1. Sacred Moments for Health and Wellbeing

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Abstract
Sacred moments refer to brief moments in time that seem set apart from ordinary reality by their transcendent nature and spiritual significance. Sacred moments are common human experiences and occur among religious and spiritual individuals, as well as religious "nones." Sacred moments have been linked to a number of benefits and appear to hold therapeutic potential for mental health, physical health, and subjective wellbeing. The following chapter examines the growing body of research on sacred moments in healthcare and discusses implications for patients, healthcare providers, and the patient-provider relationship. Suggestions for cultivating sacred moments in healthcare are offered at the end.

What are Sacred Moments?
During my second year as a clinical psychology trainee, I began working with a therapy client for depression. I was still very "green" and spent a good deal of time swimming in my own anxious thoughts. One week, the client was in a particularly dark place emotionally. Halfway through the session, she tearfully expressed active suicidality. This was my first suicidal client. But, instead of increased anxiety, I experienced an almost serene sense of focus. All of my own mental chatter fell silent. It felt as though we were existing in a container, and everything outside of it dropped away like grains of sand through a sifter. Time seemed to stand still. I was overwhelmed with the awareness that in front of me sat a human in so much pain that the only option that seemed available to her was suicide, and that revelation made me so immensely sad that I had to hold back some of my own tears. For a few moments, we shared in one of the darkest, yet most authentic and unadulterated, aspects of the human experience.

This anecdote is an example of a *sacred moment* (Pargament and Mahoney 2005, 185; Pargament et al. 2014, 249). *Sacred moments* refer to situations or brief periods of time that seem different from the ordinary because they have taken on a holy, divine, or transcendent significance for the experiencer (Pargament and Mahoney 2005, 181). The process of making or perceiving something sacred is called *sanctification* (Pargament and Mahoney 2005, 182). Importantly, the word *sacred* in this case is used as a psychological construct because it describes a phenomenological experience grounded in human perception as opposed to one

that takes a specific, theistic stance (Magyar-Russell et al. 2022, 161). As such, moments can be considered sacred by those who identify as religious and/or spiritual (Vivtruf et al. 2021, 1079-1080), but also by those who do not believe in God or a higher power or adhere to a particular faith tradition (Deal and Magyar-Russell 2022, 42).

Spiritual Qualities in Sacred Moments

Sacred moments can share a likeness with other self-transcendent experiences, such as mystical experiences (Hood 1975, 31; James 1902, 287) anomalous experiences (e.g., Pait et al. 2023, 1-2), and flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1991, 3; for review, see Yaden et al. 2017, 2). However, sacred moments are unique in that they contain certain spiritual qualities. These qualities include boundlessness, interconnectedness, ultimacy, transcendence, and spiritual emotions (Pargament et al. 2014, 249). A sense of *boundlessness* can occur if moments seem to exist outside the typical realms of time and space. *Interconnectedness* occurs when people feel a deep sense of connection, caring, or understanding with others and their environments. The quality of *ultimacy* refers to perceptions of ultimate or fundamental truth, purpose, or meaning. *Transcendence* describes perceptions of being in the presence of something that is larger than or extends beyond the self. These perceptions are not ordinarily experienced in everyday life. In addition, *spiritual emotions* like gratitude, love, awe, joy, humility, peace, and compassion, can be felt intensely during sacred moments but are oftentimes hard to capture in words.

Many of these spiritual qualities can be found in the opening anecdote. Time seemed to stand still for the clinician, and she perceived an almost tactile shift in the surrounding space that felt like sifting sand (boundlessness). She reported sharing a connection with the client characterised by heightened empathy and understanding (interconnectedness). The experience revealed to her the depth and immensity of the client's pain and suffering (ultimacy). The moment was novel and set apart from their previous therapy sessions (transcendence). Although sad, the clinician also reported feeling a sense of pure genuineness between them (spiritual emotions).

Sacred Moments and Mental Health

Much of the research on sacred moments has been conducted in the context of mental health. By broadening one's attentional focus and disrupting unhealthy thought patterns, sacred moments appear to foster engagement with the world, which may help to counter symptoms of social anxiety (McCorkle et al. 2005, 232-236) and depression (Baunal 2018, 56). Psychotherapy clients who sought music therapy for various issues (e.g., heart attack-related stress, PTSD, loneliness) reported that the sacred moments they had perceived during the course of treatment prompted them to experience "an abyss of love…some kind of rebirth," "peace for the soul," and "a deep sense of love, awe, longing, and connection…a new way of thinking," (Beck 2019, 49-51). These sacred moments often unfolded after emotional difficulties in session, such as confronting grief or trauma, and catalysed a physical and/or emotional cathartic release (Beck 2019, 52). Similarly, it is common for people to have sacred moments while experiencing religious/spiritual struggles (Wilt et al. 2018, 239), and these moments have beneficial implications. *Religious/spiritual struggles* refer to episodes of tension, strain, or conflict that people experience around religion or spirituality (Exline et al. 2014, 208-209; Pargament and Exline 2022, 6). Notably, people who had more sacred moments over a 6-month period reported more positive effects from their religious/spiritual struggles, such as feeling as though their struggles had made them a better or stronger person or had strengthened their relationship with God (Wilt et al. 2018, 241).

In a larger, quantitative study ($N = 519$), sacred moments among therapy clients were significantly and positively associated with client gains in treatment, mental health changes, satisfaction with providers, and therapeutic relationship gains, among other benefits (Pargament et al. 2014, 258). In addition, a longitudinal study that investigated the relationship between sacred moments and mental health over time found that participants who had more sacred moments over time reported more positive emotions, greater sense of meaning, lower levels of perceived stress, and lower levels of distress related to depression and anxiety (Magyar-Russell et al. 2022, 165-166).

Sacred Moments Among Mental Health Providers

Mental health providers can also experience sacred moment benefits. One music therapist reported several sacred moments while conducting music therapy and described them as "great peaks" (Beck 2019, 52). Psychiatrists, psychologists, counsellors, and social workers who perceived sacred moments with clients reported greater meaning from their work, greater motivation toward their work, and higher levels of spiritual wellbeing (Pargament et al. 2014, 253). One provider shared:

> It was beautiful to see [my client] react to the new understanding [in treatment], to watch him try on emotions like clothing to see what they felt like and to start to understand the relationship between his mind and body in a new way. I wasn't expecting this intervention to impact him so deeply, and so it impacted me deeply as well when I witnessed it. I felt honored to be part of it (Pargament et al. 2014, 252).

Psychiatric nurses and psychiatric nursing assistants working in an inpatient psychiatric facility who had a sacred moment with a patient were more likely to report a positive therapeutic alliance and greater meaning from their work (Alvarado 2016, 40).

Sacred Moments and Physical Health

The therapeutic potential of sacred moments extends to physical health and wellbeing. Indeed, a limited yet growing body of research has explored the outcomes of sacred moments for people with various physical health conditions. One study investigated the impact of sacred moments on resiliency and coping among people with long-term epilepsy diagnoses (Baunal 2018, 41). Study participants reflected on sacred moments by writing about their experiences in a diary for five minutes every day over three weeks. At the end of the three weeks, participants showed significant improvements in problem-solving, cognitive restructuring, expressing emotions, and resilience, along with reductions in tendencies to avoid problems (Baunal 2018, 53-55). Participants also experienced significant decreases in symptoms of depression and anxiety (Baunal 2018, 56-57).

For patients hospitalized with various health issues (e.g., surgery, terminal illness, cancer), sacred moments with their healthcare providers made them feel valued, heard, emotionally supported, hopeful, and peaceful (Quinn et al. 2023, 2040-2041). Such sacred moments took many forms. Some patients experienced sacred moments when they perceived their doctors to be emotionally present, evidenced by eye contact, active listening, and verbal reassurance (Quinn et al. 2023, 2041-2042). Others noted that sacred moments occurred when their doctors and nurses took specific actions, like offering appropriate and supportive physical touch like hand holding, communal prayer, and unstructured time with them at the end of the day (Quinn et al. 2023, 2040-2041).

A mixed-methods study indirectly relevant to sacred moments investigated the importance of four types of sacred relationships among people diagnosed with mild Alzheimer's Disease (McGee and Myers 2014, 62), such as their relationships with God or the transcendent, ties to spiritual communities, connections with loved ones, and personal relationships to themselves characterized by physical independence and financial stability (McGee and Myers 2014, 62-65). Study participants noted that maintaining and nurturing these sacred relationships helped them to cope with the disease over time. One participant shared, "My salvation is my daughter. If she was not with me now, I don't know what I would do. She is my strength…that is sacred," (McGee and Myers 2014, 64-65).

Sacred Moments Among Healthcare Providers

Sacred moments can also unfold among family caregivers and healthcare professionals as they support and treat patients. For some people who cared for family members with dementia, sacred moments positively predicted personal growth, work satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction, and a decline in feelings of burden (Wong and Pargament 2018). Many of the caregivers who had sacred moments reported immense feelings of gratitude for the events and felt as though the moments had allowed them to experience a deep and sometimes rare connection with their care recipients. As one caregiver described, "That moment of being with the person I knew those years ago. It was like a light blinked on and he was who he used to be for a moment. It was amazing…He was talking to me from a soul level," (Wong and Pargament 2018).

Some healthcare professionals, too, described sacred moments with their patients as spiritual, transcending, and moving (Quinn et al. 2023, 2040). Some noted themes of love, support, connection, and reflection (Reid 2006, 55). One doctor shared that sacred moments were, "The reason I went into medicine," (Quinn et al. 2023, 2041), and a nurse recalled, "…it gives you energy and I guess it makes you feel like what you are doing is right and that your job is more than a job at that time," (Quinn et al. 2023, 2041). Sacred moments like these can be rewarding for healthcare providers who feel that the moments affirmed their decision to pursue careers in medicine.

Implications for Sacred Moments in Healthcare

These findings hold unique implications for the relevance of sacred moments in healthcare. Sacred moments could contribute positively to patient wellbeing, healthcare provider wellbeing, and the patient-provider relationship.

Sacred Moment Benefits for Patients

As a perceived window to God or the transcendent, sacred moments could be a source of spiritual support from which patients draw strength, particularly during times of emotional strain, like learning difficult diagnoses, or when experiencing religious/spiritual struggles (Magyar-Russell et al. 2022,167). Sacred moments could ease the stress, depression, and anxiety resulting from serious or long-lasting heath conditions. They could also be especially helpful for people who have suffered major losses and wonder what, if anything, they have to live for. Even in the last moments of life, people have the potential to experience sacred moments. The interconnectedness often felt during sacred moments could help patients to battle the sense of isolation that can accompany illness by facilitating connections with their support systems, including loved ones, spiritual communities, healthcare teams, and perhaps

even fellow patients. Terminally ill patients could use sacred moments as a way to reflect on meaningful or ultimate truths they have learned throughout their lives. Patients who intentionally cultivate sacred moments or spend time reflecting on those they have experienced may develop more positive ways of coping with health issues, like disrupting unhelpful thoughts, focusing on positive emotional experiences to bolster resilience, and deepening their personal spirituality.

Sacred Moment Benefits for Healthcare Providers

For healthcare providers, seeing aspects of their work as sacred could help to improve job satisfaction, validate their career choice, and provide a greater sense of meaning around their work tasks, particularly on challenging days (Pomerleau et al. 2016, 49). Indeed, people are likely to invest more time and energy into their careers if they perceive job pursuits as being sacred or a "calling" (Pargament and Mahoney 2005, 188). It is also likely that healthcare workers could harness some of the mental health benefits associated with sacred moments, such as reduced stress, reduced feelings of isolation, reduced feelings of burden, and an increase in emotional wellbeing.

Some evidence suggests that sacred moments could potentially buffer against healthcare worker fatigue and burnout (Quinn et al. 2023, 2041). Healthcare worker burnout is sometimes associated with moral injury. Moral injury in healthcare occurs when providers feel a deep emotional wound from witnessing profound human suffering, such as caring for patients in war zones or after natural catastrophes, or when faced with complex ethical situations (for review, see Čartolovni et al. 2021, 593-595). If healthcare works feel limited in their ability to provide comprehensive patient care, moral injury could trigger strong feelings of helplessness and hopelessness (Čartolovni et al. 2021, 594). However, sacred moments imbued with spiritual emotions like humility, love, awe, gratitude, and compassion could be fruitful resources when healthcare workers shoulder such intense emotional burdens.

Sacred Moment Benefits for the Patient-Provider Relationship

Sacred moments may also serve to strengthen the patient-provider bond. They could help to humanize both parties to the other's struggles and inherent worth. One nurse shared:

> I remember sitting by his bed and putting my hand on his hand and him putting his other hand on top of my hand and just… making eye contact and having a moment where I just really valued him as a person and as a patient, and I felt that he very much valued me as his nurse, and there was a lot of just trust and connection in that moment (Quinn et al. 2023, 2041).

Because sacred moments are often precipitated by periods of emotional tension or difficulty (Pargament et al. 2014, 258), providers and patients who share in them could find that they have gained a deeper sense of trust and security in the relationship (Beck 2019, 55; Pargament et al. 2014, 253-528). Such authentic human connection could potentially springboard more sacred moments for both. These experiences may also increase patient satisfaction with providers, as well as healthcare systems more broadly (Quinn et al. 2023, 2041), which could contribute to patient engagement with treatment such as medication compliance.

Cultivating Sacred Moments

Although many sacred moments occur spontaneously, it is important to note that they can also be intentionally cultivated. For example, meditating on a sacred object, like a wedding ring, a family heirloom, or a personal mantra, can facilitate daily spiritual experiences and positively influence personal wellbeing (Goldstein 2007, 1009). Reflecting on memories of past sacred moments is also associated with an increase in daily spiritual experiences, as well as spiritual and personal growth (Wong 2021, 28-29). For some, sacred moments occur while listening to music, which can bring up thoughts of interconnectedness and feelings like joy, happiness, and peace (Griffith et al. 2022, 5-6). Intentional time spent in nature could also foster sacred moments, particularly for those who have positive and meaningful associations with nature from childhood, or among those seeking nontheistic spiritual perspectives that align with their personal values (Deal and Magyar-Russell 2022, 43-47).

Barriers to Sacred Moments

It is important to note some of the barriers to sacred moments. First, because sacred moments are more likely to occur among people who consider religious and/or spiritual beliefs to be important parts of their lives (Pargament et al. 2014, 258; Wilt et al. 2019, 239), some nonreligious patients may not experience sacred moments or ascribe much value or meaning to them if they occur. Sacred moments are also reported infrequently among people with insecure attachment and low openness to experience (Wilt et al. 2019, 239). Due to the current stressors facing healthcare, such as staffing shortages, heavy patient caseloads, and provider burnout (Quinn et al. 2023, 2042), some patients are likely to feel that the relationships they have with their providers and healthcare teams are unstable and unpredictable. Patients who feel that in the current medical system, they are not treated with time, care, and sensitivity, or as though they have not been fully seen or heard by their healthcare providers, will likely not experience sacred moments. Some patients may feel isolated due to their medical issue or marginalized because of their symptoms (McGee and Myers 2014, 63). Such uncertainty could understandably stoke patient self-consciousness, anxiety, and detachment, and, consequently, curtail the likelihood of having sacred moments.

Healthcare providers may face their own hurdles. Some might not feel comfortable sharing deep emotional encounters with their patients that typically accompany sacred moments. They may lack formal training in how to develop a good bedside manner, such as displaying kindness, sympathy, warmth, and understanding with patients, a historical hallmark of the art and science of practicing medicine (e.g., Lasagna 1964). This may lessen provider openness to sacred moments or the willingness of providers to discuss the experiences. Additionally, due to structural healthcare system restraints, such as limited patient interaction, prioritization of acute medical problems, and the expanding use of electronic documentation (Quinn et al. 2023, 2042), providers might not have the time, emotional bandwidth, or personal relationships with patients to have sacred moments.

Practical Applications

Given the potential benefits and barriers of sacred moments in healthcare, the following suggestions are offered to help cultivate nourishing soil for sacred moments to take root.

- Introduce the concept of sacred moments in healthcare provider training. Highlight the associations between sacred moments and mental and physical health benefits and greater job satisfaction.
- Provide access to sacred moment resources.
- Encourage providers to reflect on sacred moments from their own lives, such as those experienced within marriage or parenting (Pomerleau et al. 2016, 45-47), or those they may have experienced with patients. Providers can reflect on sacred moments privately, such as when they are on the ride home or while getting ready for bed, or by discussing them with trusted others.
- Create a safe space for healthcare workers to discuss sacred moments with colleagues to help them become more comfortable sharing emotionally intimate moments with patients.
- Create a safe space for patients to discuss sacred moments with other patients, such as incorporating a discussion of sacred moments into support groups or behavioural health groups.
- Encourage intentional cultivation of sacred moments by meditating on a sacred object, reflecting on a sacred memory, listening to music, or spending intentional time in nature.
- Be open to sacred moments in healthcare, especially during times of emotional strain or spiritual struggle.
- Assess whether religious and/or spiritual beliefs are important to patients to determine whether a discussion of sacred moments could be fruitful, particularly for populations who may benefit from such discussions, like those in palliative care.
- Be attentive to the possibility of sacred moments among patients who are nonreligious or religiously disengaged. Listen for the language of the spiritual qualities (e.g., feelings of connectedness, transcendence, ultimate truth, boundlessness, awe, gratitude) and, when they come up, encourage conversation about these ingredients of sacred moments.
- Maintain a sense of presence. Make eye contact with patients, stand closer to patients, practice active listening, offer verbal reassurance, demonstrate warmth, empathy, and understanding.
- If appropriate, encourage patients to utilize religious/spiritual resources, such as communication with the transcendent through religious rituals, regular interaction with religious/spiritual communities, or introductions to hospital chaplains.
- If appropriate, discuss the concept and benefits of sacred moments with family caregivers.

Future Directions

Although promising, the research on sacred moments in healthcare is limited. One avenue of future research could investigate the incorporation of sacred moments into various behavioural health groups. In particular, a discussion of sacred moments could be effectively incorporated into groups that provide psychoeducation and support for patients with chronic pain, complicated grief, trauma, or illness-related anxiety. Addressing sacred moments as part of a group intervention could also facilitate connections and understanding between patients. Next, further research is needed to better understand the potential for sacred moments to be protective against healthcare provider burn out, fatigue, and moral injury. In this vein, it is

also important to identify healthcare providers who are open to sacred moments with patients, and, if so, what other specific, practical, and available steps could be taken to help foster sacred moments within the patient-provider relationship given the current systems-level restraints. These are just a few of the ways that the spiritual resource of sacred moments can be more fully integrated into healthcare.

Practice: Cultivating Sacred Moments Activity

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