

Discovering Spirituality: A Guide for Teens¹

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The Big Questions

Who am I? What is my purpose? Seeking answers to these and related questions is a common experience for teens and young people. These questions can lead to a lifelong search for meaningful answers. For many people around the world, and throughout history, these questions are the seeds of a spiritual journey.

Spirituality and Religion

People often think of spirituality in terms of religious beliefs and practices; however, one can be spiritual but not very religious. In fact, a growing percentage of American youth identify as “spiritual, but not religious” according to a study by the Pew Research Center (Lipka & Gecewicz, 2017). In another study, of all teens that identified as religiously unaffiliated, 62% expressed their belief in God or a universal spirit (Pew Research Center, 2020). Religion focuses on the beliefs and practices of a religious organization or creed, while spirituality focuses on inspiration, self-reflection, and personal connection. Most definitions agree that spirituality is a connection to something that is greater than the self and inspires respect and admiration (Hay, et al., 2024; Lerner, et al., 2008). This can be a connection to a religious being such as a deity or spirit. It can also be a connection to individuals, objects, or a set of beliefs that inspire both wonder and humility. In either case, spirituality refers to the activity of fostering a connection to what is sacred and meaningful in life. One can be both spiritual and religious or neither spiritual nor religious. However, researchers are beginning to discover the benefits of spiritual practice, especially for teens (Aggarwal, et al., 2023; Smith & Faris, 2002).



Figure 1. Spiritual explorer.

Credit: PIXNIO (image is in public domain; <https://pixnio.com/nature-landscapes/night/sky-night-galaxy-milky-way-stars-explorer-person-shadow-silhouette>)

Benefits of Spirituality

Some benefits of spirituality include the following:

- Higher self-esteem and self-worth
- More positive relationships
- Lower alcohol and drug use
- Greater sense that life has meaning and purpose
- Greater sense of belonging and connectedness
- Lower anxiety and stress
- A stronger relationship with parents
- More friends who are positive influences
- More respect for yourself and others
- Greater success in life
- Experiencing a feeling of hope, even during hardships (Roehlkepartain, et al., 2006; The Center for Spiritual Development, n.d.)

While these benefits won’t provide answers to “the big questions” of life on their own, they can help you to follow your spiritual path by making healthy choices and developing better relationships with others.

Practicing Spirituality

There are many ways that you can promote spirituality in your life. These include individual practices and activities you can share with peers and mentors. Like other areas of life, the more you invest into your spirituality, the more you will benefit. Often, people think of spiritual practice as

prayer or meditation. These are both great options for growing one's spirituality, and there are many other ways to grow spiritually. For example, spiritual practice might include physical activity, artistic creativity, appreciation of nature, spending time alone or with others. Really, everyone can find the form of spiritual practice that works best for them. Below are a few suggestions to get you started.

- Prayer can take many forms, including traditional or spontaneous prayers recited silently or aloud, alone or with others.
- Meditation also includes a broad diversity of practices from traditions around the world, such as silent contemplation, breathing exercises, walking meditation, mantra meditation, and more.
- Reading sacred texts and hearing from others. Sometimes reading or hearing the story of another person's spiritual journey can provide insight and inspiration for our own process.
- Express your spirituality through journals, music, and other forms of self-expression (The Center for Spiritual Development, n.d.). Spirituality really flows through self-discovery.
- Explore the natural world. Taking time to appreciate and connect with nature can be an effective practice for cultivating spiritual connection.
- Surround yourself with positive friends who strengthen your spiritual growth (The Center for Spiritual Development, n.d.). Your values are influenced by those around you, so pick your friends wisely.
- Volunteer with a local community service organization. Service to others is a potent practice to access spiritual qualities such as empathy, compassion, and to realize one's interconnectedness.

If you already attend a church, synagogue, temple, or mosque:

- Learn more about your own religious beliefs by reading sacred books, praying, meditating, or attending religious activities.
- Discuss spiritual questions with your parents or other trusted adults (The Center for Spiritual Development, n.d.). Don't be afraid to open up to someone whom you believe you can talk to and who will not judge you for asking the "tough" questions.
- Ask questions of your religious or spiritual leaders and share personal experiences with adults you trust (The Center for Spiritual Development, n.d.).
- Get involved in religious activities just for teens. Participation in these activities will give you the opportunity to develop friendships with people who share similar values.

As you explore your spiritual side, keep in mind the value of the simple processes you find that work for you. Finding

balance is an important, and often challenging, element in integrating spirituality in a sustainable way alongside other responsibilities and relationships. Enjoy the journey of discovery and value the role of doubt in the process. Spirituality is a lifelong process and embracing a healthy dose of humility and not knowing all the answers can serve as a transformative element in cultivating faith.

Whether you are religious or not, anyone can develop spirituality. Developing spirituality promotes self-discovery so that you can better understand your own values, competencies, and strengths. It helps to establish meaningful relationships with others you can count on to be there when times get tough. And it allows you to see the "big picture" and to make decisions in life that will benefit you in the long run. Spirituality can be formed and practiced in a variety of different ways. No matter which path you choose, a positive and healthy spirituality will provide you with a sense of meaning and purpose and help you to navigate the obstacles in life.

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