

Disability and Spirituality

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Abstract

Disability as a concept has been defined and explained from different perspectives over the years and cannot be regarded just with an individual focus. It should also be considered environmentally and socially. Spirituality and religion have a significant importance culturally for people with disabilities. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explain the term disability in detail, its religious and spiritual aspects, and the use of these concepts in the rehabilitation process. Research has demonstrated spirituality and religion to be two terms that are a powerful and effective personal resource for accepting and dealing with issues regarding disability. According to studies, individuals have furthermore reported having a disability to provide them with a benefit of gaining a different point of view toward life. Because religion and spirituality are vital psychological resources that cannot be underestimated, they have been used in rehabilitation psychology as a coping mechanism. For this reason, this paper aims to provide knowledge about the concept of disability, its relationship with religion and spirituality, and its use in rehabilitation psychology.

Keywords:

Disability, Spirituality, Spiritual counseling, Religion, Rehabilitation counseling

Engellilik ve Maneviyat

Öz

Engellilik, yıllar içinde farklı bakış açılarına göre tanımlanmış ve açıklanmış bir kavramdır ve sadece bireysel bağlamda ele alınmamaktadır. Aynı zamanda çevresel ve sosyal açılardan da değerlendirilmelidir. Psikolojik ve kültürel bağlamda maneviyat ve din engelli bireyler için büyük önem taşımaktadır. Bu nedenle, bu çalışmanın amacı engellilik terimini ayrıntılı olarak açıklamak, dini ve manevi açıdan ele almak ve bu kavramların rehabilitasyon sürecinde kullanımına yer vermektedir. Araştırmalar maneviyat ve dinin, engellilik ile ilgili durumları tanımak, kabullenmek ve üstesinden gelmek için güçlü ve etkili bir kaynak olduğunu göstermektedir. Yapılan çalışmalara göre, bireyler bir engel durumuna sahip olmanın yaşamlarına farklı bir bakış açısı sağladıklarını belirtmektedirler. Din ve maneviyat güçlü psikolojik kaynaklar olmalarından dolayı, rehabilitasyon sürecinde başa çıkma mekanizması olarak kullanılmaktadır. Bu sebeple, bu makale engelliliđi, bu kavramın din ve maneviyatla ilişkisini ve rehabilitasyon danışmanlıđındaki kullanımı hakkında bilgi vermeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler:

Engellilik, Maneviyat, Manevi danışmanlık, Din, Rehabilitasyon danışmanlıđı

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Being disabled can create barriers in many areas, and people with a disability can have great difficulty adapting to this situation. In order to understand this concept and deal with its potential outcomes, one's perspective on being disabled becomes a vital point. Approaches to disability and their various coping mechanisms can have considerable impact on the lives of people with a disability. Therefore, this study aims to present knowledge on the term disability, disability in monotheistic religion, its relationship between religion and spirituality, and the role of religion and spirituality in rehabilitation counseling. In this way, spirituality has been shown to play an effective and significant role in studies conducted in the field of disability.

Overview on Disability

Disability has been classified by the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) as functioning in multiple life areas and denoting: (a) impairments in body functions and structures, (b) limitations in activity, and (c) restriction in participation (World Health Organization, 2011). The concept of disability has a multidimensional and dynamic feature which has been debated from different angles for years. While disability as a term has been considered to be about individuals, it has also been discussed in terms of the social context within the process (WHO, 2011). Recently the focus of the concept of disability was withdrawn from the individual and directed to the environment and society. Disability, which had been considered as a human pathological condition, has been evaluated from a social perspective in the years that followed. Apart from being a medical condition, disability is handled within the framework of human rights (Watson, Roulstone, & Thomas, 2012).

While physical deformity status is evaluated as an individual feature, disability is defined as a social situation in which the individual's physical deformity is emphasized. In other words, the disadvantages experienced are not due to how individuals' bodies or minds work. The main problem is the barriers experienced from the physical, programmed, planned, or attitude factors in one's environment and social life. When viewed from the social perspective, existing barriers can be removed in line with reducing or eliminating the disadvantages experienced by persons with disabilities (Fitzimons, 2017; Hollomotz, 2013; Thomas, 2002).

Religious values, rituals, or spirituality, being common denominators socially, are also important for individuals with disabilities. On this point, first distinguishing between spirituality and religion is quite important. Spirituality and religion are concepts often used synonymously with each other. Although these concepts have a strong relationship, their different structures should be emphasized. Spirituality contains a multidimensional system that includes transcendence, connection, meaning, purpose, beliefs, or behaviors. This concept may be related to a religion or may consist of a completely separate structure (Kim, 2002). While religion focuses

on institutional beliefs and rituals, spirituality focuses on the personal and individual dimensions of one's relationship with a Higher Power (Zinnbauer, 1997).

Disability in the Religious Context

Different religious perspectives on disability can affect people's thoughts, emotions, and actions toward the disability. That is why examining how different religions are able to address disability has importance. This section discusses a common framework on the view of monotheism towards disability. The stories in the religious books reveal their perspectives on disability. The verses and stories emphasize that behaviors toward people with disabilities should be one of respect. On the other hand, however a person's disability is thought to result from one's bad actions (Baybal, 2015). In Judaism, disability is interpreted as the individual or the family being cursed as a result of a sin committed (Baybal, 2015). The relevant part about this from Deuteronomy, a sacred text in Judaism, is as follows:

The Lord will afflict you with madness, blindness, and confusion of the mind. At midday you will grope about like a blind person in the dark. You will be unsuccessful in everything you do; day after day you will be oppressed and robbed, with no one to rescue you (Deuteronomy, 28 : 28-29).

Christianity has a point of view that does not distinguish or exclude people with disabilities:

But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind (Luke, 14:13).

However, people with disabilities are said to not be very included in religious places of worship. According to some sources, Christianity as in Judaism also considers a disability to result from sin (Otieno, 2009). From this perspective, blindness or deafness is considered a metaphor for sin. In Islam, verses directed to those with disabilities and the needy are frequently encountered. Qur'anic verses and hadiths show that a sensitivity towards individuals with disabilities should be found. For people with disabilities not to feel humiliated, the Qur'an contains verses in this context (Karagöz, 2005):

For Allah and His Messenger, if they give advice (to people) there is no sin for the weak, the sick, and those who cannot find anything to spend (in war). For there is no way (responsibility) against the ones doing good. Allah is the most forgiving and merciful.

The importance of social support and solidarity is frequently mentioned in hadiths, which report that society should support people with disabilities.

It is charity that you guide the person who asks for a way. Helping a weak person is charity. It is charity to express the merit of those who have difficulty speaking (İbn Hanbel, V, 152, 169).

The difficulties experienced by those with a disability are considered to be rewarded by God (Işık, 2013; Özer, 2015). In the Quran, the patience people with disabilities have for the challenges they meet is regarded as a sign that they will be rewarded:



And We will surely test you with something of fear and hunger and a loss of wealth and lives and fruits, but give good tidings to the patient, who, when disaster strikes them, say, "Indeed we belong to Allah, and indeed to Him we will return. Who, when disaster strikes them, say, "Indeed we belong to Allah, and indeed to Him we will return" (Qur'an, 2:155–157).

One can conclude that monotheistic religions consider being disabled as a punishment for a sin committed or as a reward that to be received later. A similar situation can be found when considering Buddhism. According to karmic philosophy, individuals who made mistakes in a previous life are punished by becoming a person with a disability in the next life (Chen, Kotbungkair, & Brown, 2015). This situation, which is referred to in Buddhism as the concept of *in-nen*, implies that mistakes made in the previous life will result in a direct or indirect situation (Turan & Battal, 2017). The Lotus Sutra, one of the holy texts of Buddhism, contains the following:

The man's wife who violates the Lotus Sutra will give birth to a mute child; if a woman violates the Lotus Sutra, her child will share the same fate (Turan & Battal, 2017, p. 11).

As can be seen, religions have various verses about disability, people with disabilities, and how to approach them. In addition to the religious context, disability should also be examined within a spiritual context as this is a crucial coping mechanism for disability issues. Therefore, detailed information about the relationship between disability and spirituality and different studies that have been performed about this are demonstrated below.

Relationship between Disability and Spirituality

Disability is a phenomenon that can be experienced at the moment of birth or later in life. Serious illnesses, injuries, or disablements are often considered a potential turning point in life. Individuals encounter some obstacles and problems in almost every area of life through this experience. Many factors exist for dealing with these problems. Facing a disability causes people to search for meaning and ask difficult questions. In this context, spiritual and religious coping skills are known to be an important tool in this quest (Schulz, 2005).

Individuals go through the phases of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance when they experience mourning, loss, or illness in their lives (Kubler-Ross, 1969). Individuals with disabilities are also seen to go through these phases in coping with the loss process and their obstacles or in accepting being disabled. Spiritual and religious orientations are important coping sources for accepting being disabled (Rodriguez, Glover-Graf, & Blanco, 2013). Treolar (2002) stated spiritual beliefs to be effective in dealing with disability and in making sense of disability.

For people with disabilities, spirituality provides purpose, awareness, bonds, creativity, and acceptance (Boswell, Hamer, Knight, Glacoff, & McChesney, 2007).

They can consider disability as a gift because they think it was given to them by God as part of their life purpose. This experience creates or raises awareness in individuals with disabilities because individuals with increased insight into their own identities develop awareness about the environment and nature. At the same time, the experience of having a disability helps them to listen to and connect with other people's stories, as opposed to disconnecting from others. In this way, the experience of having a disability helps individuals with disabilities to establish and develop relations with people and society (Rippentropa, Altmaierb, Chena, Founda, & Keffalaa; 2005; Boswell, Hamer, Knight, Glacoff, & McChesney, 2007).

When considering in more detail how spirituality affects individuals with disabilities, multiple dimensions have been mentioned that make up the concept of spirituality. These can be listed as transcendence, meaning, purpose, and bonds. The transcendental aspect of spirituality indicates that spirituality is separate from the physical, social, or psychological aspects of life and that spirituality provides individuals with the capacity to rise above the conditions of these other contexts. Spirituality is thought to provide the opportunity to help people discover meaning and purpose, both in general and in their own lives (Kim, 2002). Establishing meaningful relations reveals the importance of the concept of bonds. In this context, one needs to consider the relationship and connection to one's self, others, the world, and the supreme power, respectively (do Rozario, 1997; Dyson, Cobb, & Foreman, 1997; Schulz, 2005).

Self-connectedness. Having strong self-communication or being in touch with one's self provides an integrative perspective to the individual. Strong self-awareness is an important factor in forming a sense of integrity. In this way, a person cannot only assess the self with certain characteristics or patterns but can also see a self beyond this. For people with disabilities, this situation is a bit more important. Therefore, individuals can see themselves beyond being disabled; they are in the process of accepting themselves completely. Thus, integrating the disability with one's own self occurs (Dyson, Cobb, & Foreman, 1997). Individuals who can wholly self-evaluate can reach their internal resources. Do Rozario (1997) has defined the use of hope and self-control as internal sources. Therefore, access to these resources is ensured through self-connectedness.

Connectedness with other people. Positive social support is one factor that increases the psychological well-being and coping skills of people with disabilities (do Rozario, 1997). Having contact with family, friends, neighbors, or other people can be counted as providing this positive effect. All individuals who communicated are part of spirituality. Therefore, individual growth or development cannot occur independently from the social environment or society. In the social environment, when no negative attitudes, labeling, or exclusion is encountered, an inclusive environment takes shape and thus adaptation becomes easier (Schulz, 2005).



Connectedness with the world: The relationship individuals with disabilities have with the world is a necessary factor for transformation. They need to establish their own rights and strive to meet their own needs by taking advantage of human rights movements. Disability rights movements have also revealed a conflict within the world and society (Dyson, Cobb, & Foreman, 1997; Schulz, 2005).

Connectedness with the Supreme Power. Another part of spirituality is to be connected with the Supreme Power. The concept of power mentioned here can be called God when viewed from the perspective of faith or religion. But for some individuals, this may be called science or technology rather than a religious figure, and for others it can be called money or personal gain. What is important here is that the concept of Supreme Power has a great meaning or purpose for the person (Dyson, Cobb, & Foreman, 1997).

Individuals living with a disability or chronic illness have stated being able to access power within themselves through prayer and hope in the afterlife. People with disabilities say that this experience has given them an inner journey, a deep meaning, spiritual growth, a special quality, and uniqueness to their lives (Selway & Ashman, 1998; Boswell, Knight, Hamer, & McChensey, 2001; do Rozario, 1997). In short, being disabled has led them to a spiritual path by helping them believe they have a purpose and aim for meaning and understanding in their lives (Kaye & Kaghavan, 2002). Meanwhile, when consider the problems people with disabilities experience in regard to spirituality, the negative perception many individuals with disabilities have about themselves, other people's attitudes, and the exclusion the disabled come across in societies with common beliefs wear down their relationship both with themselves and other people. The negative life events they encounter in the partnership of faith may bring about alienation from religion and / or the Supreme Power (Dyson, Cobb, & Foreman, 1997; Schulz, 2005).

Spirituality in Rehabilitation Psychology

Recent research has shown religious rituals, spirituality, and meditations to have very positive results for individuals with disabilities (Johnston, Glass, & Oliver, 2007; Kilpatrick & McCullough, 1999). Experiencing disability, which seriously affects the flow of life, brings about a spiritual development by revealing the search for meaning in individuals. Through this experience, facing the question "Why me?" brings the spiritual needs that exist in the individual to the surface. Thus, a process of rehabilitation begins in focusing on spiritual needs such as belonging, transcendence, search for meaning and purpose, and creativity. Questioning one's relationship with the self or with the Supreme Power happens for the first time with this experience (Bowers, 1987).

Idler (1995) conducted a qualitative study that revealed the relationship among religion, spirituality, and health in individuals with sudden illness and injuries. In that

study, the sources of religious and spiritual support were presented as themes in the health problems experienced. In a related study, five basic religious and spiritual changes were found. Having experienced a direct illness or injury, the participants expressed their experiences as spiritual awakenings, that God has a purpose for them, that the disease or sudden injury had given meaning to life, and that they searched for meaning in their suffering. McColl's (2000) research examined the experience of spirituality in the face of the challenge of being disable. The results of that study suggested that participants experience spirituality under four main themes. They emphasized spirituality to be important in creating meaning for humanity and their mortality and to not consider themselves immortal. The fact that they see being disabled as a mission or task is the second theme formed by the spiritual dimension. Participants in that study stated that, even if they did not know exactly what had happened, they believed that the injuries or disabilities had created a special purpose. The third theme in the spiritual experience of being disabled is that this situation had been the result of a moral ordeal for a life not truly lived. In addition to the difficulties created by the disability, the participants reported suffering confusion, guilt, and shame because of the ordeal. The final theme from the participants is that the disability is a warning sent to them from the universe. Those individuals believe that this life was sent to them as a message to make a change.

Disability studies have observed that individuals with disabilities often experience problems such as depression and anxiety disorders and that their level of well-being is affected by their disability. The acquisition of psychological well-being is facilitated by accepting disability and seeing it as part of one's identity. In this context, spirituality supports the person accepting the loss and internalizing it by reconciling with one's self. Spirituality and religion are known to be effective in reducing the negative emotions caused by being disabled (Boswell, Hamer, Knight, Glacoff, & McChesney, 2007; Cantin, 2018).

Conducted studies suggest that rehabilitation specialists and researchers should consistently consider the religious beliefs and practices of people with disabilities. Ray (2004) stated that religious belief must be one of the four components to consider when evaluating the coping skills of people with disabilities or illnesses. Three common coping mechanisms exist that rehabilitation specialists use for dealing with stress factors: obtaining information about their situation (more information about conditions and treatments), internal resources (personality traits), and social support. However, Ray (2004) said that spirituality should be considered as a coping mechanism, too.

Pandya (2019) conducted research on stating rehabilitation counselor's perspectives about spirituality. It included 1,269 practitioners from 15 countries, and the results showed that great numbers of practitioners across countries tend to use a spiritual approach in their cases. Furthermore, the study demonstrated that spiritual views and techniques provide a useful resource for meeting the social goals of the rehabilitation process.



Spiritual Resources

Individuals tend to use spirituality or spiritual values as a psychological resource in their own lives. The effects of spirituality are seen particularly in negative life events, such as traumatic situations, mourning, and loss. In general terms, individuals with disabilities are also seen to have integrated spirituality into their lives in many aspects. Aside from the positive aspects of using spiritual and religious resources, knowing the aspects that may affect it negatively is necessary. Pargament and Brant (1998) stated that religious sources can have disadvantageous consequences for individuals coping with disability. The first of these was described as dissatisfaction with God or divine power. People with disabilities think they have been abandoned by God or divine power. Therefore, they are surrounded by feelings of anger, helplessness, and despair. The second effect is called a negative religious reframing. Individuals think that they are experiencing the consequences of bad karma or are being punished by God. Using their sources in a religious sense is very difficult for them because they believe they have deliberately been given this situation.

Religious objects, symbols, and rituals are important for individual beliefs. These provide a psychological relief to both individuals with illness or disabilities and their families. Spiritual or religious studies and reading religious verses people with disabilities like can provide them with both a religious attachment and a sense of tranquility. Candles and various belief symbols can be called coping sources depending on one's religious beliefs (Kaye & Raghavan, 2002). Spirituality enables one to relate specifically to God and society and helps one cope with stressful situations. Thus, individuals believe the pain and suffering they have means something (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). While perceiving God has been used as a source of power and relaxation for people, places of worship provide social support by establishing positive relations with society (Kaye & Raghavan, 2002; do Rozario, 1997). One's ability to accept and feel whole makes dealing with being disabled easier. The moral resources supporting this have been explained by Zeleznik (1975) as:

- spiritual friendships
- society
- embracing life
- writing
- reading
- art
- nature
- prayer
- humor

These resources can help one respect and accept self-integrity. Honest, empathetic, and compassionate clergymen that accept individuals as they are and the communities or societies that make up the focus of religious belief are the main sources for this. Places of worship such as churches and mosques are important for providing a sense of belonging and social support. Increasing awareness by focusing on the here and now contributes to accepting life as it is. Seeing life as it is is the first step in self-acceptance. Thus, living life as it is can become possible. Meditation and awareness exercises make it easy to be in the moment. Writing, reading, art, and nature are among the elements that lead individuals to experience and express their transcendental experiences. Communication with the natural environment allows for a link from a larger window. In this way, creativity, beauty, and feelings of gratitude can be reached. Prayer is a tool that is based on transcendence resources. Prayer, which provides a meditative feature, at the same time provides a calming effect by helping the flow of emotions. Humor helps in dealing with negative and stressful life events thanks to the different perspectives it creates (Underwood, 2000; Zeleznik, 1975).

The belief in a higher power is a sufficient resource for many religious individuals in coping with their disability. Spirituality can be used as a powerful method for dealing with illness or disability. Individuals with disabilities feel desperate because they cannot control their situation. They mention that religion provides an indirect mechanism for this problem in their difficult experiences. People who have faith and worship or meditate in this sense feel that they have control and therefore experience psychological relief (Koenig, 2012). In addition, Könczei and Sandor (2019) stated that spiritual approaches and rituals make individuals more successful and effective and also enable them to reach higher levels on dealing with the issues of being disabled.

Accessibility to Spirituality and Religion

Carter (2017) stated that different restrictions and obstacles are found to being able to access religion for people with disabilities. He listed these obstacles as architectural barriers that can cause problems such as wheelchair access, the labeling attitude of society, communicative barriers such as a lack of sign language, or being from religious rituals. The fact that transportation to places of worship, toilets, and religious communities remain limited has caused those with physical, visual, hearing and other disability groups to be excluded. These barriers restrict the ability of individuals with disabilities to carry out their religious beliefs (Vogel, Polloway, & Smith, 2006). Although religious books contain verses about including individuals with disabilities in society, sufficient access to religious experiences is not found (Carter, 2017; Kim, 2002).

Vander Plaats (2016) developed a five-stage theory reflecting the attitudes of individuals with disabilities and religious communities. By using this theory, attitudes and behaviors towards disability were defined in religious societies. Accordingly,



attitudes and behaviors towards individuals with disabilities in religious communities were stated to be found as follows:

- ignorance about people with disabilities
- pity for people with disabilities
- caring for people with disabilities
- making friends with people with disabilities
- working with people with disabilities

These steps can help religious societies produce measures or implement action plans by recognizing the part they are involved in.

Griffin, Kane, Taylor, Francis, and Hodapp (2011) studied the characteristics of religious communities that embrace an inclusive view. As a result, they defined five dimensions of inclusiveness in the context of religion:

- determined leaders who include people with disabilities
- use of educational resources to identify disability issues
- close relations with disability institutions
- talking positively in religious education about people with disabilities
- more commitment to social justice

It is very important to evaluate these different dimensions and implement a more inclusive policy for people with disabilities. In this context, a multicultural perceptiveness applied to individuals with different racial and ethnic origins in religious societies can be used in future studies to be carried out on people with disabilities.

Conclusion and Evaluation

Spirituality and individuals' states of mind have been seen to be highly interactive. In terms of emotional well-being, research has revealed spiritual factors to have a negative relationship with depression, anxiety, general psychological distress, uncertainty, hopelessness-anger, and hostility. In addition, religion and spirituality are seen to reduce social isolation or loneliness by providing positive social support and facilitating social cohesion. However, studies in the field of disability and rehabilitation indicate that the spiritual needs of the clients or patients have not been adequately met (Baider et al., 1999; Nosek, Huges, Taylor, & Taylor, 2006.)

Assessing whether or not barriers exist to participating in practicing faith for persons with disabilities, how these barriers can be overcome, and how alternatives can be found are important. Belief and spirituality are seen to have an important contribution in the process of healing after a disease or disability that has disrupted the flow of life. Research has shown that spiritual or religious coping skills are effective in the problems encountered in disability. In this context, one should not ignore the influence spirituality and religion have in the field of counseling, including rehabilitation counseling. Furthermore, developing academic publishing on the role of spirituality in rehabilitation counseling should be supported, especially in Turkey. Therefore, giving room to spiritual values seems necessary for meeting the need for spiritual values in terms of people with disabilities in Turkey, in disability studies, and in practice.

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