

What Spiritual Bypassing Means – And How It's Toxic To Your Mental Health

Is your spirituality toxic or authentic?

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When we practice spirituality (<https://www.yourtango.com/self/your-spiritual-platform>) or attempt to bring ourselves closer to a higher understanding, we are supposed to put all our emotions and deeply hidden feelings on the table.

Unfortunately, some people spiritually bypass and stunt their spiritual growth. But what does that mean?

What is spiritual bypassing?

You may not recognize this term, but it's been around since the 1980s.

According to Buddhist teacher and psychologist John Welwood (<https://tricycle.org/magazine/human-nature-buddha-nature/>), who coined the term, spiritual bypassing means having a "tendency to use spiritual ideas and practices to sidestep or avoid facing unresolved emotional issues, psychological wounds, and unfinished developmental tasks."

A strong spiritual practice can provide you with resources and tools to stay calmer and more centered in your life, especially during times of stress.

Having a positive outlook and maintaining hope are two keys to better health as a whole – except when they are used to cover up, avoid, minimize, or deny a problem that needs to be resolved. This then becomes something called spiritual bypassing, rather than an authentic spiritual practice.

While spiritual enlightenment is the expressed goal (<https://www.yourtango.com/2020333177/what-spiritual-awakening>) of the practices and ideas of the seeker, pseudo-enlightenment that covers over your anger, your secrets, and mistakes is not really enlightenment. That is more like trying to put a band-aid on a wound that wasn't cleaned first: the dirt is still there and can even lead to infection.

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Spiritual bypassing is a strategy used to avoid painful emotions or realities. Just like the ghosts that keep reappearing to haunt fairytales, Shakespeare, and your dreams, the ghosts of your unfinished business will continue to emerge until they have been acknowledged, resolved, and perhaps even befriended.

What are the signs of spiritual bypassing?

Because spiritual bypassing is a way of hiding behind supposed spirituality in an effort to avoid facing your real issues, there are a number of signs that you could be doing this, even without knowing it.

Signs of spiritual bypassing include feeling entitled, not living in the present, putting too much emphasis on positivity, being overly detached, being overly idealistic, showing anger, engaging in cognitive dissonance (<https://www.yourtango.com/experts/patricia-ogorman/what-is-cognitive-dissonance>), feeling spiritually superior, using coping mechanisms, or projecting negative feelings onto other people.

A few examples of spiritual bypassing come in the form of phrases like "everything happens for a reason," "thoughts and prayers," "blessing in disguise," or "good vibes only."

What causes spiritual bypassing?

Because spiritual bypassing is a defense mechanism, it's used as a way to cope with troubling or difficult realities.

Someone experiencing spiritual bypassing may be too afraid to experience the pain they are holding deep inside, and will use any means necessary to protect themselves. When certain emotions come up, they are immediately suppressed, leaving issues unsolved.

For example, if they have feelings of anger that begin to surface, rather than facing their emotions head-on, they use spiritual bypassing as a way to avoid it altogether.

Another reason people may spiritually bypass is to downplay their suffering. For instance, if a negative event occurs, the person may say, "that's what God intended" or "it was for the best" as a way to explain away their hurt. This allows them to avoid taking any responsibility for their actions.

Finally, toxic wellness culture may be partially to blame (<https://www.yourtango.com/experts/elayne-daniels/reasons-diet-culture-wellness-fitspiration-are-harmful>) as well, as this movement relies on blind optimism and toxic positivity.

Here are 8 ways to avoid spiritual bypassing and find authentic spirituality.

1. Focus on the here and now.

Rather than living in the past and focusing on what used to be, stay present. Learn to identify when you're recycling a past hurt or catastrophizing an imagined future.

2. Create a mental 'field' to keep negative thought patterns out.

Then, practice using an image such as a bubble or a containment field to remove negative thought patterns and externalize them.

3. Acknowledge that good and bad can both exist.

In the Buddhist symbol of yin and yang

(<https://www.yourtango.com/2020333687/meaning-spiritual-symbols>), the white swirl of the yin contains the black dot of the yang, and the black swirl of the yang contains the white dot of the yin.

Pretending that something is “all good” doesn’t make it so. There is both good and bad in the world, often in the same situation or person.

4. Know that you are on a path.

Except for moments of delicious grace, you do not stay in an enlightened state. As the Dalai Lama said, “After enlightenment, the laundry.”

5. Strive for balance in your life.

Find a healthy balance between being connected and detached from yourself, others, and ideas.

6. Listen to your dreams.

Your dreams contain unadulterated truths that the censor of your waking mind has not yet contaminated with judgment. Pay close attention to what your subconscious is trying to tell you.

7. Use a dream journal.

This is to both record your dreams and to incubate new and healing ones. Spend a few minutes before bed writing down the healing, enlightenment or resolution you desire, and then end with a question about how to attain it.

Write down the dream you have, then receive on the same page. Some of the answers to your questions will be embedded therein.

8. Identify the root cause of your negative emotions.

The work of clearly seeing these patterns or "ghosts" involves addressing the root cause of your anger and fear.

Where did you learn to swallow your true feelings? Where did you learn never to truly trust anyone? Where did you learn that grace and forgiveness were for others, but not for you?

You can move the root sources of your pain up from their buried depths in your unconscious through good therapy, strong dreamwork, and a real commitment to get down into the mess.

Working through the issues, whether or not the people you struggle with are currently in your life, frees you to be able to really use spiritual ideas and practices without avoiding reality or denying issues.

What are the effects of spiritual bypassing?

When used as a long-term strategy, spiritual bypassing can be damaging. Spiritual bypassing skips the hard work of really confronting your own demons, mistakes, burdens, and doing the real work of deep healing.

During times of high anxiety or social unrest, spiritual bypassing becomes more common. However, this leads to a compensatory cover up rather than resolution.

Long-term spiritual bypassing can lead to deterioration of one's mental health and lead to codependency, shame, spiritual narcissism (<https://www.yourtango.com/2017299206/agonny-spiritual-abuse-by-religious-narcissists>), and control issues.

This toxic practice not only makes individuals deny their own emotions, but the emotions of others as well, leading to the judgment of other people and the justification of suffering.

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