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IDENTITY, SCHEMAS, AND ADAPTIVE CHANGE

SELF-AFFIRMATION FOR USE BY SPIRIT-EMPOWERED
CHRISTIAN COUNSELORS

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Keywords *self-affirmation, schemas, motivation, Spirit-empowered, counseling*

Abstract

Recent dramatic events, coupled with increased connectivity via technology, have led to many shifts in global culture. These shifts have been accompanied by an increased awareness of mental health needs, including those of Christians. Although people may realize they need to make important life changes for their mental and behavioral health, it is not always clear where they should begin. Moreover, when they recognize a need for change, this experience is often perceived as threatening. People's innate discomfort with uncertainty then requires that they fight both the temptation to avoid the truth about themselves and the practical obstacles that naturally make growth difficult. Many Christian counselors and clients acknowledge their need for help from the Holy Spirit to discern what changes need to be made and also how to implement these changes for their health and well-being. This process often requires transforming schemas to accommodate clients' new insights into the self and interactions with the environment. Self-affirmation consistent with an applied biblical hermeneutic can help focus these clients on Christ-like values and steady them in the face of ambiguity and change. Grounding themselves in God's truth can thus be instrumental for clients actively seeking to renew their minds and motivate themselves to pursue necessary change as they seek God's best for their lives.

Introduction

The last decade has seen an increase in mental health issues. Already at peak levels prior to the pandemic, mental health concerns have increased as people have

become less concerned about stigmas historically associated with seeking therapy (Baines, 2022; <https://www.mhanational.org/issues/state-mental-health-america>; <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/01/special-kicking-stigma>). This development presents a unique challenge for mental health professionals, including Spirit-empowered counselors,¹ whose growing number of Christian clients desire treatment that integrates a biblically-based applied hermeneutic (e.g., Baucke, & Seifert, 2022; Lloyd et al., 2022; McBain, 2021). Moreover, technology-supported communication and connectivity, especially via the popular use of social media,² illuminate recent challenges to cultural values and the need to support people who are negotiating changing ideals (e.g., Kagema, 2022). Value-focused self-affirmation³ is one tool that can help people who are working to achieve mental health (Cohen & Sherman, 2014).

The Holy Spirit as the Ultimate Mental Health Advocate

Increasing awareness of mental health has created new opportunities for Christian counselors to participate in the spiritual growth of their clients. Specifically, in supporting their clients' work toward healthy, adaptive outcomes, the counselor enters the change process with the client, not only open to but actively seeking help from the Holy Spirit to empower both counselor and client in doing this work (French, 2021). Mental health professionals in the Spirit-empowered community carry out their praxis with the aim of bringing God's healing power to the counseling relationship. This restorative process relies on the active role of the Holy Spirit to facilitate important transformative changes through the soul work done with clients (Appleby & Ohlschlager, 2013; Buker, 2021; Decker et al. 2021; Sisemore, 2013; Timbers & Hollenberger, 2022; Worthington et al., 2013).

According to scripture, a marker of Christ-followership is the gift of a *new heart* (Ezekiel 36:26-27; Jeremiah 31:33; Hebrews 8:10) along with the invitation to change the way one thinks so that schemas (see below), or understandings of truth, align with God's values instead of conforming to the pattern of thinking prevalent in the popular culture (Romans 12:2). Christians are admonished in Proverbs 4:23, "Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life" (*New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition*, 2021). Scripture teaches that the renewal of the thinking mind sparks the transformative process by which Christians learn God's will (Romans 12:2) and how to live out their creative purpose as expressions of the divine personality (Ephesians 2:10). This goal to pursue God's will for intentional wholeness in mind, body, spirit, work, rest, play, and relationships extends to all Christ followers and reaches across the lifespan. Thus, helping people to integrate robust, biblically-informed schemas regarding their identity as God's children with proven mental and behavioral health practices supports whole-person well-being (Buker, 2021; Timbers & Hollenberger, 2022; Watson, 2011; Watson & Watson, 2013).

The Need for Change and Perceived Psychological Threat

Clients generally initiate counseling treatment to address a perceived problem, which often proceeds by helping clients sort through their thoughts, feelings, and desires, considering how their beliefs and habits of mind and action may inform their present circumstances and indicate the need for change, or an adaptation, in response to the problem. Sometimes this is a simple, straightforward task in which an adaptive change is made with relative ease. Often, however, the process is arduous. For many, recognizing a need for change is only the first step in a long journey that will challenge their sense of identity as they examine their schemas—or the beliefs they have held—and the decisions they have made based upon these beliefs up to a crisis point. It is not uncommon to feel uncomfortable during this time and to perceive information about the problem as psychologically threatening (e.g., Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Nash et al., 2011; Putarek et al., 2019; Steele, 1988). Negotiating this uncertainty can result in a range of negative outcomes spanning from disappointment, frustration, and despair. Alternatively, this “gift of crises” can yield potential gains in character, resilience, faith, and hope (Buker, 2021, p. 45).

Whether treatment outcomes are evaluated positively or negatively depends in part upon how the need for change is approached. Problems are typically accompanied by ambiguity, and the unknown can be perceived as threatening to the self's sense of identity and security (e.g., Gray, 1987; Nash et al., 2011; Putarek et al., 2019; Watson et al., 2021). Unless dealt with effectively, this perceived threat may inadvertently tempt clients to protect themselves in a dysfunctional way by avoiding issues instead of resolving them (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). Reminding people of who they are and what they value can help steady them in the face of a problem so that they can embark on the adaptive change process. For example, Schumann et al. (2014) found that simply asking people if they affiliated with a particular religion decreased their hostile responses when they were exposed to an experimentally-manipulated threat. Self-affirmation is another way to direct participants' attention to their values in ways that facilitate “Spirit-centered” responses (Buker, 2021, p. 33). Integrating a biblically-informed schema for one's identity as a child of God lends the Christian client additional support to face the change process. Importantly, self-affirmation is not intended to target self-esteem, but rather works to refocus client attention away from the perception of an overwhelming psychological threat to instead work productively toward necessary changes (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Napper et al., 2009). In fact, when participants realize they are being led to self-affirm, interventions tend to be less effective (Sherman et al., 2009). The purpose of this article, then, is to discuss value-focused

self-affirmation as a tool to help clients move forward and enact important adaptive changes. In agreement with the goals set forth by Walker et al. (2021) to “build bridges,” this proposition is set forth specifically:

- (a) to...advance the conversation about the nature of change in the Spirit-empowered world, (b) to build bridges between science and faith in scholarship, and (c) to understand better the integration of the Spirit into the change process to improve our counseling interventions.
(p. 4)

The following questions will guide this discussion. First, how do schemas inform one’s worldview and behavior? Second, can value-based self-affirmation support clients’ sense of self-integrity and thus facilitate needed accommodations to their existing belief systems? Third, how can a biblically-informed schema regarding identity be useful for Christian counselors supporting this work?

Schema Transformation and Change

Even when change is desired, the process is difficult. Moreover, the ability to learn from experience can be a double-edged sword as experiences inform people’s understandings about the way the world works and how they fit into it. Although this process is usually adaptive, occasionally the environment provides messages that may be better left unlearned or that lead to adaptations that help one function in the short term but may not serve one’s long-term best interests (e.g., Liu & Huang, 2019; Voisin et al., 2019). In addition, when clients are influenced by their culture, they may come to the counseling relationship with conflicting values, even when these values do not serve their best interests and well-being. Postmodern society is dominated by convincing voices that espouse values and subsequent actions that recommend them (Schwartz, 2018).⁴ Yet, these values may be difficult for some clients to integrate with their own sense of identity (e.g., Kagema, 2022).

Piaget (1932; 1936) famously dubbed the learning process a cognitive dialectic that begins when children interact with their environment and collect information they mentally represent in schemata, or schemas, for future use. When a new experience fits neatly into an existing schema, the child assimilates the new information and moves on; however, when new experiences challenge their working understanding of the way things are, they must accommodate this discrepancy by modifying the inadequate schema to restore cognitive equilibrium.⁵

Although this simple idea has been variously challenged, adapted, and modified, most cognitive frameworks still borrow from this dialectic in explaining at least some aspects of mental and behavioral health functioning (e.g., Chen et al., 2022; Lyddon, 1990; Morra et al., 2007; Suizzo, 2000). Regardless of how old

they are, human beings never stop learning from experiences and the learning itself represents a change at the neural level that has the potential to develop and express itself in complex behaviors. As we grow in experience, our knowledge increases. Yet, adults are more likely to strive for assimilation than accommodation, even when new information suggests that edits to schemas are needed (e.g., Amedi et al., 2005; Luczak & Kubo, 2022).⁶ Furthermore, these kinds of changes reflect multi-factorial processes that involve complex interactions both within the individual and between the individual and the environment (e.g., Finn et al., 2017; Momi et al., 2021; Voss et al., 2017). Although we now realize that the human brain retains plasticity beyond childhood,⁷ it is still clear that children are the master learners while adults struggle to make new connections that may require dramatic restructuring of existing schema(s) (Buker, 2021; Chen et al., 2022). This may explain, at least in part, why Jesus told his disciples, “Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (*New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition*, 2021, Matthew 18:3).

Yet, people often move through life without considering their ways of knowing and being, the assumptions that underpin these ways, or the inconsistencies that may lead to dissonance and can disrupt healthy and adaptive functioning (e.g., Chui et al., 2022; Colonnello et al., 2019; Drigas et al., 2021; Soon, 2020; Sweegers et al., 2015). Thus, unless schemas themselves are changed to accommodate new information, then clients in therapy will likely have trouble remembering insights later, making it difficult to put them into action in meaningful ways (e.g., Lyddon, 1990). This hearkens to the effort required for formation tasks described in the epistle of James when the apostle admonishes his readers to be doers of the word and not hearers only who “...are like those who look at themselves in a mirror...and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like” (*New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition*, 2021, James 1:23b-24).

It should be noted that, on some level at least, the most common mental health tasks involve understanding, developing, and refining one’s sense of self in terms of who that self really is and what options that self actually has available to move forward (Morawski, 2022). After all, the self is truly the only person over whom the client inarguably has a clear authority and responsibility. Tangentially, to grow up into God’s image as Christ followers, every Christian must learn a new way of understanding one’s identity in God’s new creation through Jesus’ work on their behalf: “Everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new” (*New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition*, 2021, 2 Corinthians 5:17)! Whether people are cognizant of their schemas or not, the stories they tell themselves about who they are and about the world around them informs the way

they respond to perceived psychological threats. When holding multiple beliefs and concomitant values in their awareness, clients can focus their attention upon their true values, which can strengthen them to make needed adaptive changes (Cohen & Sherman, 2014).

Is Self-Affirmation Theory⁸ Appropriate for a Spirit-Empowered Context?

Steele (1988) posited that when people perceive a threat to their sense of self-adequacy and integrity, they will try to restore that sense of self-adequacy and integrity. As previously mentioned, for many people, simply recognizing a problem can seem threatening in itself and the self-affirmation tendency explains how responses may be either adaptive or maladaptive depending upon how one attempts to restore self-integrity.⁹ According to self-affirmation theory, when people faced with a stressor evaluate themselves as adequate, competent, and good enough, they are more likely to respond to a perceived threat appropriately and make the necessary changes to respond accordingly. Unfortunately, however, when people faced with a stressor evaluate themselves as inadequate, incompetent, and not good enough—as is often an artifact of navigating a mental health crisis—they are less able to separate themselves from these painful self-evaluations. Consequently, their energies will more likely be diverted toward neutralizing the negative personal evaluations symbolized by the perceived threat through avoidant behaviors, rather than responding intelligently to the implications of the threat itself (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Lannin, Ludwikowski et al., 2019; Lannin, Vogel et al., 2019; Logel et al., 2019; Steele, 1988).

A lifelong challenge for Christians, particularly those who are who are high meaning searchers,¹⁰ is integrating a biblical understanding into schemas that can accommodate new information.¹¹ These schemas must acknowledge human shortcomings (e.g., Romans 3:23) as the starting point for redemption and transformation (e.g., Romans 3:24-26), without getting mired in either a sense of inadequacy when things go wrong (e.g., 2 Corinthians 3:5-6), or a sense of self-righteousness when things go right (e.g., Ephesians 2:8-10). McGregor et al. (2022) note that “chronic meaning search could be a kind of over-idealism that distracts people from making progress on vital, real-world goals—a maladaptive addiction that prevents immersion in the here and now that is necessary for actually obtaining meaning.” Moreover, in a particularly maladaptive expression, “idealistic devotion can also sometimes tilt into smug sanctimony or self-righteous hate” that is used as a crutch to motivate meaning searchers toward action and change (p. 14).

On the other hand, low meaning searchers¹² may fall into complacency and the kind of lukewarm inaction that stunts needed growth. Resolving these kinds of misunderstandings are critically important not only so that Christians perceive truth, but also because God’s plan is more generous than they can conceive for

themselves (e.g., Ephesians 3:20-21). At crisis points when an experience cannot be assimilated into existing schemas and requires a more difficult accommodation instead, this aspect of renewing one's mind introduces higher stakes: A change in thinking and behaving must take place if a person is to move away from worldly conceptions of what it means to be either self-centered or other-centered, and instead toward what Buker (2021) describes as a "Spirit-centered" paradigm for mental health instead (p. 33).

Self-Affirmation Interventions

A self-affirmation intervention is simply an exercise in which participants are led to reflect on some aspect of their global self-adequacy, integrity, and/or morality. The affirmation is generally carried out prior to an activity that will likely draw on personal resources for successful performance, although self-affirming is not usually related to the upcoming performance activity itself. As noted earlier, those involved in a typical self-affirmation intervention may not realize that the exercise is a form of self-affirmation at all. In fact, the effectiveness of self-affirmation tends to be less effective if participants are aware of the self-affirming purpose (Sherman et al., 2009).

A range of studies have indicated the effectiveness of self-affirmation interventions. These include but are not limited to the following: lowered threat response to psychological help-seeking (Lannin, Ludwikowski et al., 2019; Lannin, Vogel et al., 2019), increased empathy and helping (Kim & McGill, 2018), improved intergroup conflict resolution (Sherman et al., 2017), improved creativity despite job insecurity (Jiang, 2017), reduced relational aggression in adolescents (Armitage & Rowe, 2017), lower epinephrine levels induced by exam stress for college students (Cohen & Sherman, 2014), healthier food choices and awakening cortisol levels in dieting women (Logel et al., 2018), better psychosocial responses for bicultural students (Liu et al., 2021), increased class participation for college students (Serenio et al., 2020), and improved emotion and cardiovascular responses (Chen et al., 2020).

Interestingly, the most effective self-affirmation interventions seem to be values-based (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Lannin, Ludwikowski et al., 2019; Lannin, Vogel et al., 2019; Logel et al., 2019). In these types of interventions, participants typically reflect on important values and personal standards they have internalized, often in terms of social relationships and religious values. Self-affirming prepares participants to make an adaptive change. Cohen and Sherman (2014) suggest this activity often unearths an unexpected source of strength that is

drawn upon long afterward, providing a broader view and putting a perceived threat to the self into a more adaptive perspective so healthy changes can take place.

McGregor et al. (2022) take this notion a step further when they observe that the usefulness of this newly perceived source of strength is in fact a connecting thread throughout psychological and philosophical theorizing. For meaning searchers, in particular, “self-transcendence can confer what feels like a kind of higher power that makes people more magnanimous” and consequently braver in facing the need for change (p. 2). For the Spirit-empowered counselor and client, this so-called higher power is often recognized as the Holy Spirit, at work on their behalf, loosing people from anxiety and complacency alike that keep them stuck in maladaptive ways of knowing and being, freeing them to see themselves instead as God sees them: cherished loved ones who are worth the precious cost of saving and well worth the effort of ongoing transformation from glory to glory (e.g., Romans 5:10; 2 Corinthians 3:18).

In their comprehensive review of self-affirmation theory interventions, Cohen and Sherman (2014) observe that effective psychological interventions, such as counseling treatment, influence the change process in much the same way any formative experience does. Ideally, counseling experiences will positively impact individuals, causing them to interact with their environments differently. Self-affirming thus helps set the stage to initiate a “cycle of adaptive potential” through therapy that will reinforce and perpetuate adaptive changes (p. 340). During this change process, people continue to construct cognitive narratives for themselves to make sense of the world and their place in it. In this storytelling activity, they intuitively search for ways to protect their sense of self-integrity. The Christian counselor can help them do this in ways that affirm their own self-integrity even while they accommodate new information to adapt and grow (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Steele, 1988).

Although people can (and do) construct stories that distort the truth about themselves, distortions are often unintentional as people generally prefer stories that fit within the parameters of reality (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). After all, an inspiring description of someone will be convincing only if the description is believed to be true. Thus, self-affirmation’s “goal is not to appraise every threat in a self-flattering way but rather to maintain an overarching narrative of the self’s global adequacy” (Cohen & Sherman, 2014, p. 336; see also Sherman et al., 2009; Steele, 1988). For Christians, this belief is bolstered by the power of the Holy Spirit at work on their behalf to make them competent (2 Corinthians 3:5). People tend to be more tolerant of their shortcomings and mistakes—and thus more open to the need for change—when their self-assessments reassure them that they are adequate overall, even if they are not perfect. Thus, a value-based self-affirmation prior to therapy lowers resistance and increases the probability of activating the adaptive potential cycle (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Putarek et al., 2019).

Approach or Avoid: Considerations for Meaning Searchers

According to reinforcement sensitivity theory (Gray, 1987), some individuals are more highly influenced by the behavioral activation system (BAS), which is associated with proactive striving and the motivation to approach challenges, while others are more sensitive to the behavioral inhibition system (BIS), which is associated with risk-avoidance and the motivation to avoid challenges. An optimal balance between these two systems' functions should allow people to evaluate threats in light of their values to help them choose appropriate, congruent actions (Putarek et al., 2019).

McGregor et al. (2022) propose that when people are by nature more oriented to search for meaning in life, a self-affirming focus on self-transcendent values such as peace, justice, kindness, and compassion are more adaptive in supporting the change process than self-enhancing values like appearance, power, money, and status. The authors suggest that these self-transcendent values stimulate the BAS of motivation that spurs meaning searchers on toward brave and magnanimous action, while quieting the BIS that is more inclined to fear, worry, and ruminative inaction. On the other hand, they found that for people who are less likely to search for meaning, a self-affirming focus on self-transcendent values actually led to *less* motivation to approach important challenges. Because approach motivation¹³ is necessary for the change process that clients seek as they come (and keep coming) to counselors for, discerning these nuances to protect against a one-size-fits-all approach to intervention is essential.¹⁴

McGregor et al. (2022) suggest that some people are more naturally inclined to search for meaning. This may include many religious people, who do not simply experience temporary states of meaning searching, but actually possess a stable personality trait that disposes them toward meaning searching. Regardless, with Steger et al. (2006), McGregor et al. (2022) observe that meaning searching may be accompanied by anxiety, insecurity, and distress over uncertainty as well as less mindfulness and secure attachment. These patterns are typical of BIS activation (Gray, 1987; Putarek et al., 2019) and may explain both why high meaning searchers (such as some sincere Christians) can seem immobilized by anxiety and why a focus on self-transcendent values can help quell the negative effects of BIS control and trigger the reciprocal BAS instead. In practical ways, devout Christian clients could benefit from biblically-informed schemas that encourage the healthy approach motivation necessary for making important changes.

Caveat: When Self-Affirmations Are Not Appropriate

For self-affirmation to be effective, the problem situation must include a psychological threat to the individual's sense of self. In other words, awareness of a problem often causes people to feel that they are somehow inadequate when they are not. This perceived threat to global adequacy and self-integrity then blocks agency that would otherwise develop via the cycle of adaptive potential if the perceived threat to the self were successfully countered (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). For example, self-affirmation interventions have been effective in overcoming stereotype threat, a psychological threat in which people know they have been stereotyped by others due to a characteristic they were born with (e.g., ethnicity, gender, ability level, etc.). Kim et al. (2022) recently found that performance differences disappeared after women were self-affirmed even though they had consistently performed lower than men on quantitative tasks in the past. On the other hand, a self-affirmation intervention would not be considered appropriate when the obstacles to well-being are clearly problem-based (e.g., an unsafe neighborhood, dysfunctional workplace, abusive partner, etc.). In these cases, therapy goals would be better focused upon a realistic locus of control and an appropriate problem-focused strategy for change (e.g., Öztürk, & Maçkalı, 2022).

In addition, as previously discussed, individual differences must be considered in evaluating treatment needs for clients who not only begin therapy with different needs, but also are at different points in their developmental trajectories. Clients need help discerning where to focus their own soul work in the present moment. For example, Voisin et al. (2019) found that some women seemed to use stereotype threat to prime themselves as a prepotent response to challenge and thus, self-affirming *harmed their subsequent performance* on multiplication tasks in one study and mental rotation tasks in another. Similarly, Liu and Huang (2019) found that for Chinese high school students who were highly motivated to obtain others' approval, self-affirming resulted in *increased task avoidance and lower performance outcomes* at school. The latter two studies are not included to suggest that these extrinsic motivational foci are by any means ideal;¹⁵ rather, the results confirm the need for assistance from the Holy Spirit for a wholistic understanding of each client and their existing schemas before an effective intervention can be implemented (Buker, 2021; Timbers & Hollenberger, 2022; Watson, 2011).¹⁶

Implications

Taken together, the academic literature highlights three key issues. First, global culture is rapidly changing, and the awareness of mental health needs is increasing among the world's citizens, including Christians (Baucke & Seifert, 2022; Kagema, 2022; Lloyd et al., 2022; McBain, 2021). Second, Christian counselors and their clients need the help of the Holy Spirit to discern the needs of the moment and to

implement appropriate change interventions (Appleby & Ohlschlager, 2013; Buker, 2021; Decker et al. 2021; French, 2021; Sisemore, 2013; Timbers & Hollenberger, 2022; Worthington et al., 2013). Finally, self-affirmation theory, rightly discerned, may be a useful tool for clients renewing their minds to align with a more Spirit-centered paradigm and approach important challenges accordingly (Buker, 2021; Cohen & Sherman, 2014; McGregor et al., 2022).

Ideas for Practice

The implicit nature of constructing and referencing schemas about the self and the role that self plays in the world makes the identification and reconstruction of these schemas a challenging process (Chui et al., 2022; Colonnello et al., 2019; Drigas et al., 2021; Morawski, 2022; Soon, 2020; Sweegers et al., 2015), and may subvert efforts to change and grow. Self-affirming is one possible way to facilitate better perspective-taking, motivate people to approach important challenges, and make needed changes (e.g., Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Steele, 1988). Although there are different ways to lead people in self-affirming (see Napper et al., 2009; Zhu & Yzer, 2019), values-based self-affirmation interventions have proven to be among the more effective approaches (e.g., Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Lannin, Ludwikowski, et al., 2019; Lannin, Vogel, et al., 2019; Logel et al., 2019; McGregor et al., 2022). In developing their 32-item scale to prompt self-affirmation, Napper et al. (2009) drew from the 250-item Values in Action (VIA) Strengths scale (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) to highlight worthwhile values and they found their new measure was comparable to other established self-affirmation tools. In a rigorous psychometric follow-up study, Zhu and Yzer (2019) developed and tested an 11-item brief version of Napper et al.'s scale. They found that their brief scale format, along with the 32-item scale (Napper et al., 2009) and a frequently used essay induction prompt, were all effective for initiating values-based self-affirming (Zhu & Yzer, 2019). Given that many Christians desire to live their lives based on a biblical worldview, they may find stability in values derived from scripture rather than secular culture (e.g., Kinnamon & Matlock, 2019; Worthington et al., 2013). See Appendix A for a sample of scriptures that align with Zhu and Yzer's (2019) brief attribute scale format self-affirmation induction (brief scale affirmation task, or B-SAT) as one example of how scripture might be integrated with other validated methods for self-affirmation.

Conclusions

Change is an inevitable part of life, but Christians can be cheerful knowing that God has given them the Holy Spirit to lead them in overcoming challenges (John 16:33). When believers experience blessing, they can rejoice and give thanks. Yet, even when they encounter crisis, they can learn to be confident in God's faithfulness, knowing the Lord's power is made perfect in their weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Although mental health professionals do not always know what is best, or what interventions will lead to effective change, they do know the One who knows all things. Spirit-empowered counselors can be assured that their Advocate is working on behalf of their clients for good, leading them over and through each crisis (Romans 8:28). As Christians renew their minds and learn to think about themselves the way that God does, their schemas and the actions that flow from them are transformed. The residual effects generated through the Creator's divine fractals (Buker, 2021) result in cycles of adaptive potential (Cohen & Sherman, 2014) that overhaul human lives, further opening the way for the Holy Spirit's creative power. This process engenders hope, revealing what it can look like for God's will to be done here and now as the Creator conceived it in the initial design, on earth as divinely as it is carried out in heaven.

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Notes:

¹ For the purposes of this discussion, “Spirit-empowered” will refer to the biblical idea that God is present, active, and facilitative in people’s lives, including but not limited to the soul work carried out via a counseling intervention. Thus, a Spirit-empowered counselor is one who believes this tenet and approaches the counseling context accordingly (see Decker et al., 2021, pp. 10-11).

² The prevalence of social media that celebrates ordinary life can also trigger feelings of inadequacy in followers (e.g., Liu et al., 2022). The contemporary self-help industry is booming as people strive to pursue their elusive “best lives” and negotiate the challenges this goal presents both in its idealistic rendering (e.g., <https://livemybestlife.com/>) and in its more problematic shadow

(e.g., <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Living%20My%20Best%20Life>). According to marketing research from Grand View Research, the global personal development market size was worth \$41.48 billion in 2021 with a growth prediction of 5.5% between 2022–2030 (<https://www.grandviewresearch.com/industry-analysis/personal-development-market>). To be their best, many people deconstruct their lives in an effort to become better humans (e.g., <https://betterhumans.pub/how-to-deconstruct-your-present-habits-to-design-better-habits-2d89922d1d60>).

³ Self-affirmation theory is defined in the American Psychological Association (APA) dictionary as follows:

The concept that people are motivated to maintain views of themselves as well adapted, moral, competent, stable, and able to control important outcomes. When some aspect of this self-view is challenged, people experience psychological discomfort. They may attempt to reduce this discomfort by directly resolving the inconsistency between the new information and the self, by affirming some other aspect of the self, or both. Self-affirmation theory has been used as an alternative to cognitive dissonance theory for explaining some phenomena. See also dissonance reduction; self-consistency perspective. [originally proposed by U.S. psychologist Claude M. Steele (1946–)]. (<https://dictionary.apa.org/self-affirmation-theory>)

⁴ The contemporary interest in self-improvement can focus attention in ways that may not result in better mental health. Carl Cederström and André Spicer illustrate this unintended outcome in their own comedic journey, *Desperately Seeking Self-Improvement: A Year Inside the Optimization Movement* (2017). These real-life business professors documented their rigorous efforts to develop latent human potential with mixed results, concluding that although the intentional pursuit of a worthwhile life did result in many accomplishments that may have been valued by others, it did not automatically lead them to more congruence or personal fulfillment. In her thoughtful pre-pandemic analysis of the self-improvement ideal, Alexandra Schwartz (2018) suggests these kinds of deflating results may simply be the logical consequence of allowing cultural norms to dictate the standards by which one evaluates the worthiness of one’s life and, by extension, the self. Taken together, these observations beg the question of

whether the collectively increased attention to self-improvement has helped people or if this pre-occupation with improving the self may instead have resulted in maladaptive functioning, perhaps even increasing a need for clinical intervention?

⁵ For example, when a child encounters a Labrador Retriever for the first time, she learns that it is a dog. When she later meets a Boston Terrier, she learns that it, too, is a dog and assimilates this information into her schema. However, when she is introduced to a British Shorthair kitten and mistakenly assumes it is a dog, the environment will eventually correct her misunderstanding and she must accommodate the new information, quickly modifying her schema for dogs and creating a new schema for cats. This correction will assist her in her future interactions and subsequent discussions about common household pets.

⁶ This preference for assimilation even when dissonance occurs is thought to contribute to many of the cognitive biases that negatively impact interpersonal relationships such as stereotypes (<https://dictionary.apa.org/stereotype>) and fundamental attribution errors (<https://dictionary.apa.org/fundamental-attribution-error>).

⁷ A discussion of experience-related changes in the nervous system lies beyond the scope of this study (see Voss et al., 2017).

⁸ The popularity of Al Franken's lovable but beleaguered Stuart Smalley, first introduced on the *Saturday Night Live* television show, led to the tongue-in-cheek publication of Stuart's daily self-affirmation journal (Franken, 1992; Franken & Wilson, 1991). The journal chronicles the character's efforts to employ a seemingly endless stream of trite self-help platitudes (e.g., "that's just stinkin' thinkin'," "denial ain't just a river in Egypt," "and that's... okay," etc.) to shore up his battered self-image. The satire provides a humorous and sometimes poignant depiction of how this fictional character's environment has contributed to his mental health challenges as he struggles to combat his own negative self-evaluations. Whether intentional or not, the highly public nature of Stuart's mental health journey may have contributed to flawed assumptions about self-affirmation theory. Notably, Stuart's coping strategies, however amusing, could inadvertently lead casual observers to presume that self-affirmation is merely repetitious and occasionally incongruent self-talk.

⁹ For example, if a father learns he may be laid off at work, this information would reasonably be considered threatening. If he interpreted this threat as an indictment against his adequacy as a person, he might be tempted to put the threatening information out of mind by playing video games, ignoring the implications of unemployment, and hoping the problem will go away. Alternatively, he might try to secure his own position by actively undermining his colleagues so that possible negative evaluations of his work were deflected onto his coworkers. Both responses would be considered maladaptive and are also inconsistent with biblically-informed schemas about one's identity as a child of God. On the other hand, if he did not interpret this threat as a personal attack on his inherent worth, but instead rightly perceived it as a threat to providing for his children, he might respond more proactively by investigating deeper into his job security in his current position and exploring other employment prospects that could be pursued if job loss did occur. These responses would be considered adaptive and are also consistent with biblically-informed schemas about one's identity as a child of God.

¹⁰ High meaning searchers can be defined as people in search of a sense of coherence and purpose to harmonize their thoughts, feelings, actions, and experiences (see Steger et al., 2006).

¹¹ Scriptural interpretations may also be understood in different ways. For instance, in a report by Barna (2021), over half of American adults purported to have a biblical worldview, but only about 6% really did. Moreover, among those respondents who claimed a biblical worldview, there were widespread inconsistencies between their understanding of the bible and what the

bible actually teaches. Based on the assumption that many Christian clients will subscribe to a perspective that is sympathetic to biblical teaching, values accurately derived from an applied biblical hermeneutic should have a stabilizing effect for many, especially when working through beliefs about the nature of God, the self, the world, and the relationships shared among all (Morawski, 2022; Worthington et al., 2013). In addition, this work should be useful in bridging religious practices associated with the Christian faith and commonly accepted secular understandings of psychological health and well-being (e.g., Watson, 2011; Watson & Watson, 2013).

¹² Low meaning searchers can be defined as people who feel they already possess the presence of sufficient meaning (see Steger et al., 2006).

¹³ Approach motivation is the motivation to approach a challenge as stimulated by the BAS rather than the motivation to avoid a challenge as stimulated by the BIS (see McGregor et al., 2022).

¹⁴ Just as a pastor who tries to reassure fervent and existentially anxious parishioners with messages of assurance may neglect to challenge more carnally-minded congregants or, conversely, who may effectively motivate worldlier members while terrifying the sensitive devout, the counselor must recognize the unique needs of each client to craft an intervention appropriate for that one.

¹⁵ The preference for intrinsically motivated goal pursuits is prevalent in the achievement motivation literature, especially Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory (SDT) that posits people need to feel autonomous in their pursuits, competent to achieve their goals, and related to the people important to them as they proactively live their lives (Howard et al., 2021; Ntoumanis et al., 2021). Most studies corroborate SDT's framework for predicting intrinsic motivation and well-being for psychologically healthy people (Howard et al., 2021; Ntoumanis et al., 2021). Yet, questions about achievement motivation remain as researchers explore not only what people are motivated to accomplish and how that makes them feel, but also why they are motivated to do so in the first place (Sommet & Elliot, 2017).

¹⁶ In John 16:13-15, Jesus describes the work of the Spirit: "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for...he will take what is mine and declare it to you" (*New Revised Standard Updated Version*, 2021). For the Spirit-empowered individual, then, a healthy process is facilitated as the Holy Spirit guides the individual into truth (John 16:13), leading to freedom (John 8:32) and faithful, obedient action (James 2:14). One way the Spirit-empowered counselor supports this process is by helping the client to connect with Christlike values that de-center and realign one's understanding of the self, neither as devalued and marginalized nor grandiosely located front and center; rather, as an integral part of the Lord's beloved and interdependent creation (Colossians 1:15-23).

Appendix A

The following are examples of scriptural support that align with Zhu and Yzer's (2019) brief attribute scale format self-affirmation induction (brief scale affirmation task, or B-SAT) that comprises the 11 items below. All biblical

references below are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition* (2021).

1. I love to learn new things.
 - a. Proverbs 9:9: Give instruction to the wise, and they will become wiser still; teach the righteous, and they will gain in learning.
 - b. Proverbs 1:7: The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.
2. My friends can trust me.
 - a. Proverbs 11:13: A gossip goes about telling secrets, but one who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a confidence.
 - b. Luke 6:31: Do to others as you would have them do to you.
3. I always try to keep my word.
 - a. Deuteronomy 23:23: You shall be careful to do what has passed your lips, for you have voluntarily vowed to the Lord your God what you have promised with your mouth.
 - b. Matthew 5:37: Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one.
4. I am always curious about the world.
 - a. Proverbs 1:5: Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance,
 - b. Proverbs 16:16: How much better to get wisdom than gold! To get understanding is to be chosen rather than silver.
5. There are people in my life who care as much about my feelings and well-being as they do about their own.
 - a. Romans 12:15: Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.
 - b. Proverbs 17:17: A friend loves at all times, and kinsfolk are born to share adversity.
6. I value my ability to think critically.
 - a. 2 Timothy 2:7: Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.
 - b. Romans 12:2: Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.
7. My friends value my good judgment.

- a. Psalms 119:99: I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your testimonies are my meditation.
 - b. Colossians 3:16: Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.
8. I can express love to someone else.
- a. 1 Peter 4:8: Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.
 - b. Ephesians 4:1-2: walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,
9. I treat all people equally, regardless of who they might be.
- a. Romans 2:11: For God shows no partiality.
 - b. 1 Timothy 5:21: In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels, I warn you to keep these instructions without prejudice, doing nothing on the basis of partiality.
10. I must stand up for what I believe in, even in the face of strong opposition.
- a. 1 Thessalonians 2:4: But just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts.
 - b. Ephesians 6:13: Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.
11. Despite challenges, I always remain hopeful about the future.
- a. Psalms 130:5: I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits, and in His Word I put my hope.
 - b. 1 Peter 5:10: And the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will Himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.

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