**Appendix B**

**Intervention Manuals**

**Description of the Intervention: BSS**

This document contains Building Spiritual Strength intervention manual as it has been used at the Minneapolis VA Healthcare System and in training for chaplains and mental health providers in other VA settings.

A brief summary of objectives for each of the 8 sessions follows:

* Session one establishes group rapport by sharing military and religious histories, defining group norms, and identifying individual spiritual development goals.
* Sessions 2 and 3 involve experiential and written prayer/meditation exercises designed to reduce spiritual distress in the individual's perceived relationship with any Higher Power/Universal Force/Tao/Chi concept.
* Session 4 incorporates a discussion of theodicy (i.e., explaining the existence of evil), helping to resolve conflicts between beliefs in a benevolent, omnipotent Higher Power/Spiritual Universe and the existence of trauma.
* Session 5 teaches active (more effective) vs. avoidant (less effective) spiritual coping.
* Sessions 6 and 7 address forgiveness and facilitate conflict resolution with self, others, and Higher Power.
* Session 8 includes discussion of termination issues, self-evaluation of progress on individual spiritual goals, and planning for continued personal spiritual development.

**Building Spiritual Strength**

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**Building Spiritual Strength**

**Section I: Rationale**

*Introduction*

For the vast majority of people, spirituality is an important part of coping with stressful events (Schuster et al., 2001). Despite this, there is very little research on how people use spirituality to endure, recover, and even grow in the wake of these events, making it difficult for psychotherapists and pastoral counselors to help clients use this powerful tool (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2000; Hall & Johnson, 2001). Using spirituality in coping is complex. While many people find their faith helpful in recovering, a nearly equal proportion struggle with faith when confronted by negative life events, and respond by disengaging from their faith and religious community (Falsetti, Resick, & Davis, 2003; Elliott, 1994).

One important way that stressful life events disrupt emotional, psychological, and personality processes is by shattering assumptions about safety, power and control, self, and the world (Janof-Bulman, 1992). Spiritual assumptions from the previous relationship with a Higher Power are likely to be disrupted; beliefs in a benevolent, omnipotent Higher Power may appear inconsistent with life events, and this often precipitates existential crises (Falsetti, Resick & Davis, 2003; Cadell, Regehr & Hemsworth, 2003). Survivors must redefine their world perceptions at physical, interpersonal, and spiritual levels (Decker 1993; Wilson & Moran 1998). Spiritual guidance to restore a disrupted relationship with a Higher Power may be helpful in recovering from negative life events.

*Related Literature*

Relationships between spirituality and mental health adjustment are complex. While theorists have suggested that spiritual involvement helps survivors make meaning of difficult experiences (Hall & Johnson, 2001; Wilson & Moran, 1998), as noted above, data-based studies show that spirituality can be positive or negative in coping. Vietnam veterans who lost their religious faith in combat required more mental health services throughout their lives (Fontana & Rosenheck, 2004). People who use prayer for active, rather than avoidant coping, demonstrate lower levels of anxiety and symptoms (Harris, Schoneman & Carrera, 2002; Harris, Schoneman & Carrera, 2005; Harris et al., 2006). Prayer that seeks to reduce arousal and find a way to accept traumatic experiences is associated with higher levels of posttraumatic growth (Harris et al., 2006).

Religious coping research indicates clinically-useful relationships with mental health outcomes. Religious coping strategies predict church members’ adjustment better than non-religious coping strategies or other aspects of religious beliefs (such as perceptions of Higher Power, religious orientation, and orthodoxy) (Pargament et al., 1990). Perceiving a Higher Power as benevolent and just, experiencing a Higher Power as supportive, involvement in religious rituals, and seeking support through religion predict positive adjustment (Pargament et al., 1990). Using religion to facilitate avoidance predicts poorer outcomes (Harris, Schoneman & Carrera, 2005; Pargament et al., 1994). Using prayer to avoid dealing with a stressor predicts increased distress, while using prayer to actively seek help from a Higher Power, focus coping efforts, or increase one’s personal acceptance of stressful situations predicts decreased distress (Bade & Cook, 1997; Harris, Schoneman & Carrera, 2002)*.* Other aspects of religious functioning (feeling alienated from a Higher Power, experiencing religious conflicts with others, and higher levels of fear and guilt in religious life) predict poorer adjustment (Exline, Yali & Sanderson, 2000). This suggests that fostering a positive relationship with a Higher Power, perceiving one’s Higher Power as benevolent and supportive, (not punishing and condemning), and promoting active rather than avoidant modes of interacting with a Higher Power, should maximize recovery from stressful life events, and potentially from traumatic ones as well.

Our research on religious functioning and coping has identified specific patterns associated with adjustment. Working collaboratively with a Higher Power viewed as supportive and loving, using prayer to reflect on issues, calm oneself, and ask for help with specific coping tasks, as well as being open to spiritual growth and change in one’s faith journey promotes better adjustment. Seeing one’s Higher Power as punitive, abandoning, or uncaring, experiencing alienation from one’s Higher Power and one’s faith community, expressing guilt and fear in one’s relationship with a Higher Power, and failing to derive comfort from faith predicts poorer adjustment (Harris et al., 2005). This intervention is designed to optimize faith resources that enhance adjustment by focusing on skills that provide for a healthy relationship with a Higher Power. Research completed at the Minneapolis VA Medical Center demonstrates that people who participate in a Building Spiritual Strength group report significantly lower levels of PTSD symptoms than people who were on a waiting list for a Building Spiritual Strength group in an 8-week study.

*Purpose*

Building Spiritual Strength (BSS) will train participants to make the best use of their pre-existing faith resources to manage stressful life events. The training is designed to address the spiritual concerns, and to help participants to resolve spiritual concerns that may contribute to distress, while maintaining and enhancing areas of spiritual functioning that are contributing to positive adjustment.

BSS can be implemented in church, synagogue, or other community settings to avoid any stigma attached to visiting a mental health clinic. Group leaders should be prepared to screen participants well enough to refer for formal mental health evaluation and care if that is needed.

**Section II: Practical Issues**

BSS consists of 8, 2-hour skills training and support group sessions as outlined in this manual. Each group will have 1-2 leaders who meet minimum training requirements and are comfortable providing spiritually integrated counseling. Clergy should have completed a Clinical Pastoral Education program or a Master’s degree in a counseling field, such as social work, pastoral counseling, counseling psychology, or clinical psychology. Mental health professionals will have a degree allowing them to practice counseling independently, and seek supervision and/or training to ensure competence in conducting spiritually integrated interventions. All leaders will be trained in this specific protocol.

Group members will be veterans who identify a history of exposure to trauma. They should be competent to consent for themselves and should be over age 18. They should be veterans who express an interest in working with spirituality in managing traumatic experiences.

Veterans should be referred to formal mental health services, rather than this group, if they express intent to harm themselves or others, display emotional instability that would be disruptive to the group, are actively psychotic, are using alcohol or drugs to the point that they cannot benefit from the group, or are actively antisocial (stealing, dealing drugs, exploiting others, etc.)

The Joint Commission requires that hospitals provide spiritually sensitive care, and the ethics code of the American Psychological Association (2002) requires that client religiousness be considered when clinically relevant. Substantial research on spirituality and adjustment to trauma demonstrate relevance (Harris et al., 2008; Cadell, Regehr, & Hemsworth, 2003; Elliott, 1994; Falsetti, Resick, & Davis, 2003; Fontana & Rosenheck, 2004 Pargament, Koenig, & Perez, 2000).

Logistics

You will need to plan for a number of resources to implement a Building Spiritual Strength program. You will need access to an appropriately sized group meeting room once a week for eight weeks. Plan for sessions to be 2 hours.

You will need to plan for time for recruitment; recruiting participants who can benefit from the intervention will be covered in detail later in these materials.

You will need to plan to print or acquire materials. BSS Leaders Manuals and Participant Workbooks are public domain, but minimally will require some photocopying. If you have an institutional resource such as the VA’s Medical Media, this may be helpful in creating attractive workbooks for participants. If you plan to use the text “Good Goats: Healing Our Image of Higher Power,” by Linn, Linn & Linn, you will need to plan for funds to purchase these books. If you are working with participants who do not have the resource to purchase a notebook for their personal prayer log, you may wish to plan for funds to provide notebooks.

Recruiting Members for Building Spiritual Strength Groups

It is appropriate to place informational fliers in waiting areas (particularly outpatient PTSD waiting areas), your facility’s chapel or chaplaincy space, local religious organizations that serve large numbers of veterans or do outreach to veterans, and events for returning veterans. It is also helpful to do informational visits to mental health teams that may refer interested veterans, and other veterans' resource groups that might inform veterans about the resource and/or include information about the group in their organization’s newsletter.

Here is a sample informational flier:

Spiritual Support Group

For Veterans

Chaplaincy Services at VA Medical Center is organizing spiritual support groups, called Building Spiritual Strength for veterans who have survived difficult or traumatic experiences.

Building Spiritual Strength groups help veterans reduce spiritual and psychological distress, and help them use prayer to calm themselves.

Groups are being planned at \_\_\_\_(*enter location*)\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

Groups meet once per week for 8 weeks.

If you are interested in participating in a spiritual support group as part of your readjustment, please contact:

*Enter contact information here.*

Here is a sample recruitment announcement appropriate for an organizational newsletter:

**Spiritual Support Groups Available for Returning Service Members**

Are you a recently deployed military service member? Would you like to share and receive support with the spiritual and personal issues common among people who have been deployed to combat?

The VA Medical Center is inviting veterans to participate in spiritual support groups. Group meetings will be scheduled at a time that is convenient for all of the participants involved. There are groups meeting at *enter location here*. If you are interested in participating, please contact *enter name and contact information here.*

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**Section III: Learning Objectives**

The following objectives address aspects of spiritual life that can improve or impair adjustment. For details of the research findings supporting these interventions please see Harris et al., 2005, 2006, 2008.

Participants will:

1. Enhance their perception of a Higher Power as loving, close, and supportive through difficulties.
2. Work to resolve any fears that a Higher Power is punishing or abandoning them.
3. Will work to resolve any guilt over their actions or inactions.
4. Work to reverse any loss of faith.
5. Build or enhance their support network in their community of faith.
6. Understand that their relationship with a Higher Power is a process, that this relationship will change and grow; and that this change and growth often is more difficult when facing life challenges.
7. Work with a Higher Power and their spiritual support network to resolve anger and guilt and move toward forgiveness. Forgiveness may be for others, for self, or both.
8. Work with a Higher Power to identify and use strategies for coping with distress.
9. Seek opportunities for spiritual growth that come from coping with distress.
10. Use prayer/meditation practices (prayer, meditation, journaling, etc.) to reduce painful feelings.

**Section IV: Session Format/Administration of Training**

**Ground Rules for Group Safety:**

1. This is an interfaith environment. Many different approaches to faith will be represented. We will respect each others’ beliefs, experiences, and feelings; we do not have to agree with a belief to respect it. Members and leaders all are empowered to address difficulties in respecting each other. No one will be asked to accept any doctrine that is inconsistent with their faith.
2. All of us have endured difficult experiences. If we have chosen to be in this group, we are likely seeking to make some changes in our relationship with Higher Power. All of us have the right to change our mind about our beliefs. And change it again, or change it back. Our relationship with Higher Power is likely to change as we grow just as our relationships with people change as we grow.
3. Material we discuss in group is confidential. Our peers in group should not share information about others in group outside of this setting. It is OK to share what you personally are experiencing in group in any environment you feel is safe for you.
4. Activities will be presented to facilitate your faith development. If you do not want to participate in an activity, that is your choice. Leaders will ask about your feelings and barriers to your participation to help you get the most out of group, but you do not have to do anything you do not want to do.
5. If you cannot be at a group session, please let a leader know in advance.

**Section V: Outlines for Skills Training Sessions**

Session One – Sharing Our Stories

* Objectives:
  + Participants will build or enhance their support network in their community of faith.
  + Participants will seek opportunities for spiritual growth that come from managing difficult experiences.

Welcome

* Welcome the group;
* Leaders introduce themselves and provide a brief background on themselves and the BSS program; Explain that participants will have the opportunity to share more about themselves later in this session.
* Allow each participant to introduce themselves and to state the name they prefer to be used when addressing them.
* Introduce the workbooks – Point out the two workbook versions (one references “God/Higher Power” and the other references “Higher Power”). Distribute the appropriate versions accordingly.
* Review the purpose, goals, and ground rules of the group outlined in the workbook. Invite discussion and solicit suggestions for any additional ground rules to be added.
* Describe the basic format that the two-hour sessions will typically follow:
  + Short review of last week’s material.
  + Homework assignment: Discussion of what was experienced in completing the homework assignments.
  + New material: presentation and discussion.
  + Homework assignment for the coming week.
* Suggest that the group may want to incorporate additional elements to the sessions (identify those elements now and then decide together on the specifics at the end of this session):
  + Do we want an opening/closing ritual? (Examples: group silence and meditation, prayer, individual spoken prayer, silent prayer, candle lighting, some litany, or other ritual)
  + If we decide to pray at the end of the session, what will be the focus? (Example: to confirm safety and mutual respect about what has been shared, and to support each other for the challenges of the coming week)
  + If we decide to pray, how should we do so? (Examples: silently, with a leader, seated, standing, holding hands, etc.).
  + Do we want to take a bathroom break over the course of the session?
  + When should we make the refreshments available?
* Lead the following discussion. Invite each participant to share their stories based on the following questions.

Life Before the Military:

* In what faith/religion (if any) were you raised?
* Back then, how did you come to understand God/Higher Power/a Higher Power and your relation to God/Higher Power/Higher Power?
* Who (or what) played a role in your faith understanding?
* What was going on in your family, school, employment, etc?

Life in the Military:

* What were the events/life experiences that led to your involvement in the military?
* In what branch of the military did you serve and what were the significant events and challenges that you faced?
* How did your relationships with family and friends change as a result of your service?
* How did your understanding of yourself change as a result of your service?
* What effect did your military service have on your faith/belief/worldview?

Life Now:

* How has your faith/belief/worldview changed as a result of your military service?
* What aspects of your faith/belief/worldview are helping you?
* What aspects of your faith/belief/worldview are difficult for you?
* On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 being “no problem” and 10 being “overwhelming problems”), how would you rate your ability to cope with the stresses in your life?

Setting Goals:

* Lead the following discussion on identifying and writing down each participant’s goals. Point out that we will review their goals at the end of session eight.
* What would you like to have happen as a result of participating in these 8 sessions?
  + Some seek to resolve their anger, either at God/Higher Power/Higher Power or at someone else. Some seek forgiveness. Some seek to gain or regain a closer relationship with God/Higher Power. Some want to enrich their spiritual life.
  + What aspects of your faith/belief/life view would you like to have strengthened or changed?
* Write down your goal(s) is in the space provided in your workbook. We will review them at the end of Session Eight.

Decisions about our Group Session Structure:

* Encourage the group to decide on the following group session options. Ensure that their decisions are incorporated into the next week’s session.
* Do we want an opening/closing ritual? (Examples: group silence and meditation, prayer, individual spoken prayer, silent prayer, candle lighting, some litany, or other ritual)
* If we decide to pray at the end of the session, what will be the focus? (Example: to confirm safety and mutual respect about what has been shared, and to support each other for the challenges of the coming week)
* If we decide to pray, how should we do so? (Examples: silently, with a leader, seated, standing, holding hands, etc.).
* Do we want to take a break over the course of the session?
* When should we make the refreshments available?

Homework for This Week:

* Encourage the group members to pray/meditate on the following items. Remind them that they will be invited to describe their experience with the exercise at the beginning of the next session.

Pray or meditate on the hope of meeting your goals, for the group to work together, and for all to meet their individual goals.

Session Two – Communicating with God/Higher Power: The Empty-Chair and Two-Way Prayer/Meditation Logs

* Objectives:
  + Participants will enhance their perception of a Higher Power as loving, close, and supportive through difficulties.
  + Participants will make progress toward resolving fears that they may be being abandoned or punished by a Higher Power, and will progress toward resolving any unresolved guilt.
  + Participants will make progress toward resolving loss of faith.
  + Participants will understand that their relationship with a Higher Power is a process, and that this relationship will change and grow; some of this change and growth is more difficult when facing life challenges.
  + Participants will work with a Higher Power and their spiritual support network to resolve anger and move toward forgiveness. Forgiveness may be for others, for self, or both.
  + Participants will work with a Higher Power to plan coping strategies for managing difficult experiences.
  + Participants will seek opportunities for spiritual growth that come from managing difficult experiences.
  + Participants will use prayer/meditation practices (prayer, meditation, journaling, etc.) to reduce painful feelings.

Welcome:

* Begin with the opening ritual as decided by the group.

Homework Review:

* Discuss the participants’ experience with the homework assignment. Encourage discussion on places where the participants felt “stuck” in their communication and/or relationship with God/Higher Power/Higher Power.
* What was it like to pray or meditate on the hope of meeting your goals? On the hopes for the group to work together and for all to meet their individual goals?
* Are there aspects of your prayer/meditation experience where you feel “stuck”? Are there aspects of your relationship with God/Higher Power/Higher Power where you feel “stuck”? If so, how?

The Empty Chair Technique:

* Explain the purpose of the Empty Chair Technique: an opportunity for participants to hear how God/Higher Power/Higher Power might be responding to them regarding their specific issues/concerns. These responses will come in the form of words that participants can imagine God/Higher Power/Higher Power might use. Invite a participant to share an issue to be addressed. Re-iterate that the leaders and other participants will respond to the issue as they believe God/Higher Power /Higher Power might respond. They are not, however, speaking on behalf of God/Higher Power/Higher Power; only imagining what they believe God/Higher Power/Higher Power might be saying regarding the issue.
* Facilitate the Empty-Chair Technique using the following structure. First, review each step involved, and then begin the exercise.
* An issue is described by a participant.
* What follows is a moment of silent reflection.
* The first leader shares a response of what he/she believes God/Higher Power might be saying.
* The second leader shares a response of what he/she believes God/Higher Power might be saying.
* Other participants are invited to share their responses.
* After all participants have the opportunity to respond, the recipient describes what it was like to receive the responses.
* The responders then describe their experience of speaking words they imagined coming from God/Higher Power
* Another Empty Chair Technique (with another issue) is facilitated as time and circumstances permit.

The Empty Chair Technique is an opportunity for participants of the group to respond to a specific issue using words they can imagine God/Higher Power might use. One participant identifies a concern or issue, and other participants take turns responding to the person speaking as though from the perspective of God/Higher Power. Note: this technique is not meant to imply that any of us fully knows what God/Higher Power is saying; it is simply intended to give an opportunity to share what we imagine God/Higher Power might be saying.

* One participant identifies a concern and the other participants take turns responding from the perspective of what they imagine God/Higher Power might be saying.

The Two-Way Prayer/Meditation Log:

* Introduce the Two-Way Prayer/Meditation Log. Explain that it is similar to the Empty Chair Technique in that it allows a person to identify an issue/life concern and then imagine how God/Higher Power might respond. It is, in essence, a letter we write to God/Higher Power about our issue/concerns, and then to which we respond based on what we believe God/Higher Power might be saying back to us.
* Distribute the Prayer/Meditation Log Hand-out and review the following items:
* Write out your issue using “First Person” (as though you are writing a letter directly to God/Higher Power). Use the Log Template in your workbook.
* Write out God/Higher Power’s response to you using “Second Person” (as though you are hearing back directly from God/Higher Power)
* Focus on one issue at a time.
* If you are not sure about something, put it in parentheses, adding any notes to yourself about your uncertainty.
* Know that it’s okay to be angry! Allowing yourself to feel your emotions is a good thing and a sign you are being honest with God/Higher Power!
* The point is to write out your perceptions of God/Higher Power as those perceptions relate to you. It is an effort to organize your feelings and thoughts about your relationship with God/Higher Power.
* Take a moment to meditate and center yourself before writing God/Higher Power’s response back to you.
* Allow your understanding of scripture or sacred teachings to be part of the response.
* Consider these questions:
* How has God/Higher Power been present with you in loving relationships with others?
* How have your relationships with others made it difficult for you to understand what God/Higher Power is doing, thinking, or feeling regarding this issue?
* Instruct the participants to identify an issue/life concern and then complete a Two-Way Prayer/Meditation Log in their workbook.
* After completion of one Log, instruct the participants to identify a second issue/life concern and complete a second Two-Way Prayer/Meditation Log in their workbook.

The Two-Way Prayer/Meditation Log is an opportunity to have an individual conversation with God/Higher Power using a style of communication similar to the Empty Chair Technique. The “log” is essentially a letter that we write to God/Higher Power about concerns of life or issues for which we are seeking help. This part of the log is written from own perspective. The second part of the log is *God/Higher Power’s response to us* and it is written from the perspective of what we imagine God/Higher Power might be saying in response.

* Practice the Two-Way Prayer/Meditation Log by identifying an issue, writing about it, and then responding from the perspective of what you imagine God/Higher Power might be saying to you.
* Practice the Two-Way Prayer/Meditation Log by identifying a second issue, writing about it, and then responding from the perspective of what you imagine God/Higher Power might be saying to you.

THE TWO-WAY PRAYER/MEDITATION LOG (1)

MY THOUGHTS TO GOD/HIGHER POWER:

Write a letter to God/Higher Power describing an issue, question, concern, or feeling that you are experiencing. Focus on one specific issue, rather than on a series of issues.

GOD/HIGHER POWER’S RESPONSE TO ME:

Write down God/Higher Power’s response to you as though God/Higher Power were speaking directly to you. The response may be based on what you know about scripture, the teachings you have received, what you have learned about God/Higher Power in relationships with others, or your active efforts to listen to God/Higher Power on your own.

THE TWO-WAY PRAYER/MEDITATION LOG (2)

MY THOUGHTS TO GOD/HIGHER POWER:

Write a second letter to God/Higher Power describing another issue, question, concern, or feeling that you are experiencing. Focus on one specific issue, rather than on a series of issues.

GOD/HIGHER POWER’S RESPONSE TO ME:

Write down God/Higher Power’s response to you as though God/Higher Power were speaking directly to you. The response may be based on what you know about scripture, the teachings you have received, what you have learned about God/Higher Power in relationships with others, or your active efforts to listen to God/Higher Power on your own.

Homework for This Week:

* Remind participants about their homework assignment:
  + Set aside time daily for prayer or meditation. Consider using the Prayer/Meditation Log as a tool for communicating with God/Higher Power on a daily basis.
  + Be ready to discuss this experience at the beginning of next week’s session.
* Introduce the book, “Good Goats: Healing our Image of God”. Have several copies on hand for participants to borrow as they choose.
* Conclude with the agreed-upon Closing Ritual.
* Set aside time to write in your prayer/meditation log. Ideally, it is to be done on a daily basis.
* If you get stuck on any issues, write about feeling stuck. You will have the opportunity to talk about this during our group time next session.
* Make a note of anything you’d like to discuss regarding your prayer/meditation log experience in group next session.

Session Three - Challenges to Communicating With God/Higher Power

* Objectives:
* Participants will enhance their perception of a Higher Power as loving, close, and supportive through difficulties.
* Participants will make progress toward resolving fears that they may be being abandoned or punished by a Higher Power, and will progress toward resolving any unresolved guilt.
* Participants will make progress toward resolving loss of faith.
* Participants will understand that their relationship with a Higher Power is a process, and that this relationship will change and grow; some of this change and growth is more difficult when facing life challenges.
* Participants will work with a Higher Power and their spiritual support network to resolve anger and move toward forgiveness. Forgiveness may be for others, for self, or both.
* Participants will work with a Higher Power to plan coping strategies for managing difficult experiences.
* Participants will seek opportunities for spiritual growth that come from managing difficult experiences
* Participants will use prayer/meditation practices (prayer, meditation, journaling, etc.) to reduce painful feelings.

Welcome:

* Begin with the opening ritual as decided by the group.

Homework Review:

* Discuss these questions about the Prayer/Meditation Log experience:
* What happened in your Two-Way Prayer/Meditation Log with God/Higher Power?
* What did you need to tell God/Higher Power?
* What did God/Higher Power tell you?
* Where are you feeling that you do not yet understand what God/Higher Power would like you to learn from this?
* How do you feel about God/Higher Power right now?
* How does God/Higher Power feel about you?
* Are there things you want to change in your relationship with God/Higher Power?
* Describe your experience of writing out your prayer/meditation logs this week.

Feeling Stuck

* Discuss the experience of getting stuck when participants attempt to complete their prayer/meditation log.

Some participants report that they have difficulty or get stuck in some place in writing their prayer/meditation log. If that is the case with you, what are the barriers you experience? It is often helpful for participants to talk openly with the group about the specific ways in which they get stuck.

* If you get stuck, where and how exactly do you get stuck?
* Ask the group for help, and pray or meditate about the barriers you experience.

Feeling Strong Emotions

* Discuss the experience of feeling strong emotions when talking to God/Higher Power.
  + What kinds of emotions come up?
  + Have you talked about them before?

Sometimes intense feelings (isolation, sadness, abandonment, anger, confusion) make it hard to communicate with God/Higher Power. These feelings may be seen as being unacceptable to God/Higher Power or others, and it may be tempting to suppress, underestimate, or deny having them. It is ok to ask the group and the leaders for help talking about these feelings. When you talk about them they may get more intense at first, but after talking about them they will likely start to resolve so that you can start working more clearly with God/Higher Power on resolving pain in your relationship with God/Higher Power.

Speaking Honestly and Candidly With God/Higher Power

* Discuss the attitudes/assumptions about talking honestly to and about God/Higher Power.
* Is it possible that God/Higher Power can take the harshest anger the most hopeless despair, or the most intense guilt that you or anyone else can express?
* Do you believe God/Higher Power would rather have honest, open communication with you than have you avoid your pain and doubt about faith issues, pretend that it’s all ok, or express your negative feelings about your Higher Power toward someone else?
* Do you believe God/Higher Power wants to have a personal relationship with you?
* Is it possible for a relationship to be without conflict, and without the honest and difficult effort it takes to resolve the conflict?

Your Higher Power can take the harshest anger, the most hopeless despair, the most intense guilt that you or anyone else can express. Your Higher Power would rather have honest, open communication with you than have you avoid your pain and doubt about faith issues, pretend that it’s all ok, or express your negative feelings about your Higher Power toward someone else. What your Higher Power wants is to have a relationship with you. No relationship continues without conflict, and without the honest and difficult effort to resolve the conflict. Use your log to work out these conflicts, just as you might work on conflicts with your spouse, partner, parents, or children.

* Are there times, either before or after your difficult experience that you felt especially close to your Higher Power?
* What was going on in your life then?
* Are there things that you can do to recreate that now?

Homework For This Week:

* Discuss these questions about the Good Goats book:
  + What questions did the book raise for you?
  + What issues regarding forgiveness feel unsettled for you?
* Continue Prayer/Meditation logs
* Conclude with Closing ritual.
* Continue making entries in your prayer/meditation log book.
* Be ready to ask the group and leaders for help with parts of your log keeping that feels difficult.
* Consider reading the Good Goats book.

Session Four – The Question of Evil in the World of a Good God/Higher Power

* Objectives:
* Participants will enhance their perception of a Higher Power as loving, close, and supportive through difficulties.
* Participants will make progress toward resolving fears that they may be being abandoned or punished by s Higher Power, and will progress toward resolving any unresolved guilt.
* Participants will make progress toward resolving loss of faith.
* Participants will understand that their relationship with a Higher Power is a process, and that this relationship will change and grow; some of this change and growth is more difficult when facing life challenges.

**Welcome:**

* Begin with the opening ritual as decided by the group.

**Homework Review:**

* Discuss these questions about the Prayer Log experience:
* What happened in your Two-Way Prayer/Meditation Log with God/Higher Power?
* What did you need to tell God/Higher Power?
* What did God/Higher Power tell you?
* Where are you feeling that you do not yet understand what God/Higher Power would like you to learn from this?
* How do you feel about God/Higher Power right now?
* How does God/Higher Power feel about you?
* Are there things you want to change in your relationship with God/Higher Power?
* Describe your experience of writing out your prayer logs this week.

The Meaning Of Evil:

* Discuss the following questions on the meaning of evil

Most people at some point in their lives struggle with the question of how a good and all-powerful God/Higher Power could allow so much evil to go on in the world.

* Before your time in the military, how did you understand the meaning of evil in the world?
* Has your understanding of the meaning of evil in the world been challenged as a result of your experiences in the military?
* Has your understanding of evil changed as a result of your experiences in the military?

Ways to Understand the Meaning of Evil in the World of a Good God/Higher Power:

* Review the five different perspectives of understanding the meaning of evil in the world of a Good God/Higher Power. Invite discussion after each perspective is reviewed.

Here are some ways that people understand the meaning of evil in God/Higher Power’s world. Share what you think about these with the group.

1. The Higher Power has the power to make some good of every evil. In Christianity, Jesus’ execution led to Salvation. In Judaism, Joseph’s sale into slavery saved the known world from famine. In Buddhism, Buddha’s exposure to suffering led him to the path of spiritual searching. A Higher Power will demonstrate Its ultimate power by bringing us through this and bringing good from it.
2. The presence of sin in general (not just mine) interferes with the perfection of creation, and over time our Higher Power is correcting the results of evil. Because of this, sometimes there is no way to act sinlessly in a sinful world. The Higher Power does not want evil to happen to anyone. The Higher Power is omnipotent over time.
3. Evil is allowed to exist in the world because we learn from it how we can live better in relationship with our Higher Power. What can I learn from this experience? How can I integrate this experience into a relationship with my Higher Power?
4. Good and evil cannot be balanced in our lifetimes; this is too short. We will be rewarded for our perseverance in faith, and those who harmed us will come to justice in the realm that follows this life.
5. Our Higher Power created us with free will; evil is the result of human choice, and is not what the Higher Power wants.

Feelings about God/Higher Power:

* Discuss the participants’ feelings about God/Higher Power in the context of the meaning of evil in the world
* How are you feeling toward God/Higher Power right now?
* Do you experience anger about the evil you have witnessed and experienced?
* Are you feeling abandoned because God/Higher Power allowed bad things to happen?
* Do you feel afraid or guilty because you feel that God/Higher Power is punishing you or your loved ones?
* Are you feeling grateful for your survival and/or the support you get from your faith through your combat experience and readjustment?
* How do you think God/Higher Power feels about you right now?

Homework:

* Encourage participants to use their prayer logs throughout the week. The prayer/meditation log experience will be discussed at the beginning of next week’s session.
* Remind participants about the book, “Good Goats: Healing our Image of God/Higher Power”. Have several copies on hand for participants to borrow as they choose.
* Conclude with the agreed-upon Closing Ritual.

1. Write down thoughts and changes in your thoughts about understanding evil in God/Higher Power’s world in your prayer/meditation log.
2. Ask God/Higher Power for help so that you and others in the group can trust that God/Higher Power loves each of you, even if you can’t understand that love at this point in your faith journey. Pursue a conversation with God/Higher Power about this in your prayer/meditation log.

Session Five - Getting Stronger Through Communication with God/Higher Power

* Objectives:
* Participants will enhance their perception of a Higher Power as loving, close, and supportive through difficulties.
* Participants will work with a Higher Power to plan coping strategies for managing difficult experiences.
* Participants will use spiritual practices (prayer, meditation, journaling, etc.) to reduce painful feelings.

Welcome:

* Begin with the opening ritual as decided by the group.

Homework Review:

* Allow 15-20 minutes to process prayer/meditation logs. Encourage continued logging and continued efforts to bringing successes and challenges encountered with logging to group.
* Work through worksheet questions on prayer/meditation development.

Your Experience With Prayer/Meditation:

* Discuss the following questions about prayer and meditation.
* Encourage conversation about challenges to prayer and meditation. Review these common challenges and validate the experience of the participants:
  + Feeling emotionally too overwhelmed to think about or organize spiritual practices
  + Feeling angry or upset with a Higher Power
  + Feeling that a Higher Power is abandoning or punishing the survivor
  + Experiencing too many demands to have time for prayer/meditation
  + Being away from home faith community and familiar settings and rituals for prayer/meditation
  + Needing additional clergy care resources (for example, Eucharist or other rituals, an accepting community of faith, a relationship with a clergy)
* How were you taught to pray/meditate as a child (or as an adult if you learned then)?
* What do you do when you pray/meditate now? Do you exercise other spiritual practices in addition to or with your prayer/meditation?
* Where do you pray/meditate?
* How do you prepare for prayer/meditation? Do you sit, stand, kneel, fold hands?
* How do you address your Higher Power (Father, Jesus, Higher Power, Creator, Jehovah, Allah, etc.)? What does the way you address your Higher Power say about your relationship with you Higher Power?
* How often do you pray/meditate? How long do you spend praying/meditating?
* When you are upset, is prayer/meditation one of the first things you do or one of the last things you consider?
* Do you experience barriers that stop you from using prayer/meditation in ways that you would like? Would it be useful to pray for help with that or to ask the group for support in managing these barriers?

Prayer/Meditation Approaches To Increase Skills for Coping:

* Review the four different approaches to prayer/meditation. After describing each approach—1) Seeking Calm and Focus, 2) Seeking Assistance, 3) Seeking Acceptance-- allow time for participants to silently practice the approach. Process the feelings, thoughts, and perceived usefulness of each skill as experienced in the fourth approach—4) Setting It All Aside—describe the approach but do not direct the participants to practice it.
* Note that people who use the first 3 strategies to prayer/meditation seem to cope best, and people who are not coping well seem to be using the fourth strategy most frequently. Talk about times that we have used the fourth strategy, and invite participants to discuss if this strategy has or has not been helpful to them.

We know that people who have used prayer or meditation to cope with serious stressors tend to use 4 spiritual coping strategies:

1. Seeking Calm and Focus

* + Reflect on the issues
  + Meditate
  + Acknowledge that many things are beyond my control
  + Remind me who I belong to

2. Seeking Assistance

* + Ask for guidance
  + Ask for healing
  + Talk things over with my Higher Power
  + Seek comfort
  + Pray for strength and support

3. Seeking Acceptance

* + Put things in my Higher Power’s hand when I know I can’t handle them
  + Seek my Higher Power’s will
  + Know that someone is listening
  + Ask my Higher Power to direct my life and actions in ways that It wants
  + Give me the understanding to accept Higher Power’s will

**4. Setting it All Aside (least helpful, but may still be useful at times)**

* + Pray for my Higher Power to change the situation
  + Pray for things to get better
  + Let my Higher Power take care of it for me
  + Pray for difficulties to be taken away

Homework:

* Encourage participants to use their prayer/meditation logs throughout the week. The prayer log experience will be discussed at the beginning of next week’s session.
* Remind participants about the book, “Good Goats: Healing our Image of God/Higher Power”. Have several copies on hand for participants to borrow as they choose.
* Conclude with the agreed-upon Closing Ritual.

Look through your prayer/meditation log and identify what strategies you are using. Write about what you are doing in prayer/meditation in your log, asking your Higher Power to help you to pray/meditate more effectively. If you would like to change something about your prayer/meditation life, write about that, do some 2-way logging with your Higher Power about it, and bring it back to group for discussion.

Session Six - Finding Forgiveness

* Objectives:
  + Participants will make progress toward resolving fears that they may be being abandoned or punished by a Higher Power, and will progress toward resolving any unresolved guilt.
  + Participants will work with a Higher Power and their spiritual support network to resolve anger and move toward forgiveness. Forgiveness may be for others, for self, or both.

Welcome:

* Begin with the opening ritual as decided by the group.

Homework Review:

* Allow 15-20 minutes to process prayer/meditation logs. Encourage continued logging and continued efforts to bringing successes and challenges encountered with logging to group.

Feelings And Forgiveness:

* Describe the role of difficult feelings in the process of perceiving and managing stressful experiences:
* Feelings can be a necessary cue, warning sign and preparation to act.
* Feelings can be your spirit telling you that your Higher Power does not want things as they appear at this time.
* Feelings can be overwhelming, hurtful to you and to others.
* Feelings can be so overwhelming it spills out into other relationships; our spouses, ourselves, co-workers, friends, the leaders of the group, and our Higher Power.
* Validate/normalize anger, shame, guilt sadness, and hurt
* Invite the participants to write down answers to the following questions on feelings and forgiveness. Give participants opportunities to talk about what they have written; process efforts to forgive, encourage 2-way logging or empty chair discussions about places where this is difficult.

Many feelings can be cues that we need to work on a forgiveness process; anger, hurt, shame, guilt, sadness, etc.

* What feeling-cues seem to be important to you right now? Which feeling is dominant?
* In what ways has \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (your dominant feeling) been helpful to you in your life?
* In what ways has \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (your dominant feeling) been a problem for you?

It can be helpful to seek your Higher Power’s assistance in managing that feeling in a spiritual practice so that you can discern what thoughts and feelings are your Higher Power speaking, and what may be the results of being overwhelmed.

Your Higher Power wants to help you maintain a relationship with It even while you have feelings that strain your relationship with It.

* Write down where you are experiencing that feeling in your life right now. (It is ok to include your Higher Power on that list, even if you are feeling angry, hurt, or saddened by a loss of relationship with your Higher Power.
* Where is your feeling a useful cue for action in your Higher Power’s service? Where is it hurting you or others? Note that the same feeling can be doing both things.
* Are there places on this list where forgiveness would be helpful?

1. Perhaps there is valid feeling, a cue for action, and your feeling about the situation prevents you from communicating well and resolving the situation?
2. Is there anger, hurt, sadness, guilt, shame, or some other painful feeling with yourself? You have enough challenges going on right now—are you willing to give yourself a break by forgiving yourself?
3. Is there anger, hurt, sadness or shame in your relationship with your Higher Power? Do you need to find a way to work this out with your Higher Power and in some fashion forgive It?

The Process of Forgiveness:

* Review the following steps in the process of forgiveness. Emphasize that forgiveness is a process, not an event. Explain the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation.

There are many steps in the process of forgiveness:

1. Acknowledging the hurt
2. Acknowledging some rift in relationship with a Higher Power (yours or someone else’s)
3. Trying to understand what was going on for the one who caused the harm
4. Making the decision to work in loving relationship while the often time-consuming work toward repairing the rift continues.

Forgiveness is a process, not an event; you can commit to forgiving in a moment, but the process of forgiveness goes on and on for life. Feeling anger again does not mean that you have not forgiven; it means that you are continuing to work on forgiving.

Forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation. One person can forgive. It takes 2 people to reconcile. You can forgive someone, but if they do not choose to join you in reconciliation, you might not be able to stay in relationship with them even if you have forgiven them.

“Forgiveness is to give up your right to get even and want the best for the offender” -Anonymous

What Might Forgiveness Look Like?:

* Review the four examples of forgiveness. Ask the participants to identify which example of forgiveness rings true for them. Invite them to reflect on how they might experience that particular example of forgiveness in their own lives.

1. I am angry that my Higher Power would allow my loved one to die, and that I have had to see and cope with so much. I am angry that I’ve been hurt, emotionally or physically in this situation. I don’t understand why a loving Higher Power would let that happen. Even though I am angry with my Higher Power, I’m still willing to talk with It about this and the other things going on for me, I’m willing to share my anger and my other feelings with my Higher Power, and work on this like I’d work on a marriage that’s in trouble.
2. I feel that I’m doing everything wrong. My marriage/relationship with my partner is stressed. I’m having trouble getting things done or communicating with people at work. I’m using more alcohol than I used to think was a good idea. I am upset with myself. I will consciously remember that I am doing my best, and asking for my Higher Power’s help to do better. Criticizing myself will not make me manage any of this better.
3. I am hurt by my spouse/partner/parents/friends/co-workers who don’t understand how I’ve changed. I care about each of these people enough to acknowledge that both of us are doing our best to be in relationship with each other and that both of us are hurting from the stresses we’ve encountered. I care enough about them to be honest about how I am feeling, and to express that in a respectful way. I will continue to do what I can to work on the relationship so that we can feel comfortable with each other again.
4. I am angry with myself, with my Higher Power, and with everyone around me. I have fears and doubts that I may not have acted as consistently with my faith as I want to during my deployment. I need help to accept what has happened, that I have always done my best to serve my Higher Power, and to let go of this struggle and free the energy that goes into this struggle to be of service to my Higher Power again. Help me to step back and realize that I have always been spiritually safe. Even in anger and hurt, even in serious injuries, none of the evil in this world can separate me from my Higher Power’s love. I am having trouble feeling that love right now; help me to continue to act in loving relationship with You.

* Where are you with forgiveness in important issues in your life? Where would you like to be with them?

Homework:

* Encourage participants to write about forgiveness issues that are important to them in their prayer/meditation logs.
* Encourage them to pray/meditate for assistance in staying with the process of forgiveness, rather than for completing it.
* Distribute the Self-Forgiveness Workbook and encourage them to use it as they see fit.
* Conclude with the agreed-upon Closing Ritual.

Write about forgiveness issues that are important to you in your prayer/meditation log. Pray/meditate for assistance in staying with the process of forgiveness, rather than for completing it.

Session Seven – Successful Forgiveness

* Objectives:
  + Participants will make progress toward resolving fears that they may be being abandoned or punished by a Higher Power, and will progress toward resolving any unresolved guilt.
  + Participants will work with a Higher Power and their spiritual support network to resolve anger and move toward forgiveness. Forgiveness may be for others, for self, or both.

Welcome:

* Begin with the opening ritual as decided by the group.

Homework Review:

* Process the week’s homework. What happened in the course of logging about forgiveness and praying for assistance with that?
* Process questions/feedback on the Self-Forgiveness Workbook.
* Facilitate discussion on forgiveness using the following questions:
* Where is forgiveness a difficult process for you?
* Where are you tempted to rush through forgiveness and avoid the issue rather than stay with that process?
* How can the group be helpful to you with that process? Through discussion, the empty-chair technique or shared prayer?
* Are there others you need to involve in your forgiveness process?
* Do you need to talk with a spouse/partner, friend, co-worker, or someone else to move the process forward?

Review your log on forgiveness, and share with the group the places that you are making progress, and places that you feel stuck. You can ask the group for help through discussion, the empty chair technique, or shared prayer/meditation.

Successful Forgiveness:

* Facilitate discussion on participant stories of successful forgiveness using the following questions:
* Are there times in your life that you have had successful forgiveness experiences?
* What was going on in your life and in that process at that time?
* What was happening in your relationship with your Higher Power at that time?
* Are there things that you can do now to re-create the conditions of your successful forgiveness experiences?

Homework:

* Discuss the question: “How will you continue in the process of forgiveness after this group has stopped meeting?”
* Open up discussion of termination, preparation for our final group.
  + Would the group like to plan any other rituals for the final session next week?
  + Depending on the spiritual backgrounds of the group members or leaders, a Communion/Eucharistic celebration may be appropriate.
  + Another possible ritual may be for each member to write down a spiritual issue in which s/he is planning continued work and to entrust the card the issue is written on to another group member or members for their continued prayer support.
  + Yet another option may be to bring an object that symbolized a continued spiritual concern or spiritual growth, and to place it on some form of altar in the context of group prayer, perhaps explaining the symbol to the group).
* Ask the clients to review the goal they established for this group for discussion at the final group session. Ask them to consider these questions:
* What were my goals?
* Did I meet them?
* Have any of the goals changed?
* Conclude with the agreed-upon Closing Ritual.

Continue your spiritual log as needed. It is no longer required as homework, but a tool for you to use whenever and however it will help you. Review the goal you set for yourself at the beginning of this group, and prepare to discuss with the group the ways that you have progressed toward this goal, or the ways that the goal has changed, in the course of your work together.

Session Eight - Go in Peace

* Objectives:
  + Participants will build or enhance their support network in their community of faith.
  + Participants will understand that their relationship with a Higher Power is a process, and that this relationship will change and grow; some of this change and growth is more difficult when facing life challenges.
  + Participants will seek opportunities for spiritual growth that come from managing difficult experiences.

Welcome:

* Begin with the opening ritual as decided by the group.

Your Goals:

* Ask clients to look in their workbooks at the goals they set in the beginning of this group. Facilitate discussion on these questions:
  + Have you met that goal?
  + Has the goal changed?
  + If it has, what new goal or goals did you adopt in this group (perhaps without realizing it)?
  + What did you do that helped make progress toward that goal?
  + What events, new skills, or help from others helped you make progress toward that goal?
* Facilitate discussion about the group experience using these questions:
  + Are there thoughts or feelings that you would like to share with others (including leaders) in the group?
  + What do you wish for the others as this group ends?
  + What will you do differently in your spiritual life in the future?
  + How will you care for your relationship with your Higher Power? How would you like that to be reflected in your relationships with others?
* What was your goal when you started this group? Have you made progress toward that goal? Has the goal changed?
* Are there thoughts and feelings that you want to share with others in this group before leaving? (Often when deployed we are denied the opportunity to say goodbye in the ways that we would choose—this does not have to be the case here.)
* What will you do differently in your spiritual life in the future? How will you care for your relationship with your Higher Power? How would you like that to be reflected in your relationships with others?

Go In Peace:

* Distribute resource sheet and encourage participants to share contact information with each other as they wish.
* Use any ritual identified by the group as useful for termination, and any closing ritual that the group has been using.