for another purpose, as in yoga or meditation used to induce mystical experiences.

Intentional: Happens during training for the specific purpose of inducing psychic experiences.

Mishlove also classifies development into two systems:

Pre-scientific: for example, yoga; Buddhism.

Modern popular: for example, Spiritualism; Silva method; Transcendental Meditation; Milan Ryzl program; A Course in Miracles. (Mention of specific courses does not imply endorsement by the AIPR.)

Hierarchy of wellbeing

Personal growth refers to individual psycho-spiritual development, that is, achieving full potential and integrating the whole person.

The whole person includes three aspects: body, mind and spiritual (termed 'spirit' by Christians). Other names for these three aspects are: (i) pre-personal or subconscious; (ii) personal, conscious or self-conscious; and (iii) transpersonal or super-conscious (34).

This information sheet adopts the five-stage model of Vaughan (32,33) - physical, emotional, psychological, existential, transpersonal - but adds a psychic stage. The stages form an approximate ladder or hierarchy, though the steps on the ladder overlap. Each higher step includes all lower ones, and thus more completely describes the health and personal growth of the human individual.

Physical (material) health

Being aware of body sensations and avoiding physical pain. Includes awareness of diet and exercise. Medical practice until recently, largely focussed on physical health.

Non-acceptance of stages 2 or 3 to 6 can manifest as excessive or compulsive behaviours related to material health, for example: obesity (excess food intake); anorexia (excess dieting); compulsive shopping (5) and substance abuse. The term "excessive appetites" (22) to describe such compulsions is apt.

Emotional health

Being aware of positive and negative feelings, such as anger, sadness, love and joy, and avoiding emotional pain. This is a focus of the humanistic psychology of Rogers and Maslow (19, 25).

The emotions are controlled by the endocrine system, which is closely connected with the nervous and immune systems. Emotional health thus cannot be separated from both physical and psychological health. The motivation of behaviour cannot be separated from emotions.

Psychological (mental) health

Being aware of conscious thoughts and avoiding psychological pain. Includes life-skills such as cross-cultural communication (10, 19, 25, 31). Self-concept, that is, the individual ego, is strengthened. Intuition is balanced with critical thinking (9, 32).

Existential health

Accepting all the realities of human existence, including death, loneliness, the meaning of life, and the limitations of the ego. Includes the ability to accept body-mind unity within separate individual existence.

A person having a good job, family and social life can still feel unhappy: life has no meaning. This is called existential pain/angst/neurosis (6A,18,36,37). Access to spirituality is missing. The person has come close to a "religious conversion" experience. This condition supports the reality of spiritual experiences and their suppression in our technology society.

Transpersonal (spiritual) health

Transcendence of ego identity, that is, awareness of the mystical experience - the "higher" state of consciousness characterised by a sense of unity with the universe, ecstatic joy and intense love and insight (4,7,13,14,34). See information sheet on mystical experiences.

Frequent minor mystical experiences (peak experiences) have a major impact within society (12). Maslow says they lead to "self-actualisation".

All religions have a common mystical experience, but many paths are available, being unique expressions of the diversity of human individuals. Some persons have theistic mystical experiences (the presence of a personal God); others have impersonal mystical experiences.

Psychic (parapsychological) health

Being aware of psychic experiences such as ESP, apparitions and out-of-body experiences (20,21,26,30). These lie at the interface between normal consciousness (stage 4), and spiritual states (stage 6). Methods of psychic development are much the same as those for developing mystical experiences. Fantasy addicts, or fantasy prone persons, are the 4% of people who report regular psychic experiences such as ESP, out-of-body experiences, automatic writing, visual and auditory hallucinations (apparitions), and the sensations of being touched, of temperature changes, and of "past lives" (35). Fantasiers live in a trance much of the day. They easily develop psychosomatic symptoms, and allegedly make good healers. Rather than negative connotations, the experiences have creative potential: the novelist Charles Dickens had a rich fantasy life, including premonitions and seeing apparitions of his characters (1).

The occult dimension

Occult beliefs and rituals are based on psychic and mystical experiences. Some, such as astrology and numerology can yield personal growth, though others such as Satanism attract many disturbed people.

Psychic or mystical experiences are commonly confused with associated occult beliefs. A spontaneous experience of clairvoyance, for example, can

be described scientifically. Religious counsellors who describe such an experience as "the occult" can needlessly frighten clients.

Methods of psychic development are the same as those for mystical experiences.

The sacred and profane

Two aspects of psychic and mystical experiences can be distinguished. Awareness of this distinction avoids the problem of persons doing psychic research as a substitute for spiritual needs, thus compromising objectivity.

The profane aspect can be described scientifically. For example, the study of self-reports identifies common parameters, and biological models clarify interpretation.

The sacred (6) or numinous aspect (23) refers to the feelings of meaning and joy produced. This aspect is the basis of spiritual growth, and can only be fully described by personal experience.

Training strategies

Mishlove describes experiments to train ESP and psychokinesis (PK) as being statistically suggestive, though not proof, of a training effect (21). Methods alleged to enhance psychic ability include hypnosis, yoga, meditation, relaxation and biofeedback.

Psychic training strategies either involve under-arousal or over-arousal of the brain. Rogo's book (26) emphasises the former.

Under-arousal method

Relaxation and meditation. Mental and physical exercises, including slow breathing. The aim is to focus attention (absorption) and blank the mind. Yogis warn against developing siddhis (psychic powers) during meditation; these inflate ego and distract from enlightenment (11).

Self-suggestion (auto-hypnosis). The correspondence course of Milan Ryzl requires initial mental preparation. Biofeedback helps.

Visualisation exercises. To create and control imagery that is termed hypnagogic (waking up), eidetic (vivid, persistent) and auto-scopic (viewing image of oneself).

Dreams. In particular, ESP dreams, lucid dreams (the dreamer knows he or she is dreaming), and dreams during a mystical experience (14A). Dream content can be recalled and controlled by command just before falling sleep (or do activities that one wants to dream about that night).

Over-arousal training

Examples include hyperventilation (fast breathing) rapid dancing and chanting, and taking psychedelic drugs. These methods are less safe as they can induce experiences too suddenly, leading to psychosis. The holotropic training of the Grofs, involves closely supervised fast breathing, evocative music and focussed bodywork (7A).

Spiritual emergencies

Traumatic psychic or mystical experiences, termed a spiritual emergency (3,8), can occur during development. The Grofs list several overlapping descriptive types. If coped with, they can lead to profound growth.

Shamanic crisis. A sudden illness like the initiation of shamans. Involves symbolic experiences such as trips to the underworld, attacks by demons, death or dismemberment - then rebirth and ascent to the sky.

Kundalini awakening. A sudden mystical experience involving much energy, heat, emotions, body spasms, lights, archetypal beings and rapture. Yogis regard as cosmic energy travelling up the spine, opening up of psychic centres (chakras).

Cosmic combat between opposites. Such as Good and Evil, or Light and Darkness. Fantastic archetypal imagery involving ritual killing (24).

Psychic opening. Sudden, frequent and abundant influx of psychic experiences. Past-life experiences. Emotional experiences of being another person from the past, often from another country. Perhaps inspired beliefs in reincarnation and karma.

"Spirit guides" and channelling. The presence of a being acting as teacher and protector. Traumatic if messages received are contrary to one's current world view.

Near-death experience (see Information Sheet 9).

UFO abduction. Archetypal imagery of being abducted by beings in their spaceship.

Possession. The feeling that the body has been invaded and is now controlled by a hostile outside entity.

[The basic technique of many psychics] is similar to the non-directive humanistic therapy of Carol Rogers

Dangers in general

Spontaneous psychic and mystical experiences can have a strong emotional impact, leading to the awareness trap (28). A person may uncritically adopt the social context at the time, for example, Christian or New Age. A person intoxicated by the beauty of the experience may retreat from society and thus be unable to change it.

If an experience is induced too fast, it can become borderline or fully psychotic. Warning signs include persistent thoughts about conspiracies, such as aliens taking over the earth, or hearing voices that urge harm to oneself or others.

Ouija boards spell out messages according to tiny unconscious movements of fingers placed on the board. The messages originate in the minds of the sitters. One sensitive person can dominate the effects; or all sitters contribute (group mind effect). A suppressed thought, suddenly spelled out, can be

psychologically damaging. Spiritual medium, dream interpreter, psychic medium, clairvoyant, counsellor, Support, guidance, Karen Ellyard, Gold Coast, Queensland, Brisbane, Reiki, Angel, Meditation and teaching

In rare cases, so-called possession-like phenomena are alleged to take place, but these might be explained as dissociation.

The person who has frequent psychic experiences, fearing ridicule, cannot talk openly. This can be traumatic.

Consulting psychics

A long tradition exists of consulting psychics, channelers or mediums. At least, the client informally talks over a problem with a stranger. A non-professional therapist can help as much as a professional, especially in

the short term (2). Careful choice of psychics is a must: those met at fairs or randomly are unlikely to be helpful.

The psychic feeds back to the client what the client has already spoken about, or has deduced from observing clothes and manner (termed "cold reading").

This is like the non-directive humanistic therapy of Carl Rogers (16).

Some psychics firmly tell the client what to do, like the directive rational-emotive therapy of Albert Ellis (16). The directions may come from the psychic's "inner voice", regarded as a spirit guide.

Uncritical belief in the psychic's advice is a problem.