

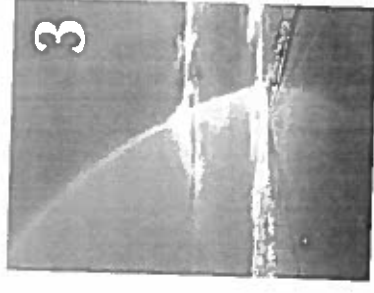
Multifaith Views in Spiritual Care

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The world is one family Principles of Hindu spiritual care

Dinesh C. Sharma¹

Rooted in such practices as *pranayama*,² meditation, and yoga, Hinduism has much to offer both spiritual caregivers and receivers, and to those within the faith tradition as well as to those coming from other or no faith backgrounds. To begin, I will briefly describe the core beliefs of Hinduism pertinent to spiritual care. I will then consider principles of Hindu caregiving, including practical illustrations. Finally, I will highlight key competencies for effective care.

Core beliefs of Hinduism

To appreciate why Hinduism has something unique to offer spiritual caregiving, it is helpful to have a basic understanding of a few of the religion's core beliefs, as listed below:

- There is only one triune God.
- All living beings are divine.
- The sacred writings of Hinduism are foundational to the religion.
- The nature of creation is cyclic and eternal.
- The theory of karma—that is, “as you sow, so shall you reap”—teaches us that a balance exists in the universe, and that, to some extent, we are masters of our destiny. We create karma through our thoughts, words, and actions.
- The soul is immortal and will return to live in a new body after death of the former through reincarnation. The ultimate goal of

¹ Pandit Dinesh C. Sharma wishes to pay his oblation to the lotus feet of his guru (spiritual teacher), and all sages, and dedicates this essay to them.

² Pranayama is a Sanskrit word meaning “extension of the breath.”

human life is to attain *moksha* (liberation), or to know God, and this is possible only when all karmas are dissolved.

- According to Hindu scriptures, it is easier to achieve self-realization, that is, divine knowledge, with the help and guidance of an able guru (spiritual teacher).

In addition to those key beliefs, Hindu scriptures prescribe ten *Vedic Yama* (restraints) and ten *niyama* (practices). The ten Vedic restraints include *ahimsa* (non-violence), *satya* (always speak the truth), *asteya* (refrain from stealing), *brahmacharya* (chastity or divine conduct), *kshama* (patience and forgiveness), *dhriti* (steadfastness), *daya* (compassion), *arjava* (honesty), *mitahara* (moderate appetite), and *shaucha* (purity or external and internal cleanliness).

The ten Vedic practices include remorse, contentment, charity, faith, worship, scripture listening or reading, cognition, *vrata* (sacred vows), *jap* (recitation of God's name, sometimes aided by a rosary), and austerity. Those who follow the discipline, practices, and principles just highlighted are likely to live a healthy, happy, and long life.

Sacred writings

Followers of Hinduism refer to the religion as *Sanatana Dharma*—meaning “the eternal law.” The foundation of *Sanatana Dharma* rests on four pillars, each known as a *Veda*, meaning “divine knowledge” or “ultimate reality.” The mantras in the Vedas are the words revealed to sages by God. Originally, the *Veda* was a single oral collection of mantras, but, over time, the single tradition was divided into four books—*Rig-Veda*, *Yajurveda*, *Samaveda*, and *Atharvaveda*.

Four *upavedas* (or “sub-vedas”) also exist, though lists vary somewhat as to what is included. The most pertinent *upaveda* to our topic of spiritual caregiving is the *Ayurveda* (*Ayur* means “life”), dealing with the prevention of disease and preservation of life. Alongside the *Ayurveda*, the *Charanavyutha* includes three other *upavedas*: the *Dhanurveda*, associated with combat skills; the *Gandharvaveda*, relating to music and dance; and the *Sashtrashastra*, affiliated with military science.

God in Hindu philosophy

Though Vedic philosophy holds that there is only one God—and that this God is eternal, unchangeable, omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipenetrating—it is not possible to give a comprehensive definition of God within the framework of Hinduism, as people see God in different forms

and by different names. God is the inner soul of every being, and every human is part of the Divine consciousness. God is infinite (*Atharvaveda* 10.8.12); God is immortal (*Rigveda* 10.48.5); God is beneficial and a judicious friend (*Yajurveda* 36.9). We might also talk about God by understanding what God is not, which is known as *Neti neti* (“not this, nor that”)—God cannot be seen, cannot be specified, is without color, and without eyes or ears.

While many Hindus believe in roughly 330 million gods and goddesses, this is not contradictory to the monotheistic faith. According to the *Rigveda* (1.164.46), “God is one, though sages call God by different names.” In general, Hindus believe in the trinity of the *Brahma* (Creator), *Vishnu* (Preserver), and *Shiva* (Destroyer).

Hinduism and community

Consistent with the recognition of God as one, though with many names, *Sanatana Dharma*'s philosophy and traditions are universal, comprehensive, and inclusive. The prayers, mantras, principles, and guidelines from the Hindu scriptures are meant for the benefit of all humanity, not just for Hindus. A well-known mantra from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* models this universality:

Om sarve bhavantu sukhinah

Sarve santu nir-aamayayah

Sarve bhadraanni pashyantu

Maa kashchid-dukha-bhaag-bhavet.

May everyone be joyful!

May everyone be healthy!

May everyone look to the good of others!

May no one in the world suffer!

Historically, members of any given community were classified into four categories based on vocation, as found in *Bhagavad Gita*, 18.41–45—the *Brahmana* (teacher), the *Kshatriya* (protector), the *Vaishya* (nourisher), and the *Shudra* (worker). Rohit Mehta states, however, that “this is a functional classification of humankind, but behind it one can see the comprehension of the psychological attitude of man. The fourfold classification has both a social and an individual significance. In its social

setting, it indicates an ideology of social integration."³

The mantra of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam affirms that the entire world is one family—a bold and powerful statement. Every human being is a temple in which God resides, and any help or service rendered to a fellow being is considered as service to God.

Spiritual care practice

Health and healing: Origin of Ayurveda

The practice of *Ayurveda*, or "the knowledge for long life," is a holistic treatment, and includes caring for the mind, body, and spirit—the most sacred three dimensions of human life. As the name suggests, *Ayurveda* is a science of life as well as an art of living, and is applicable to all human beings. It is based on the premise that the universe is made of five elements: air, fire, water, earth, and ether. These elements are represented in humans by three doshas, or energies: *Vata* (air and ether elements), *Kapha* (water and earth elements) and *Pitta* (fire and water elements). *Ayurveda* endeavors to restore harmony of the above doshas through cleansing, palliative measures, and the treatment of underlying cause.⁴

Health is a natural state of existence—in fact, according to the *Taittiriya Shaka* of the *Krishna Yajurveda* (2.3.11), every human being is born with the innate potential for living a healthy life of one hundred years or more. The teachings of Swami Satchidananda instruct us to keep our bodies strong, to care for them gently, and to live in such a way that makes them healthy. He says, "The body is a vehicle of divine expression, as are all forms of creation. To become a good instrument of the divine, maintain your health. Have an easeful body, a peaceful mind, and a useful life."⁵

Illness, however, can come from the type of food we eat, lifestyle choices, or the environment we find ourselves in. Prevention of illness and maintenance of good health go together in life. Hindu philosophy, however, affirms that each human body is capable of healing itself. While a physician can aid in the healing of the body and the spiritual caregiver can help in restoring peace of mind, it is the care receiver who plays the

most vital role in their own healing. Dr. R. L. Kashyap observed that there are four basic methods of healing found in the Hindu scriptures: the willpower of the person, openness, recital of mantras, and communion.⁶ He explains that in order to have a happy and fulfilled life, we must make use of and nourish our willpower, fortitude, and quietude. These resources, however, need replenishing, and the mantras, discussed later, can help us in this restoration.⁷

Willpower

A patient's thoughts can be both their greatest resource in overcoming illness and their greatest obstacle. In harnessing control of thoughts, willpower plays a vital role in the recovery of any person. According to Hindu scriptures, humans are made by their belief—what they believe, they are. Sri Aurobindo asserts, "Disease is needlessly prolonged and ends in death more often than is inevitable, because the mind of the patient supports and dwells upon the disease of the body."⁸

Helping patients uncover a sense of strength in themselves will help them recover more quickly. Reverend Mother from Sri Aurobindo Ashram, India, writes that everything you do should be done in "a spirit of complete surrender." You should do your best, while still placing the final outcome in the hands of the Divine.⁹

Positive energy and pranayama

Often, the problem a patient suffers from is the result of negative energy affecting a part of their mind, soul, or body. In most cases, unfortunately, the person in need of care does not know how to harness positive energies, often due to lack of faith and the negative attitude that generally accompanies illness or traumatic situations. Helping patients develop a positive attitude and faith in their capacity to help themselves greatly assists the healing process.

While helping to build the self-esteem of patients is a longer-term undertaking, *pranayama* is a breath tool that might immediately affect overall health for any given patient, for everyone is always breathing and will do so until the end. In order to assist a patient in this way, we should guide the patient to think positive thoughts, reminding them that, with each breath, illness leaves their body while healing power enters in. As

³ Rohit Melton, *From Mind to Super Mind: A Commentary on the Bhagavad-Gita* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 1995), 186.

⁴ N. A. Murthy and D. P. Pandey, *Ayurvedic Care for Common Diseases* (New Delhi: Orient Paperback, 1997), 1, 29.

⁵ Cited by Swami Sarvananda, "The Hindu Chaplain," *Hinduism Today* (Magazine Web Edition: <http://www.hinduismtoday.com>), Pl. 0 R0C became the first Hindu chaplain

⁶ Dr. R. L. Kashyap, *Shanti Mantras* (Bangalore: Institute of Vedic Culture, 2009), vii, xi, 17.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Mother Aurobindo Ghose, *On Thoughts and Aphorisms* (Sri Aurobindo Ashram: 1984), 324.

we become more confident in assisting patients with their breathing, we might further train them to hold different postures so that good energy might flow through their bodies and on to specific areas.

Another way of assisting the patients in their breathing is to actually match one's breath to that of the care receiver, who might be breathing either too slowly or too quickly, and then slowly change our breathing to the appropriate pace.

The power of mantras

The next step after right breathing involves the power of mantras. I strongly believe that mantras and prayers have healing powers, though science has not yet found a fully satisfactory explanation. My belief in the effects of prayer is only strengthened by my personal visits with patients. In the following paragraphs, I will provide a few examples of the healing power of prayer that I have witnessed in caregiving situations.

One afternoon, I received a call that a lady in her early sixties had a brain hemorrhage. When I reached the hospital she was unstable and speaking out of context. Her forty-year-old son was in tears and holding her hand. I first consoled the son and asked permission to sit beside him. "Uncle," he said, "she went shopping and felt very sick. Immediately she called for an ambulance and now here she is." The elderly woman mumbled something difficult to understand. With the son's permission I took her left hand in mine and started to chant a few mantras, and, to the amazement of her son, she calmed down quickly. Because the chanting of the mantras brought the woman some measure of peace, I began daily visits, sometimes even coming multiple times in the same day. After brain surgery, the woman fully recovered, and I believe this was largely due to the miraculous nature of prayer.

At another time, I was approached by the family of a young woman after she had started her fourth treatment of chemotherapy. My wife and I visited their home the same day. I talked to the parents first and then to the young woman. I listened, showed empathy, and comforted the care receiver. A bit scared and uneasy, I invoked my guru's spiritual powers and started to pray while my wife held the patient's hand. The following verbatim on this caregiving situation further illustrates my views and the practice of spiritual care from a Hindu perspective.

Case study

A young woman in her early twenties sat in her bedroom, in both distress and pain. A small dog was by her side and her father was present. We knew

this family through our local temple, and it was at her parents' request that my wife and I visited the family. We learned that she was suffering from cancer and had already had four therapies. Despite all her pain and discomfort, she appeared receptive and eager for our visit.

C = Care receiver

S = Spiritual care specialist

F = Father

The father received us at the door and directed us to the living room.

F Namaste, Mrs. and Mr. Sharma.

S Thank you, John, for inviting us to your home. We are glad we can be with your family at this time.

S If you don't mind, please tell us a little bit about your daughter's health condition.

F Mr. S. (He was holding back his tears, and I tried to comfort him with a slight pat on his back.) Mr. S., my daughter was fine until she noticed a small growth on her neck. We went to the family doctor, and he prescribed an antibiotic that she took for a month, but it didn't help. (He continued to narrate the ordeal that the family was going through, including their many sleepless nights.)

S I can understand your feelings, John . . . it is hard to believe that your own child is so sick. (I touched his hand, comforted him, and requested that he pull himself together, especially in front of their daughter—I asked him whether a glass of water would help.)

F Thank you, Mr. S. I feel relieved talking to you.

S We would like to talk to your daughter, if you don't mind.

F Sure. (He pointed toward a room upstairs, and we followed him into their daughter's room.)

S Hello, P., I am Dinesh Sharma, a spiritual caregiver, and this is my wife, R.

C Hi uncle, I know you from the temple.

S Is it OK with you if my wife stays here?

C Yes, by all means. (She was speaking in a mild voice, and her pain was tangible.)

S I just talked with your father about your illness. Do you mind speaking with us for a few minutes?

C Of course I will speak with you.

S Please tell me about your health.

C One morning I found a lump in my neck, so my parents took me to

our family doctor. He prescribed some medicine, but it did not help, so my father insisted that I see a specialist. (There was a moment of silence. I tried to comfort her by holding her hand.) Finally, I was diagnosed with this dreadful disease.

S I am very sorry to hear about your ordeal.

C Do you think I will survive this cancer? (Her father had left the room, and I was surprised by the directness of the question but maintained composure.)

S I am not a doctor, but I have seen many patients recover from cancer ... I am confident that you will be fine with the quality medical care you are receiving.

C Hmm (as if she was not sure.) ... It is good to talk to you, but I am tired. Would you mind saying some prayers for me? (I read the Sanskrit prayers in English: "God takes us from the non-being to true being, from the darkness to the light, from death to immortality. Om! Peace! Peace! Peace." It appeared that she liked the tune of the mantra and smiled faintly.)

C Please do come again.

S Thank you, I will. Take care.

After leaving the young woman's room, I talked to the father and agreed to come daily for at least a week and once a week thereafter. I left with a heavy heart and recited a mantra to care for my own distress. The next day, I received notice that the girl wished to speak with me again.

2nd Visit

The young woman was finishing her breakfast in her bedroom. She insisted that I have some coffee, an offer I accepted.

S How are you feeling today?

C Not well.

S Was there a reason you called for me?

C Yes, I have two questions on my mind. First, what if I do not recover from this illness? And, second, I am concerned about my studies. (She was in her second year at the university.)

S Yesterday I reminded you that you are getting the best treatment available in the medical field. Rest is important—only you can help yourself.

C How might I help myself?

S Think only about your health, and do not focus on the cancer. You can believe that you are getting better day by day. Have you heard

about the rule of 20/80?

C I'm not sure. Would you mind telling me?

S The rule of 20/80 is that twenty percent is what has happened to you, and eighty percent is how you react to the situation. Instead of focusing on "why me?" you should focus on overcoming this disease.

C Thank you, but how do I do this?

S You should make a promise to yourself that you will be happy and always focus on your health. Do not worry about your studies right now. For now, you should concentrate on getting better.

C Thanks, that really takes the burden off of me ... Uncle, please suggest some prayers that I might recite.

S You can recite many prayers, but it is best to recite "Om Gum Ganpate Namaha," (meaning, "I pray to Eternal Supreme consciousness, Ganesha. He is beyond the three attributes of humans. It is by contemplating on Ganesha, in the heart, that Brahama creates, Vishnu preserves and Rudra absorbs the creation") and ask for good health.

C Thank you. I feel much better. (I thanked her and wished her good luck.)

I continued to visit this young woman from time to time, and she has shown remarkable progress and gratitude. I always reminded her that her recovery was due to her positive attitude and continued focus on self-care. To everyone's great surprise, the young woman's level of pain and unease was reduced significantly after the next chemotherapy treatment. The woman survived the illness and resumed her normal daily life. Both the patient and her family firmly believe that the guru's grace and the powers of the mantra were essential to her healing. I also believe that the family's deep commitment and faith played an important role in the young woman's recovery.¹⁰

¹⁰ Nakini Tarakeshwar and colleagues studied and sought to measure religious coping—that is, the function of religious beliefs and practices in times of crisis—among Hindus. They found that, similar to results obtained with other religious traditions, religious coping for Hindus serves five main functions: finding meaning, gaining control, gaining comfort and closeness to the Divine, gaining intimacy with others, and achieving life transformation. Those researchers developed a Hindu Religious Outcome 20-item scale assessing the degree to which involvement in Hindu pathways lead to valued outcomes (e.g., "Practicing yoga/meditation brings me mental peace and stability"). They also created a 27-item scale assessing degree of involvement in four Hindu pathways: devotion, ethical action, knowledge, and restraint (e.g., "How often do you perform puja in honor of your deity?" [Path of Devotion]). N. Tarakeshwar, K. I. Paragme, & A. Mahoney, "Initial Development of a Measure of Religious Coping Among Hindus," *Journal of Community Psychology* 31, no. 6 (2003): 607–28; and, by the same authors, "Measures of Hindu Pathways: Development and Preliminary Evidence of Reliability and Validity," *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Journal* 9, no. 4 (2003): 377–94.

Commitment to follow-up, evident in the case studies provided above, enables the professional caregiver the ability to monitor the effect of therapy and the healing process. It may also help to avoid the relapse of the ailment and provides material for later assessments.

Competencies for fruitful spiritual care

Spirituality is an integral part of ancient Indian health, both in philosophy and practice. In providing health care, there are three basic covenants in the Indian system that provide the foundation of *Ayurveda*—that one is capable, available, and of unquestionable character. Caregivers should have thorough knowledge of the subject, as well as purity of both heart and body. They should be free from vanity, egotism, and boastfulness and should show regard for decent behavior, speech, and dress. They should be respectful to patients as well as to their patients' conditions.

A true and professional spiritual caregiver should be courteous, self-controlled, compassionate, abstemious, modest, and have a passion for learning. In the Hindu practice of spiritual care, knowledge and action are complementary to each other. Knowledge without action is futile, and action without knowledge can be dangerous. According to Hindu scriptures there are two types of knowledge which any good spiritual caregiver will both seek and acquire: *apara-vidya*, which involves the knowledge of the material world; and *para-vidya*, or knowledge of the divine, leading to self-realization. In fact, Hindu philosophy holds that spiritual healing occurs when the soul is finely in tune with the Brahman (Creator).

Hindu scripture describes the qualities a caregiver should have:

He who knows only the theory but is not proficient in practice gets bewildered on confronting a patient, just as a crowd feels afraid on the battlefield. Only the wise person who knows both theory and practice is capable of obtaining success, just as only a two-wheeled chariot is useful in the battlefield.
—Sushruta Samhita¹¹

Caregivers should have, again, both knowledge and practice, theory and action. A good caregiver will know how to provide spiritual care in diverse situations and circumstances. They will have a wide knowledge in related realms, including the emotional and socio-spiritual fields. Practically, they will model a healthy self-esteem, which will convey a positive image to the care receiver. They should show empathy toward

the values and beliefs of the patient, as well as sensitivity to the social and cultural beliefs of others. A good caregiver will communicate well and behave in such a way that care receivers feel comfortable and understood. They must also have the ability to hold their own beliefs with integrity and without compromise, while not imposing or super-imposing their own personal beliefs or values onto the patient.

That person alone is fit to nurse or to attend the bedside of a patient who is cool-headed and pleasant in his demeanor, does not speak ill of anybody, is strong and attentive to the requirements of the sick, and strictly and indefatigably follows the instructions of the physician.¹²

Similarly, Charaka wrote that any attendant should "be devoted to the patient, have purity of mind and body, and be intelligent or clever."¹³

Action

As mentioned previously, we must have a desire and a plan if we hope to have good health, and remembering the effects of karma might assist us in maintaining that desire and creating a plan, even in dire circumstances. In care and counseling, the understanding that each action has a reaction that will somehow, someday, bring balance makes it easier to understand and accept a situation one has not caused directly—such as the impending death of a loved one. Remembering the balance of karma might help individuals have greater acceptance and even assist them in surrendering to what unfolds. When we remember that there is a reason behind everything, it becomes the person's duty to deal with the present and not resort to pondering the "what ifs" of the past that might have changed the present. Instead, plans can be made, action taken, that all might move forward.

Holistic presence might come about when action and knowledge come together and under the right circumstances. This presence might help the care receiver feel safe, comfortable, protected, and understood, and often results in a sensed connectedness and hope. Holistic presence that is a byproduct of appropriate knowledge applied during a care visit is not a complementary therapy, but is rather the correct, complete, and cohesive therapy, often able to produce overall satisfaction. In the words of Rohit Mehta, "right action is possible only if there is right perception.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *The Care of the Sick: the Emancipation of Medical Knowledge*.

¹¹ David Frawley and Ranade Subhash, *Ayurveda: Nature's Medicine* (Twin Lakes, WI: Lotus Press,

And right perception . . . is that condition of the human mind in which it is capable of total and undistracted attention, freed from confusion of thought, and not caught in the play of opposites."¹⁴

Communication through quietude

In Hindu spiritual care, it is believed that it is best for a caregiver to be in a state of silence and deep quietness, or *quietude*. This quietude is the state in which the mind is focused on listening to the other person empathetically, and is often called "active listening." Effective listening will help build the care receiver's will-power and self-confidence and creates an overall positive attitude. Inner-stillness—just being, not doing—is a great healing force and essential in assisting patients and families as they deal with turbulent emotions. Inner-stillness brings with it outer stillness.

Hindu caregivers in North America may encounter particular communication challenges, especially in issues of culture and language. An important example is that, though first-generation Hindu immigrants may have a good understanding of English, our patients may not always understand our speech. In any event, we caregivers need to make an extra effort to communicate clearly.¹⁵

Challenges in interfaith spiritual caregiving and what Hinduism might offer

It is my belief that basic traits are held in common by all faith-based spiritual care systems. On the surface, individuals look different, but we are all human and of equal value—we are all made of the same basic elements. In the same way, the spiritual needs of different faith groups are similar but with a few external differences. All care receivers need unconditional comfort and understanding, regardless of their religious tradition. Indeed, Swami Vivekananda has stated that we should let the poor, the illiterate, the ignorant, the afflicted, be our God; we must know that service to them alone is the highest religion. In other words, any caregiver should provide services to a patient in need as if they were serving God, regardless of their religion or lack of religion.

The fundamental Hindu principle that "truth is one; though seers express it in many ways," is a cornerstone for good interfaith spiritual

care.¹⁶ The caregiver must respect religious differences while acknowledging that there is an essence of sameness, believing that truth, joy, love, and light might be found on any path.

Diversity does exist, however, and always presents an opportunity for learning. In these situations we need to practice mutual respect and understanding. The best approach in multifaith interactions is to try to know and understand those other traditions and backgrounds and accept them on their terms. Hindu chaplains or spiritual caregivers should have a working knowledge of other faiths and, especially, Judeo-Christian spiritual care, as the majority of care receivers in North America are from the Judeo-Christian tradition, broadly speaking. Consequently, acquaintance with Judeo-Christian beliefs and rituals is imperative. When I meet care receivers who are non-believers, I seek to listen and, whenever possible, talk to them about using the inherent energy flowing through every living creature that might help them meet any challenge.

Finally, it is the nature of a chaplain's work to care for anyone impacted by crisis on a daily basis. We help individuals face transitions, assist survivors in coming to terms with grief, handle mundane matters that accompany death, and find ways to walk with the living as they move ahead in their lives, and all this on a daily basis. It is beneficial for every individual, regardless of faith background, to have assistance in finding meaning, hope, and moving forward.

In conclusion, I would like to share a teaching of my spiritual guru: "It is said that a healthy mind and an enlightened spirit will certainly help to create a healthy body. In my opinion, spiritual health care is more a philosophy of healthy living, love, empathy, happiness, peace, trust and enlightenment, rather than a philosophy of religion." *Om Shanti . . . Shanti . . . Shanti*—let there be peace within us and among us.

¹⁴ Melita, *From Mind to Super Mind*, 186.

¹⁵ For a helpful discussion of caring for Hindus in Canada and the United States in light of specific challenges related to cultural differences and family and marriage in particular, see Anu R. Sharma, "Psychotherapy with Hindus," in *Handbook of Psychiatry and Religious Diversity*, ed. P. Scott Richards & Allen E. Bergin (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2000).