Spiritual Crisis in the U.K.[1]

What is 'spiritual crisis?' Briefly, it can be described as an intense awakening to spiritual ideas and experiences that, whilst ultimately leading to personal transformation and growth, can be difficult to cope with or understand at the time. This process is not well understood and is often pathologised. Catherine Lucas (2011) reports that the experience can make daily life very difficult for those going through it and result in unnecessary hospitalisation, isolation, and an inability to work. She lists its characteristics as: being very intense, difficult to cope with, causing confusion of inner and outer worlds, with pains and trouble sleeping, powerful emotions, a sense of loss or ego-death, ego-inflation, confused thinking, a sense of the importance of symbolism and myth, meaningful coincidences, seeing flashbacks or spirits, and feeling strong energies. This can include anomalous experiences such as kundalini, Near-Death Experiences (NDEs), and mystical states, amongst many others.

The terms 'spiritual crisis', 'spiritual emergence', and 'spiritual emergency' tend to be used interchangeably. The phrase 'spiritual emergency' was used by Stanislav and Christina Grof in their book *Spiritual Emergency* (1989). They wanted to emphasise the positive aspects of the experience, 'This positive potential is expressed in the term *spiritual emergency*, which is a play on words, suggesting both a crisis and an opportunity of rising to a new level of awareness, or "spiritual emergence" (Grof, 1989, p. x). In 1980 Christina Grof founded the Spiritual Emergence Network in the U.S.

In 1994 David Lukoff, Francis Lu, and Robert Turner were instrumental in getting spiritual crisis recognised in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-IV). The DSM-IV includes the category of 'Religious or Spiritual Problem' and refers to examples such as a loss, questioning, or conversion to a new faith or other spiritual values. Crucially, this category is a 'v-code', that is, a condition that is not pathological but can be misconstrued as such.

In 2004 the Spiritual Crisis Network (SCN) was set up in the U.K. by Lucas, who had experienced spiritual crisis herself. According to Lucas techniques and strategies that can help someone through spiritual crisis include; grounding, social contact, helping others, surrender to the process, medication, diet, exercise, reducing spiritual practices, mindfulness, creativity, journaling, ritual or ceremony, acceptance and validation, and finding meaning in myth. Further examples and discussion of the SCN perspective can be found in a special issue of *Asylum* magazine (2011).

The SCN has a website offering advice to those affected by spiritual crisis at http://www.spiritualcrisisnetwork.org.uk. The network is run by a small group of volunteers who are interested in experiencers, or supporters of people going through, spiritual crisis. These volunteers operate an e-mail contact service on a monthly rota basis and there is also an online discussion group on psychosis and spirituality. A next step, currently being looked at, would be to offer access to therapists. The network is trying to establish local peer-support groups around the U.K. for experiencers, carers, and therapists to come together and share their knowledge and

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[1] This is a pre-print version of the article published in the *Journal for the Study of Spirituality*, 3, 2, 168-171.

experience. One such group has been successfully established in London, with numerous new groups in the early stages of development in Sheffield, Norfolk, Stroud, and Newcastle. The SCN perspective is that the distinction between a psychotic experience and a spiritual, or mystical experience, is far from clear-cut. Indeed, labelling such experiences as psychosis, or mental health problems, may pathologise the process and result in unnecessary stigma, which itself is counter-productive. Indeed, Clarke advocates using the terms 'transliminal' (Clarke, 2008), and 'shared' and 'unshared' reality (Clarke, 2010), as a neutral way of talking about these experiences, whilst Lucas (2011) refers to 'mystical psychosis' and the 'dark night of the soul'. However, the SCN does not take an anti-psychiatry stance and accepts that medication can be helpful and may have a role to play in managing the process. In short, although difficult and challenging, these experiences are viewed as meaningful and potentially transformative for the individual. Apart from these general principles, the SCN does not promote any particular explanatory framework for understanding spiritual crisis. Grof's work provides one such framework, but Lucas and Clarke each provide their own perspectives. Lucas adopts a more spiritually-oriented framework whereas Clarke utilises a more cognitive one. Both, however, accept that spirituality, and in particular spiritual crisis, is a natural and potentially transformative process that, managed correctly, can lead to growth and should be honoured not pathologised. The SCN is also keen to network with similar organisations and is arranging a conference at the University of Sunderland on 28th June 2013. The conference title is 'Finding Solid Ground: investigating mental health, spirituality, and extreme human experiences'.

Lucas has commented that, 'More research is needed in order for mainstream mental health services to really take the phenomenon of spiritual crisis on board' (2011, P73). With this in mind the SCN has also recently set up a research group. The remit of this group is to provide statistics on the frequency and type of requests received by the SCN, to undertake more in-depth research, and to publicise its findings, in order to inform and guide the development of the network.

Other organisations relevant to this area include the Royal College of Psychiatry Special Interest Group, the Hearing Voices Network inspired by the work of Marius Romme and Sondra Escher (1993), and Soteria. There is also an online forum, inspired by Steve Taylor, author of *Out of the Darkness* (2011), for discussing 'awakening' experiences. In addition to Grof's transpersonal model and therapeutic training in Holotropic Breathwork, another allied therapeutic approach is Roberto Assagioli's (1965) psychosynthesis. Training in psychosynthesis, and access to counsellors, is provided by *The Psychosynthesis and Education Trust*, the *Institute of Psychosynthesis*, and *Re-Vision* in London.

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Websites

- The Hearing Voices Network: http://www.hearing-voices.org
- Institute of Psychosynthesis: http://www.psychosynthesis.org
- Isabel Clarke's website: http://www.isabelclarke.org/psychosis_spirituality
- Out of the Darkness online forum: http://outofthedarkness.site50.net/index.php
- The Psychosynthesis & Education Trust: http://www.psychosynthesis.edu
- Re-Vision Centre for Integrative Psychosynthesis: http://www.re-vision.co.uk
- Royal College of Psychiatrists Special Interest Group: http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/college/specialinterestgroups/spirituality.aspx
- SCN Website and conference details: http://www.spiritualcrisisnetwork.org.uk
- Soteria website: http://www.soterianetwork.org.uk
- Steve Taylor's website: http://stevenmtaylor.co.uk

Biography

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