

The Relationship Between Spirit and Matter: Can Shamanism Help Us Heal?

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the relationship between spirit and matter, specifically in relation to shamanic and spiritual healing. Shamanic healing is a primarily intangible model of healing, engaging patients on a spiritual level more than a physical one. One goal of this paper is to look at ways to integrate spiritual and physical healing techniques. Shamanism provides a valuable example for several reasons: shamanic healing is practiced throughout the world, the techniques of disparate cultures are surprisingly similar, and it can be used in conjunction with allopathic techniques.

Shamanic healing is based on principles of animism, on entering altered states of consciousness, and on working directly with spirit assistance. The cosmologies, mythologies, beliefs about the afterlife and daily practices of shamanic cultures are discussed. Methods of diagnosis are reviewed, as are specific healing therapies, including soul retrieval, extraction, power animal retrieval, laying on of hands, and psychopomp work. Ceremonial healing is ubiquitous in shamanic practices and some practitioners today are incorporating ritual healing in their medical practices. Other factors that are important to successful healing, including the compassion of the healer and the power of sound and language when used by the shaman, are reviewed.

Information from scholars and anthropologists regarding the spiritual basis of shamanic healing and shamanic beliefs concerning health is discussed. The work of contemporary practitioners, both native healers and core shamanic practitioners, is examined. I examine different ways healers are incorporating shamanic techniques in their work, and discuss the challenge of utilizing ancient methods, widely unknown in western culture, in modern medical settings. Scientific studies measuring the effects of shamanic healing on human bodies and bodies of water are reviewed.

Some forms of shamanic healing are analogous to non-local or prayer based healing. A variety of scientific studies indicate that interdenominational prayer positively affects the health of those prayed for. Synopses of some of these studies help illuminate the possibilities for spiritually based healing methods to impact patients today.

The shamanic concept of living in harmony with nature is discussed in relation to the recent movement called ecological medicine. The scientists involved in this movement are investigating a view of health based on the importance of living in balance with ourselves, each other, and our environment. This is a quintessentially shamanic philosophy. By combining the ancient spiritual beliefs and techniques of the shamans with the awareness and technical skills of modern doctors and scientists, we can begin to create a bridge between science and spirituality, between traditional healing practices and allopathic methods, and between our bodies and our spirits.