

Both in my private practice and my social circles I sometimes see people using spirituality as an excuse to not deal with life's problems. For example, a few weeks prior a person attempted suicide. In what seems like a miraculous healing, they are attributing great joy in moments of being present. Which would be utterly fantastic if that was the only thing going on. But it's not. They are largely directionless in life, wandering around aimlessly, wondering what career to pursue or whether to remain in a relationship or not. There are other tell-tale signs – overly dependent on others for answers, an overly critical orientation, both outward and inward, but most of all they just don't feel good about themselves. The person fluctuates between moment of clarity and joy to feeling ill at ease with themselves and life.

It surfaced as I was working with another client, that they were using meditation and hypnosis to blank out from life. Instead of dealing with ongoing family and work issues these traditional inner practices literally had become an addiction which enabled the person to dissociate from life. Usually meditation and hypnosis allow a person to contact parts of themselves they might not know well or not at all. But in this case hypnosis and meditation were used as an escape from life.

There is a person on Facebook who acknowledges she has been traumatized. In her mind, she believes she is being guided by angels and by the deceased. She believes that they are leading her to salvation and a life free of suffering. As best as I can tell she has been at this for around seven years with no discernible progress. One of the things she does quite regularly is to dissociate. When she is dissociated she seems to confuse an altered state as being something divine in nature.

What these three people have in common is they are using spirituality to avoid life's difficulties. They are using spirituality as a type of analgesic – a way of numbing and turning away from what must be dealt with for life to progress satisfactorily. This is sometimes referred to as spiritual bypassing.

Many people on the spiritual path believe that things like meditation lead to higher, universal truths. In many ways they think the day to day dramas and problems are on a lower realm. There can often be a sense of superiority revolving around the spiritual path – a kind of I am too good for therapy mentality. All ego at its best of course!

I asked someone what about the people that are genuinely happy and content with life, but are not spiritual per se. His response was that it was superficial of them. I would beg to differ. I think it is more superficial to wear a costume of superiority. Walking around thinking and feeling superior is hardly a recipe for being more spiritual.

I have been known to remark that often the most spiritual people are the most responsible. They have a penchant for dealing with problems in an adult like manner. They understand that life can throw many challenges which are unavoidable. How people react to those challenges is something which can have a positive orientation or an orientation of learning from the situation. And that's the thing, each of the people used in the examples used were not really learning from the situation, but rather were stuck in deeply ingrained and unconscious responses. It should be pointed out that it is understandable why each person was stuck in their own way. Though I have used three rather extreme examples, each in their own way captures our tendency to want to escape rather than face things.

The way out is that what most people really need is to roll up their sleeves and deal with each of life's problems in turn. The next step on the spiritual path is always the thing right in front of us usually in the form of a problem. Most often the spiritual path is exactly the psychological one. In fact it is extremely rare not to be. This doesn't mean that meditation or hypnosis or plain old-fashioned gazing at our navels don't have their place. They can all be very helpful and useful. I encourage many of my clients to meditate as one example. What both paths often have in common is a greater understanding of how we function as individuals and how we function in relation to others.

To my way of thinking, one of the keys is to learn to identify when spiritual practices are used as an escape rather than as a method to contact something deeper within. I also am fond of encouraging people to look at their resistances rather than what they resonate with. Mostly because there is more to learn from resistance than resonance.

The three people used as examples in this article, resonated at some level with something spiritual. But what they were resisting was far more telling. It often is easier to try and escape, but it's not necessarily better in the long run. Almost always, the things we do not deal with come back to haunt us later in life. Our deepest sorrows are hard to touch. They are even harder to shift. We should acknowledge that and act accordingly.