

AIR FORCE & SPACE FORCE

SPIRITUAL FITNESS LEADER'S GUIDE

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**OFFICE OF THE CHIEF OF CHAPLAINS
PLANS & PROGRAMS DIVISION**



Every Warfighter...Spiritually Fit and Ready!

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CHAPTER 1

“Military power wins battles, but spiritual power wins wars.”

- Gen George C. Marshall

SPIRITUAL FITNESS: ORIGINS, SIGNIFICANCE ON HUMAN WELLNESS & WARFIGHTER DEVELOPMENT

The Chaplain Corps vision is to see every warfighter...spiritually fit and ready! As religious and spiritual support specialists it is crucial we understand what it means to serve and support members within the profession of arms. The profession of arms is a unique profession unlike any other. World War II Gen John Hackett noted that the primary “function of the profession of arms is the ordered application of force in the resolution of a social or political problem.”¹ Therefore, the professionals within the profession of arms are experts in the management of violence. Furthermore, “with rare exceptions, a society’s government identifies the problems to be resolved with force, and it then turns to and relies on the professionals to handle the always difficult, usually dangerous, often bloody details in a manner acceptable to the citizens and supportive of their goals.”² Similar to clergy, the profession of arms is a vocation, a higher calling, to serve others, to sacrifice self, to be about something larger than one’s own ambitions and desires, something grander than one’s own contributions and even one’s own life.³ The profession of arms has often been characterized by a distinct esprit de corps - a “common spirit” inspiring a “sense of unity and of fraternity in its routine existence which expresses itself as the force of cohesion in the hour when all ranks are confronted by common danger.”⁴ Furthermore, its members are guided by a “warrior ethos” set of principles that *shape their character, build resilience, tenacity, and focus to succeed*. At its core, a “warrior ethos” is the “embodiment of the warrior spirit” that will sustain them through adversity in their professional and personal life.⁵ It’s within the context of the profession of arms that Chaplains and Religious Affairs Airmen are privileged to provide religious and spiritual support as they walk alongside warfighters who have been tasked to see and do difficult things. The calling and charge of the Chaplain Corps is to be reminders of the transcendent (God/Higher Power), and to fortify the spirit of our brothers and sisters to prepare for the moment when conflict arises, and they are exposed to danger and violence on behalf of our country. Chaplain Corps personnel have the honor of walking with Airmen, Guardians and Families as they experience events that will forever impact their dignity as a person and define the legacy of their service. Afterward, we will care for them as they return home to find purpose and meaning in what they have endured and what is yet to come through either religion, faith, or a personal connection to the transcendent (sacred/significant).

The role of religious faith and spirituality in combat is not a new concept. It has been a cornerstone of the profession of arms for millennia to the present day. At the birth of our nation, General George Washington recalled on the lessons of history during a time of great upheaval by recognizing the importance of religious faith and spirituality to his troops. In response, he established military chaplains in 1775 and used their religious faith and spirituality as a catalyst to bolster his soldiers' moral will and courage to fight. Fast forward to another tumultuous time in history, as another World War engulfed Europe in 1941, Gen George Marshall (Army Chief of Staff) called on the lessons of history, noting the importance of the warfighter's "spirit" in combat in a speech he gave at Trinity College in Hartford Connecticut. In this speech, Gen Marshall said,

"It is true that war is fought with physical weapons of flame and steel, but it is not the mere possession of these weapons or the use of them that make us win the struggle. They are indispensable but in the final analysis it is the human spirit that achieves the ultimate victory."

Today, the crucial role of religious faith and spirituality in combat has once again risen to the forefront as we glean lessons from the war in Ukraine. In "after action" reviews with Ukrainian forces, the need for a strong Chaplaincy (religious faith/spirituality) was a recurring refrain (CSAF Strategic Studies Group). In a conflict where mass casualty events were a normal occurrence, and few had not lost someone close in the course of fighting, the reality of the fight left the human spirit to wonder. The diminished odds of survival forced Ukrainian warfighters to consider their ultimate reason for fighting, and if that reason was lacking, their combat effectiveness and unit cohesion dramatically suffered.⁶ Warriors needed **something to live for, something to fight for, and something to die for** if they were to endure. In response to the growing demands placed on their warfighters, the Ukrainian Parliament officially established a military chaplaincy on 1 July 2022, which is now one of the largest in Europe. Today we find ourselves in another tumultuous period in history. With the war in Ukraine, the pacing threat of China and North Korea in the Pacific, the conflict in Israel, and Iran, we too must once again recall the lessons of history by leading in the spiritual domain within the Department of the Air Force.

We have come through some interesting times in America. A time where it was off limits to talk about two things: Politics and Religion (faith/spirituality). However, not talking about the crucial role of faith and spirituality within the profession of arms has put our forces at a disadvantage. When we avoid talking about it, we minimize its importance from a holistic perspective. It is more than just a few people in the squadron being spiritually fit, it's about the Comprehensive Fitness and holistic readiness of the entire team. As we move out of a time when leaders avoid talking about the importance of faith and spirituality, we enter a pivotal moment for the Chaplain Corps -- a moment in which we can once again set the conditions for practical conversations about the crucial role and active benefits of faith

and spirituality as part of a comprehensive integrated approach to human flourishing. To that aim, the Air Force Chaplain Corps' first line of effort is **Fortifying the Warfighter Spirit by ensuring Airmen, Guardians and their families are spiritually fit for personal and professional success.** The mission of the Air Force Chaplain Corps is to *inspire the spirit of the warfighter through religious accommodation, spiritual fitness and leadership advisement.*

In this leader's guide we will define the concepts of religious faith, spirituality, and spiritual fitness and its significance in the military context. We will explore how spiritual fitness is rooted in *meaning-making, fortified through meaningful connection to the transcendent (God/Higher Power), others, and internal values.* Finally, we will share tools to further assess and fortify spiritual fitness. As our Airmen and Guardians deliver air and space power advantage to the Joint Force, the Chaplain Corps at home and abroad ensures that warfighters are spiritually fit and ready to thrive across the spectrum of military operations *before the fight, during the fight, after the fight, and beyond their time in uniform.*

THE ORIGINS OF SPIRITUAL FITNESS

Step one is defining the word "spiritual." No doubt, many common misconceptions surrounding spiritual fitness would be remedied by a clear definition of what the Chaplain Corps means when speaking of the spiritual domain. Existing DoD and Air Force definitions of "spiritual fitness" are essentially the useful end-states desired by these organizations in the lives of their service members. The CJCSI Total Force Fitness Framework states, "**Spiritual fitness is the ability to adhere to beliefs, principles, or values needed to persevere and prevail in accomplishing missions.**"⁷ and, "**...a strong *spirit* promotes resiliency and enhances one's ability to mitigate adverse responses to stress.**"⁸

The Air Force Chaplain Corps defines spirituality as "***the means to find ultimate meaning and purpose in life.***"⁹ And "***Spiritual fitness is the ability to adhere to beliefs, virtues, or values needed to develop a fulfilling life with quality of service.***"¹⁰ Moreover, the Department of Defense and Air Force Chaplain Corps use the term "spiritual fitness", as a distinct domain, referring to *the optimization of one's total well-being, resilience, and readiness.*

THE FORMATION OF SPIRITUALITY

For many, these definitions lack clarity when defining spirituality, and the process by which spirituality is nurtured and fortified. To fortify spiritual fitness, one must, at the outset, adhere to a ***basic belief and respect for the idea that humans are spiritual beings,*** and that ***human life isn't exclusively material and meaningless.*** The table below defines the ***spirit*** as the natural motivation within each person that drives them to seek meaning. The existence of the spirit leads inevitably to ***spiritual*** beliefs, practices,

and thoughts that are usually in response to life events. Spiritual beliefs, practices, and thoughts naturally engender *spirituality* wherein these beliefs, practices, and thoughts become a system of enduring meaning, leading to spiritual fitness.

Table 1. The Formation of Spirituality

The Spark	Experience and Testing	Enduring Practice
SPIRIT	SPIRITUAL	SPIRITUALITY
Animating power Energizing force First motivation	Observed and unobserved life events	One's personal experience or understanding of events
One's inclination toward meaning making	Traits, behaviors, and thoughts that come from events	One's understood truth/reality where meaning is realized

Let's unpack these concepts further. In the context of the Air Force Spiritual Fitness program, the *spirit* is best understood as *an inherent human quality that all people are born with*. It is the spark within humanity that moves the human spirit towards *meaning-making*. As we experience life events, like the death of a loved one or a major move or the birth of a child, our understanding of the world is formed. The internal conversation all people have surrounding these universally experienced life events form the part of us that is *spiritual*.

Spirituality involves the enduring practice that results from a person's intentional pursuit of meaning and purpose in life, especially during periods of trial. The watershed moment in spiritual development usually occurs when a person seeks out someone or something to help them make sense of their life events. This practice is known as making *meaningful connections*. As a person tests their thoughts and behaviors, enduring spirituality is formed. Some of these behaviors may result in religious and spiritual practices, as well as personal methods or philosophies of coping with life and working out one's system of meaning, fulfilling the *spirit's* drive.

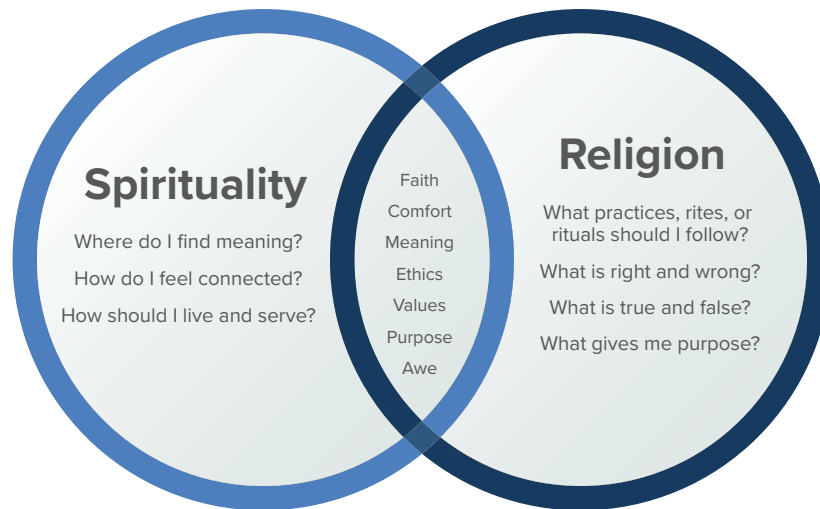
SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGION

How might we further understand meaningful connectedness, and how does it lead to spiritual fitness and the spiritual priorities to build a system or worldview which informs spiritual practice, values, purpose, and meaning? First, it is helpful to define the relationship between spirituality and religion. While religion is deeply associated with spirituality it is also, in some ways, distinct. It is common for people to experience a profound change on their spiritual path as evidenced by conversion from one faith to another, from religious to irreligious views, and vice versa. All these actions are evidence

of a person's ongoing spiritual journey even as the religious context in which these internal spiritual conversations occur change. Spirituality, in short, is a more personal and individual experience about meaning and purpose that is often informed by religion.

Figure 1. Spirituality and Religion

For some, religion is a part of their spiritual fitness.
For others, religion is not a part of their spirituality.



Religion is a set of beliefs and practices.
Spirituality is a state of being.

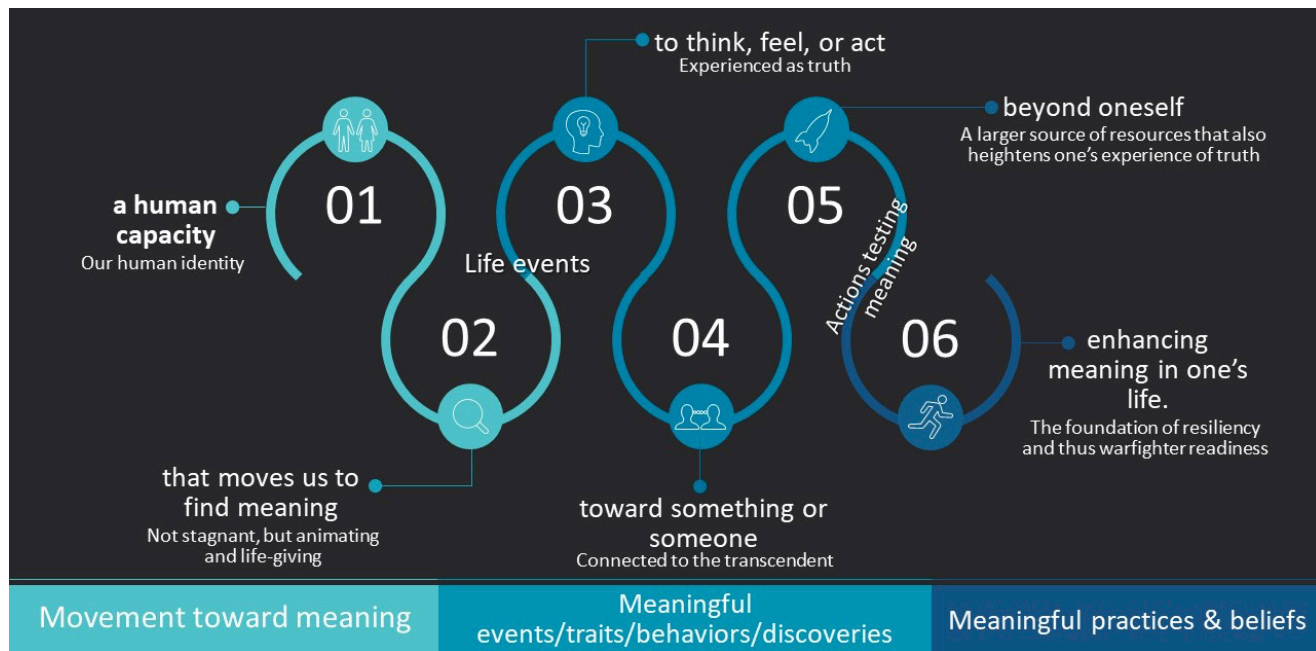
MEANING-MAKING: THE CORE PROCESS OF SPIRITUALITY¹

The core process of spirituality is meaning-making. If we were to zoom-in on this process of spiritual formation further, we would see that healthy spirituality is comprised of six components:

1. a human quality
2. that moves us
3. to think, feel, or act
4. toward something or someone
5. beyond oneself
6. enhancing meaning in one's life

Key factors of spirituality are that it is a natural part of all humanity, that it cannot be stagnant, that it is life-giving/action producing, and that it is experienced as truth while connecting to the transcendent. In turn, this connection potentially leads to a larger reservoir of resources and a heightening of one's experience of truth, thus becoming the foundation of spiritual fitness, total resilience, and ultimately warfighter readiness.

Figure 2. The Meaningful Connection Pathway¹²



MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS: THE MECHANISMS OF SPIRITUALITY

The mechanisms for healthy spirituality are found in developing meaningful connections to the transcendent, others, and one's internal values. This is a fluid process, and movement from one stage to the next may mean movement forward, backward, as well as continuously restarting in a new journey of meaning-making throughout one's lifetime. Disconnections in these six stages occur between stages 3-4, 4-5, and 5-6. When disconnects occur it means the person has not reconciled the basic human need of that stage, which can negatively affect the rest of the pathway toward meaning.

That all people have a spiritual life is self-evident. The role of the Chaplain Corps is to help Airmen and Guardian's fortify their spiritual fitness through the free exercise of religion, but also by supporting the non-religious to find meaningful connectedness in their own way. Since everyone has the core capacity to make-meaning, everyone has the potential to fortify their spiritual fitness. This process is represented by stage one in the meaningful connection pathway.

Stage two represents a time in a person's life where they begin to ask the "why" behind their life's events. These are larger, ultimate questions about meaning and purpose. Part of being human is to ask why bad things happen -- why evil, hurt, and pain exist in the world, and why we must experience them. In stage three one's self-awareness is activated. A person is then faced with a choice as to how they will respond in their thoughts, emotions, and behavior to life's events.

Perhaps a person experiencing important life events will allow others to enter their life situation and join in the journey - stage four. It is a natural drive of humanity to seek *meaning in community, as community is uniquely able to hold and interpret pain more fully than meaning-making in relative isolation*. Memorial services, retirement ceremonies, squadron formations, and other communal rituals are examples of how community support can inform a person's spiritual development during life events.

Stage five is tied to moving closer toward someone or something beyond us. It is a move toward transcendence, toward truths or realities we believe exist beyond the material world, and which represent more than a person's immediate community. In this stage a person discovers new, durable, and eternal truths from which to draw. As a person continues to journey the path toward meaning they may test the meaningful truths discovered up to this point to determine their worth. From this testing come new depths of meaning as experiences become understanding - stage six.

If accepted, these truths develop into one's ultimate beliefs about life's meaning and purpose. They may also infer a particular set of habits or practices toward their further cultivation. In some sense the religious experience is the worth found in a particular set of spiritual truths turned outward toward the transcendent, whether God, gods, or some other ultimate reality. We call this outward orientation of worth, "worship."

In review, the spiritual pathway is one model of understanding the process of how spiritual fitness develops. Working from this model spirituality is:

1. A normal human capacity that is part of our identity,
2. That moves us to find meaning, thus it is an internal life-giving energy,
3. So that when life events occur, we begin to think, feel, and act in response to them. Since our thoughts and feelings are experienced as true, we begin to cling to them as they begin to define us.
4. Our thoughts, feelings, or actions are directed toward something or someone outside ourselves (a coach, mentor, teacher, parent, minister, friend, etc.).
5. That something or someone is beyond us. (God, the universe, transcendence) Since it is beyond us, it is a durable and resilient resource that heightens our experience of truth.
6. The person then tests the product(s) of their thoughts, feelings, or actions in life, sometimes as a self-identified truth or way of life. (Spirituality)

If the spiritual pathway connections occurred in healthy and meaningful ways, then through testing one may find enhanced meaning about life events, to the point of turning suffering itself into a meaningful experience. This is the foundation of resilience, and thus warfighter readiness.

CHAPTER 2

“The soldier above all others prays for peace, for it is the soldier who must suffer and bear the deepest wounds and scars of war.”
- Gen Douglas MacArthur

SPIRITUALITY AND THE WILL TO FIGHT

Let’s explore further the critical role of spirituality in war. Leaders must recognize the profound impact of war on the human spirit, as it affects every individual who has sworn to serve. The success of armies throughout history, from the Spartans at Thermopylae to the present day has often depended on the ability of warriors to find meaning and purpose in their fight. In 2018, The Rand Corp published two reports for the U.S. Army titled, **Will to Fight: Returning to the Human Fundamentals of War.**¹³ Rand noted “will to fight as arguably, the single most important factor in war.”¹⁴ Additionally, the study noted that out of twenty-nine major influencers, personal identity, ideology, values and esprit de corps were required to fortify the will to fight.¹⁵ Clearly, personal faith, spirituality, values, purpose and meaning touch every influencer listed above, further strengthening the crucial role of faith and spirituality in maintaining combat readiness. The Ukrainian Army's recent defeat of Russian invaders, despite being outgunned and outmanned, is a stark example of how spiritual fitness can trump military might. By neglecting the spiritual dimension of war, military leaders risk misunderstanding the very essence of conflict.¹⁶ A strong spiritual core offers military members not only comfort in the face of hardship, but also tangible operational advantages.

COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGE OF SPIRITUAL FITNESS

Taking care of spiritual fitness strengthens both the mind and body. While spirituality helps a person find meaning, it also has a visible impact on the brain. Studies using functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging at Columbia University and Yale University show that religious faith and spiritually based practices activate and thicken the parts of the brain that link what we sense with how we make decisions, portions of which are literally called the “*Neurobiological Home of Spirituality*.” This discovery highlights a universal, cognitive basis for spirituality and demonstrates how deeply ingrained spirituality directly influences our thinking and judgment – crucial skills for making sound choices, especially the under pressures of combat.

Figure 3. Spirituality and Neuroscience



2018

- Yale Univ & Columbia Univ Cerebral Cortex journal
- brain-imaging studies (functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging - fMRI)
- conducted in US, China, India & Brazil
- universal, cognitive basis for spirituality

Left Inferior Parietal Lobule

- “Neurobiological Home of Spirituality”

Prefrontal Cortex

- thickened through regular practice of faith/spirituality (vs. cortical thinning w/chronic depression)

Spiritual fitness is also linked to healthy coping mechanisms. Research from Columbia University found that people who nurture their faith and spirituality have significantly greater resilience. **They're 80% less likely to develop substance dependence, 60% less likely to experience major depression, and 50-80% less likely to consider suicide.**¹⁷ Importantly, this research also revealed that **our environment shapes over 70% of our spirituality.**¹⁸ This means that creating a supportive and spiritually nurturing environment within the Department of the Air Force is a shared responsibility, especially for those who directly influence its culture.

Figure 4. Spirituality and Healthy Coping

ACTIVE SPIRITUAL FITNESS LEADS TO:

More of This:	Less of This:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stronger parent-child relationships • Educational aspirations & attainment • Effective work habits • Longevity & physical health • Well-being & happiness • Higher recovery rates from addictions • Self-control & self-esteem • Stronger coping skills • Charitable giving & volunteerism • Community cohesion & social support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fractured families • Teen sexual activity • Alcohol & drug abuse • Suicide, suicidal ideation & depression • Many infectious diseases • Juvenile crime • Violent crime • Domestic violence

SPIRITUALITY IN WAR

War can be a catalyst for spiritual growth, and many veterans discover that their faith or personal spiritual practices provide a powerful resource for coping with the trauma of war. Through the process of spiritual formation, servicemembers can develop a deeper sense of character and learn to overcome fear, anger, and moral ambiguity. War has a profound ability to bring people together in a common purpose, but war also raises difficult spiritual and existential questions and can evoke complicated emotions. War by nature impacts how a person views themselves, others, and the world.

Unfortunately, many who participate in war experience a spiritual crisis of meaning. Those unable to integrate their experiences with their understanding of the world may turn to cynicism, nihilism, loss of impulse control, withdrawal, numbing, or avoidance behaviors. When the deep waters of the soul are unreconciled, external actions will ultimately reflect their inner turmoil. Such an individual will struggle to find joy in the human experience and may no longer be able to trust the world or those in it. If a person's spiritual fitness fails, their physical, social, and mental fitness fail with it. Despite significant investment and the best efforts of helping agencies, the ongoing suicide epidemic among military members reveals a profound struggle of meaning and purpose. We must recognize this force impacting the very heart of our military community for the spiritual crisis that it is, and act decisively to address it within our ranks.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A SPIRITUALLY FIT WARFIGHTER

There is hope. Airmen and Guardians can cultivate resilience by developing a strong spiritual core which enables them to navigate stress, conflict, and challenges effectively. Three key elements — *an empathetic outlook, the ability to engage in community support, and internal ethics* — are trademark characteristics of those warriors who embody spiritual fitness. These behaviors correspond to the three areas of meaningful connectedness mentioned in chapter one: *connection to the transcendent, others, and internal values*.

EMPATHETIC OUTLOOK

An empathetic outlook serves as a key tenet of the spiritually fit warrior. Empathy is the capacity to understand and share the feelings of others, making connections that surpass superficial differences and foster genuine understanding and compassion. The warrior who embraces empathy recognizes the inherent humanity in every individual, acknowledging the struggles, fears, disappointments, and aspirations common to every person. This empathetic outlook cultivates a deep sense of the interconnectedness of all things. *Through empathy the warrior transcends boundaries of the ego and*

self-interest, embracing a broader perspective that encompasses the collective welfare of all, and the ultimate realities which teach us to “do unto others as we would have them do unto us.”

COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Robust community support forms the second pillar of the spiritually fit warrior's foundation. These networks serve as sources of strength, connection, and mutual aid. They provide a safety net during times of need and an opportunity for collective growth and development. *The spiritually fit warrior actively contributes to the well-being of their community through acts of service, advocacy, or simply by being a good teammate.* In doing so, they cultivate a culture of wellness and generosity, where individuals come together to fortify one another.

INTERNAL ETHICS

Finally, at the heart of the spiritually fit warrior lies a sturdy internal ethic — a moral compass that guides actions and decisions with integrity. This ethic is rooted in principle and in the pursuit of values, purpose, and meaning. These precepts serve as the cornerstone of the warrior's character. It compels the warrior to uphold noble values even in the face of adversity, ensuring that actions are aligned with a greater sense of purpose beyond that of individual gain. Whether in the field of combat, the daily tasks of life, or in personal interactions, *the spiritually fit warrior remains steadfast in his or her commitment to choosing the hard right, even when it is difficult or unpopular.*

The integration of these elements — *an empathetic outlook, community support, and internal ethics* — form the essence of the spiritually fit warrior. A holistic approach to warriorship transcends mere physical abilities or warfighting skill, encompassing the cultivation of virtues that elevate the human spirit and pursue the greater good. In embodying these qualities, the spiritually fit warrior is grounded in an understanding of who they are and the purpose that they serve within the world.

SIGNS OF DECLINING SPIRITUAL FITNESS

Although spirituality is highly individualized, certain warning signs can indicate when someone is struggling with an internal spiritual conflict, regardless of their specific faith or spiritual tradition. *Airmen and Guardians who exhibit moral injury, isolation, and ethical drift, may be disconnected from their sources of meaning and struggling in their spiritual fitness.*

MORAL INJURY

The study of Moral Injury has garnered a great deal of attention in the last few decades. Moral Injury is defined as **“the psychological, biological, spiritual, behavioral, and social impact of perpetrating, failing to prevent, or bearing witness to acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs.”**¹⁹ The potential symptoms of moral injury are listed in the Table 2 below.²⁰ Many similar indications are present in other invisible wounds, including those related to combat; however, *the distinguishing factor for moral injury wounds is that these symptoms are highly correlated with the spiritual domain.* Moral Injury is different because it is not primarily a fear-based response, but an internal struggle with guilt and shame because of one’s actions.

Table 2. Signs of Moral Injury

excessive shame	broken belief system	loss of hope
unresolved guilt	shattered innocence	extended isolation
a loss of faith	betrayal by friends or leaders	feelings of abandonment
extreme sorrow	uncertainty between right and wrong	repulsion to death
intensely negative thoughts	feeling that sacrifices go unnoticed	broken relationships

It is important to note that moral wounding and healing is a natural part of the human experience. Though painful, moral injury is an indicator that one has deeply held values, and that one’s moral compass is functioning and is responding to the violation of these values in the world around them.²¹ Moral injury is as old as war itself. Those who better understand the signs of moral injury in the troops they lead can have a direct and outsized impact towards helping them recover and fortify their spiritual fitness.

ISOLATION

In 2023, The U.S. Surgeon General released a report titled: **Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation.**²² Research strongly correlates positive mental health with connection to robust supportive communities, but military life is inherently isolating. In the Surgeon General’s report, it was noted that, “loneliness and social isolation increase the risk for premature death by 26% and 29% respectively.”²³ In addition, poor or insufficient social connection is associated with increased risk of disease, including a 29% increased risk of heart disease and a 32% increased risk of stroke.²⁴ Furthermore, it is associated

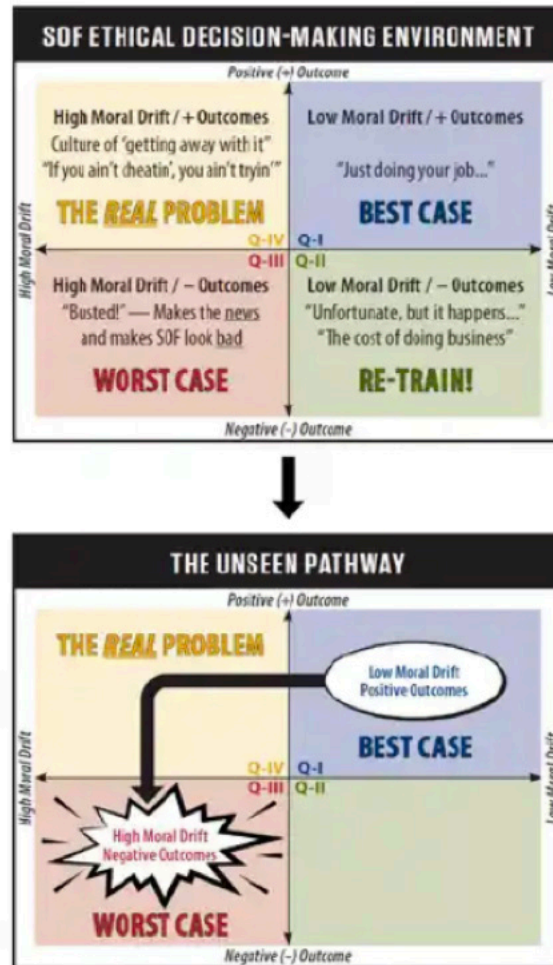
with increased risk for anxiety, depression,²⁵ and dementia.²⁶ This data is important as it relates to Airmen and Guardians since they are, from the beginning of their enlistment, separated from their community and families of origin. A dividing line is established between who the person was previously — a civilian — and who they are supposed to be now. While the initial disruption of social ties may be buffered by their additional inclusion into a new identity as an Airman or Guardian, the long-term impacts of the military way of life disrupt greater social support. Every PCS is another potential severing of belonging to friend groups, community resources, and religious organizations. Every deployment and remote tour results in physical and relational disconnections from the very family structure that most members rely on for daily support and can lead to a belief that relationships are ultimately disposable.²⁷

Spirituality is a deeply personal and communal experience, where individuals find meaning and connection by participating in something larger than themselves. When spiritual fitness declines, isolation often sets in. While solitude can be a valuable tool for introspection and personal growth when practiced intentionally, self-isolation can have devastating consequences. When individuals use self-isolation as a coping mechanism for stress, trauma, or overwhelming experiences, it can lead to a decline in mental health, intensified feelings of loneliness, anxiety, depression, and a disconnection from their spiritual community. Military service exacerbates these issues by disrupting the normal stability of social connections and community resources.

ETHICAL DRIFT

Military service is also an ethical minefield, demanding high-stakes moral decision making from exceptionally young individuals on a routine basis. The military's core mission - the potential use of deadly force - raises exceptionally high ethical stakes, requiring individuals to weigh complex decisions during both training and operations. Military leaders must consider the ethical ramifications of their actions, as the consequences of their decisions can be severe.

Figure 5. SOF Ethical Decision-Making Environment & Unseen Pathway



Source: Kari Thyne, John Labuz, Joseph Long, and John Edgar Caterson

The Air Force Core Values provide a framework for ethical decision making, guiding individuals to prioritize integrity, service, and excellence. However, leaders must make a significant effort to adhere to these principles, as their personal interests often conflict with the needs of those they lead. Over time, leaders who compromise their values or lose faith in the institution can erode their ethics, leading to a gradual decline in moral character. Air Force leaders must actively guard against "ethical drift," a subtle but insidious phenomenon that can lead to disastrous outcomes. *Often, the unseen pathway to a loss of faith in leadership is high ethical drift, especially when it leads to positive outcomes that mask underlying moral compromise.* Like aircraft disasters, ethical disasters usually do not occur over a single catastrophic failure, but over the accumulation of known problems that have gone unaddressed over a long period of time. By prioritizing ethics and addressing known problems, leaders can prevent these ethical failures and the subsequent loss of faith among our Airmen, Guardians, and the American public we serve.

The profound impact of war on the human spirit demands a deeper understanding from all military members, but especially those in positions of leadership. A spiritually healthy warrior, equipped with *empathy, community support*, and *internal ethics* is best equipped to meet the rigors of combat. Those displaying symptoms of spiritual dissonance, such as *moral injury, isolation*, and *ethical drift*, require attention, community resources, and spiritual care. Evidence shows the relevance of spirituality. By prioritizing the spiritual dimension of warfare, leaders can directly enhance the spiritual resilience of their warriors, ultimately fostering a more robust and adaptable force.

CHAPTER 3

“Nothing in life is more liberating than to fight for a cause larger than yourself, something that encompasses you but is not defined by your existence alone.”

- Sen John McCain

THE COMING TEST OF SPIRITUAL FITNESS

During his five and a half years as a prisoner of war in the infamous "Hanoi Hilton," John McCain's physical body was subjected to unimaginable torture and hardship. His captivity represented a crucial test of his spiritual fitness, which he later admitted had been neglected in pursuit of his military career. McCain credited the pivotal role that spiritual fitness played in his survival and ability to withstand the brutal conditions. Through his strong faith, connection to fellow POW's and personal values, McCain was able to find a sense of purpose and hope, even in the darkest of times. By drawing on his spiritual resources, McCain was able to cope with trauma and resist his captors, ultimately emerging from his ordeal with a deepened sense of character and a renewed commitment to his values. McCain's experience serves as a powerful testament to the importance of spiritual fitness when the tests of life ultimately come.

SPIRITUAL ASSESSMENT

Such tests of our spiritual fitness are coming for all of us, especially in an era of Global Power Competition. The question all military leaders must ask is: "Are we ready?" How would we know? The military frequently assesses its members to gauge their readiness for combat. Physical Fitness Tests are a well-known example of how the Department of the Air Force routinely assesses Airmen and Guardians to ensure they are physically prepared for war. Like other comprehensive fitness domains, spiritual fitness is also measurable and able to be assessed. Recognizing the centrality of spiritual fitness to battlefield outcomes, the Department of Defense mandates that spiritual fitness stakeholders produce metrics that provide useful information on individual, unit, and organizational spiritual fitness, as well as resources for developing the spiritual core.

In response to this demand for metrics, **Consortium for Health and Military Performance (CHAMP)** researchers partnered with **Special Operations Command (SOCOM)** to develop the **CHAMP/SOCOM Spiritual Fitness Scale (SSFS)** (Attachment 1) a multi-year project that included input from more than 8,000 people in quantitative panels, responding to an initial 378 items. This tool is research-based, empirically validated, and has a documented effectiveness in measuring and characterizing spiritual fitness. While other validated spiritual assessments exist and could prove useful depending on a unit's needs, the SSFS is a well-balanced and relatively short resource that is written for those in a military context. It provides useful metrics for commanders and individuals that can help *provide a framework for shared language and conversation* on the topic of spiritual fitness.

WHAT THE SSFS MEASURES

The SSFS measures what SOCOM calls, "Spiritual Performance", which is a snapshot in time of a person's current level of spiritual readiness compared to the end-state of spiritual fitness. It defines Spiritual Performance as "... **[continuous contact] with core spiritual beliefs, values, awareness, relationships and experiences...which form the basis to promote healthy living, sound decision-making, [and] meaningful relational interaction...**" (SOCOM-D 10-12, 2021)

The SSFS breaks Spiritual Performance into three components which coincide with the three areas of meaningful connectedness mentioned in chapters one and two: *connection to the transcendent, others, and internal values*. Additionally, it plots these three areas of spiritual connection on separate axes it calls: "**Vertical Spirituality**", "**Horizontal Spirituality**", and "**Internal Spirituality.**" The SSFS furthermore scores these three areas and defines them as core attributes of a person's:

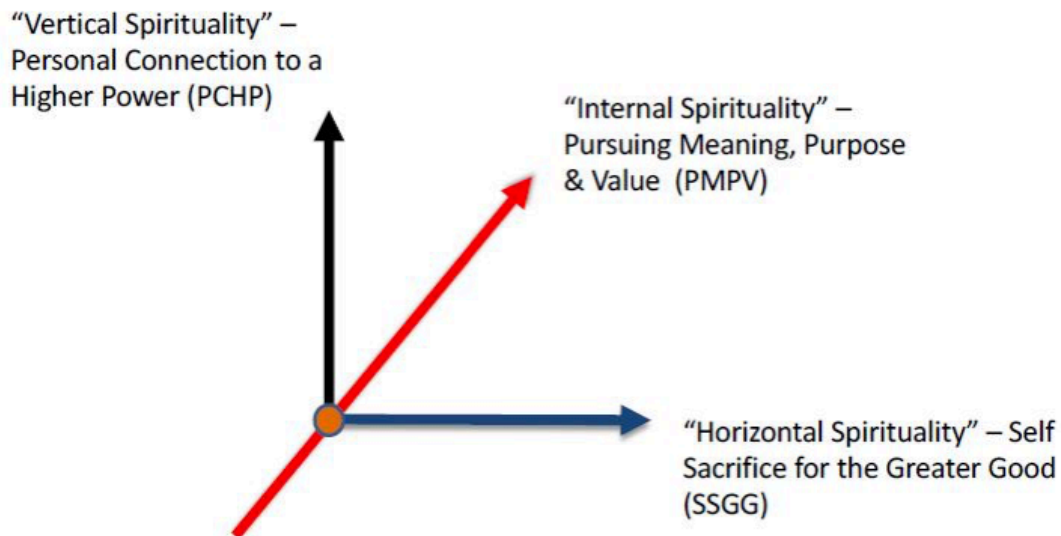
"Personal Connection to a Higher Power" (PCHP), the strength of their commitment to **"Self-Sacrifice for the Greater Good" (SSGG)**, and the fidelity of their actions to professed values in **"Pursuing Meaning, Purpose and Value" (PMPV.)**

Figure 6. Connecting Concepts and SSFS Measurements

The core process of spirituality is *meaning-making* developed through *meaningful connection* to:
the transcendent, others, internal values.

Chapter One:	Chapter Two:	Chapter Three:
Three areas of meaningful connection.	Positive and negative presentations of these three areas in a military context.	How these three areas are measured by the SSFS.
The Transcendent	+ Empathetic Outlook - Moral Injury	“Vertical Spirituality” Personal Connection to a Higher Power (PCHP)
Others	+ Community Support - Isolation	“Horizontal Spirituality” Self Sacrifice for the Greater Good (SSGG)
Internal Values	+ Internal Ethic - Ethical Drift	“Internal Spirituality” Pursuing Meaning, Purpose and Value (PMPV)

Figure 7. The Three Axes of Spirituality



Adapted from CHAMP’s Spiritual Research Team:
 Alexander D. W. (2020). Applications of the SOCOM Spiritual Fitness Scale: Program Development and Tailored Coaching for Optimized Performance. *Journal of Special Operations Medicine : A peer reviewed journal for SOF medical professionals*, 20(3), 109–112.
<https://doi.org/10.55460/K9G4-Z2CC>

The SSFS is useful for both theists (those who believe in God, deities, or other personal spiritual beings) as well as nontheists (those who don't) and it is simple to use. It is reliable and metrically sound, concise but not too narrow (17 items in the final product). It is sensitive to many belief systems and correlates with many wider wellness traits such as gratitude, quality of life, forgiveness, familial commitment, coping, resilience, and adaptive reframing.

To ensure survey validity for nontheists, or for those for whom the Personal Connection to a Higher Power (PCHP) subscale does not apply, the option to opt out of the "Vertical Spirituality" section was built into the assessment. *Opting out simply makes the horizontal axis unscored and should not be interpreted as negatively characterizing a participant's overall spiritual fitness.*

Examples of scale item questions and qualitative tools for tailored coaching and mentoring can be found in Attachment 1. Additional clarifying comments on implementation and common concerns are discussed in the appendix.

HOW TO IMPLEMENT THE SSFS

Religious Support Teams can coordinate the administration of the SSFS, ideally at pivotal collection periods, such as in-processing, pre-deployment, post-deployment, pre-separation, and when otherwise indicated, like during a crisis. To get the best available data and protect potentially privileged communication Chaplains and Religious Affairs Airmen should be the primary advisors who administer the assessment and collect the data for unit-wide assessments. The SSFS can be used episodically for individuals to assess their own spiritual fitness, as well as in the aggregate in order that commanders may gain an impression of the unit's overall spiritual fitness. When SSFS results from various points in time are compared, they can reveal important trends and provide potential conversation topics for peers, supervisors, command teams, and Religious Support Teams.

WHAT DOES THE DATA MEAN?

A leader can interpret the results of a Physical Fitness Test (PFT) rather quickly. If a member scores low or fails the pushup or sit-up portion of their test, then more time and energy in strength training is likely required. If the member scores low on or fails the 1.5-mile run, then more cardio and aerobic training will be an area of focus. But what about the realm of spiritual fitness? While the Air Force is driven by checklists and prefers purely empirical data, *leaders must recognize that spiritual fitness is a complex human activity. Airmen are not airplanes.* The SSFS is a great first step for providing the warfighter with an evidence-based snapshot of how their daily actions are or are not consistent with their spiritual beliefs, community connections, or values. SSFS results are ultimately *for the warfighter* and are intended to be maintained by them, whether in a file, photo, or screenshot.

The SSFS is a general measurement of a person's Spiritual Performance and is not intended to find or "fix" problems. Since spiritual activity occurs in the realm of meaning-making and the interpretation of life events it cannot be overstated that *the SSFS is not a diagnostic tool for commanders to use in isolation when making decisions*. Rather, the scores are one data point among others *to aid leaders in gauging the holistic readiness of their Airmen and Guardians*. Others might be their mental health, performance, and social connection in the squadron. Peers and frontline supervisors who see an individual day-to-day and know them best will often see the bigger picture of a person's spiritual fitness than what a single SSFS can assess at one moment in time.

The SSFS is a mixed-method tool that can incorporate both quantitative and qualitative data. It is evidence-based, but it still assesses a participant's subjective responses to well-formed questions like other psycho-social-spiritual assessments. It is not a blood test. If an Airman is going through a stressful season of life and is unaware of the powerful underlying forces that are helping him or her persevere (family, faith, sense of duty, etc.), that stress could produce a lower SSFS score. The goal of the SSFS is not to critique but *to spark conversation on the topic of spiritual fitness and consider ways to further strengthen one's spiritual core*.

WHAT SHOULD LEADERS DO WITH THE DATA

So, what should leaders do with this information? If an Airman scores low in the SSFS, should that data generate a Do Not Arm (DNA) or Duties Not Including Flying (DNIF) status? No. Certainly not on its own. A low score may simply indicate an area in development. The SSFS like other scales does not assign "pass" or "fail" grades to a participant's score. Research done at CHAMP has reliably identified what are considered "low," "average," and "high" scores for spiritual assessment based on the aggregate of thousands of service members who have used the SSFS tool, but *those metrics alone should not be translated directly into overall "ready" or "not ready" statuses*.

While a leader cannot *make* a follower spiritually fit (the same is true for any other domain of Comprehensive Airman Fitness), leaders can positively influence followers towards fortifying spiritual fitness and therefore toward mission accomplishment in the profession of arms. *Like a climate assessment, the goal of each SSFS is to bring awareness to the spiritual fitness level of individuals and units*.

NEXT STEPS

Once a leader understands what SSFS data means and how to use it, the final effort is to leverage the concepts and tools presented in this playbook to cultivate spiritual fitness. There are two basic approaches a leader can and should take to build spiritual fitness: reactive and proactive. A leader employs the reactive approach if a member shows steady or increasing SSFS results over time and then is assessed as having a sharp decline in spiritual fitness. Perhaps the member just returned from a deployment or is having relational or financial struggles. Maybe their section has been maintaining a rigorous OPTEMPO. A declining SSFS score may be one indicator a leader can leverage to engage the member with some forward-leaning mentoring.

Leaders owe it to their people to create environments where spiritual discussions occur in a dignified and respectful manner. The SSFS can provide leaders with critical information on a person's or organization's sense of connectedness to their beliefs, community and values. A low score in any of these three areas provides a clear vector on where to focus leadership priorities in the fortification of spiritual fitness. Ultimately the goal of the SSFS is to draw out a person's core spiritual beliefs and practices. Some questions following an SSFS assessment that might spark a healthy and respectful conversation on spiritual fitness are:

- How would you describe your spirituality?
- What in your life gets you most excited and passionate?
- What are some of the most difficult challenges you've faced and what brought you through them?
- What motivated you to serve in the USAF/USSF?
- What is worth dying for?
- Were you surprised by anything in your score? Why was it not lower, or higher?

Answers to these questions will dive deep into the spiritual beliefs, virtues, or values that make up spiritual fitness. Religious Support Teams are the subject matter experts on the unit's spiritual climate and can offer advice, programs, and training to get after these areas of meaningful connectedness.

Each person's spiritual fitness needs may look different in different seasons. Like a PT test, there are times in a person's spiritual journey where one area of focus may take precedence over others. No one can be expected to perfectly balance every aspect of spiritual fitness all the time. Sometimes one's horizontal connection might be faltering, at other times a person may sense a disconnect between them and their values, especially during periods of moral distress. The SSFS is designed to let those being assessed know where to focus their spiritual reps and sets. In consultation with the Chaplain

Corps, Airmen and Guardians can explore these three components and ways to grow according to their unique spiritual understanding and language. The goal of implementing the SSFS is to strengthen Airmen and Guardian’s ability to face the tests of life and win in future combat operations. As in all domains, failing to prepare now is preparing to fail later.

IMPACT FROM SSFS AND RELIGIOUS SUPPORT TEAMS²⁸

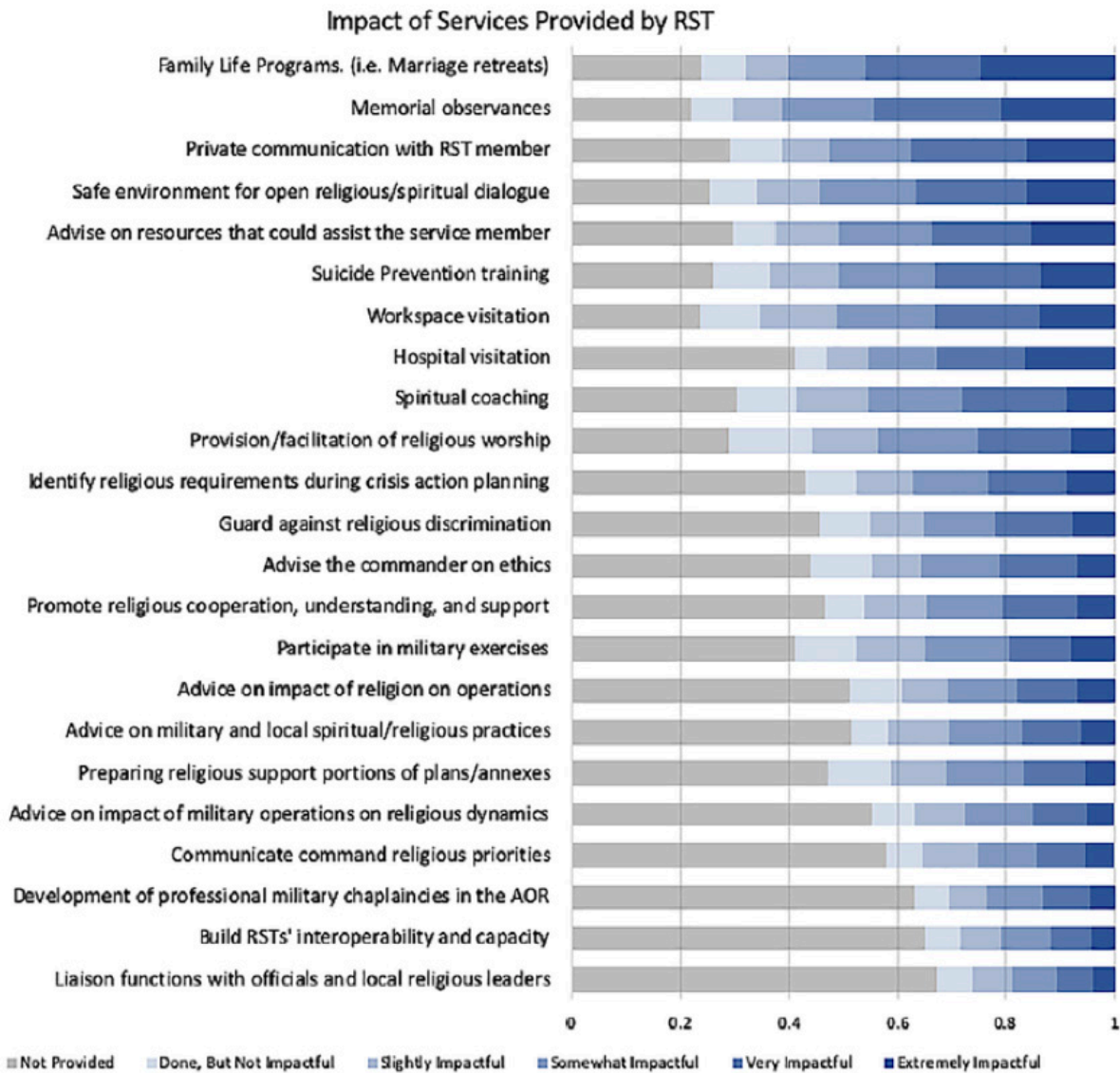


Figure 3. Respondents were asked to rate the impact of religious support team services. This figure illustrates the percentage of respondents who responded these services were done, but not impactful (light blue) to extremely impactful (dark blue). Services not provided are presented in gray.

CHAPTER 4

*“The true soldier fights not because he hates what is in front of him,
but because he loves what is behind him.”*

- G.K. Chesterton

FORTIFYING SPIRITUAL FITNESS: THE UNSUNG STRENGTH OF OUR AIRMEN AND GUARDIANS

Father Emil Kapaun, a Catholic priest and United States Army chaplain dedicated his life to serving God and country. On November 2, 1950, during the early months of the Korean War, Father Kapaun's unit was overrun by Chinese forces near the town of Unsan, North Korea. As the regiment was being forced to retreat, Father Kapaun, refusing to abandon his comrades, stayed behind to provide aid and comfort to the wounded and dying. He was eventually captured, along with hundreds of other American soldiers, and taken prisoner by the Chinese People's Volunteer Army. Kapaun's selfless dedication to his fellow prisoners, regardless of their faith, helped to foster a sense of hope and unity among the men, who were subjected to physical and emotional torture, starvation, and disease.

Through his courageous and compassionate leadership, he organized prayer services, led worship, and provided spiritual guidance, often at great personal risk, to help his fellow POWs cope with the extreme hardships they faced. By doing so, he not only strengthened their spiritual fitness but also helped to preserve their dignity, morale, and will to survive, ultimately earning him the respect and admiration of his fellow prisoners, as well as the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest military honor. Father Kapaun's unwavering commitment to serving others and his unshakeable faith inspired a sense of community and camaraderie among the prisoners, demonstrating the transformative power of spirituality in the most challenging of circumstances.

LEADING THE WAY: YOUR ROLE IN SPIRITUAL FITNESS

Father Kapaun's story might seem like a relic of the past, but the need for spiritual strength is just as relevant for today's Airmen and Guardians. We face complex challenges, from demanding missions to the stresses of military life. Spiritual fitness, at its core, is about connecting to a sense of purpose that fuels our resilience and empowers us to face any challenge. It's not about imposing a specific religion or spirituality, but about cultivating the inner strength that comes from knowing your “why.”

HERE ARE SIX WAYS THAT LEADERS CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE:





1. BE A CHAMPION OF SPIRITUAL FITNESS

Military leaders cannot permit the critical dimension of spiritual fitness to fall through the cracks. While spirituality is deeply personal, its impacts are of public interest to the Air Force and deserve the same attention as other Comprehensive Airman Fitness domains. Leaders should feel empowered to discuss spiritual fitness as a recognized part of comprehensive fitness, and not as a subcategory relevant to some people but not others.

Many internal and external factors influence our personal resilience. It's critically important we give attention to and foster improvement in each CAF domain to remain resilient for ourselves, our families, our teammates and our Air Force Invisible Wounds, like PTSD, traumatic brain injury or emotional abuse may impair our fitness. [Click here for information and resources about Invisible Wounds.](#)

COMPREHENSIVE AIRMAN FITNESS (CAF)

Resilience Domains and Tenets

 <p>MENTAL The ability to effectively cope with unique mental stressors and challenges.</p>	 <p>PHYSICAL The ability to adopt and sustain healthy behaviors needed to enhance health and well-being.</p>	 <p>SOCIAL The ability engage in healthy social networks promoting overall well-being and optimal performance.</p>	 <p>SPIRITUAL The ability to adhere to beliefs, principles or values to persevere and prevail in accomplishing missions.</p>
<p>Awareness Adaptability Decision Making Positive Thinking</p>	<p>Endurance Recovery Nutrition Strength</p>	<p>Communication Connectedness Social Support Teamwork</p>	<p>Core Values Perseverance Perspective Purpose</p>

CAF is a holistic, strength-based, integrated framework that plays a role in Sustaining a fit, resilient and ready force.
CAF is not a standalone program—it is multiagency programs and activities working together across the DAF.

Figure 5. Comprehensive Airman Fitness



Figure 6. The Spectrum of Resilience

Punting, minimizing or choosing not to discuss the topic of spiritual fitness among the four pillars speaks loudly. Spiritual fitness taken seriously will be treated *with the same level of importance as any other training requirement*. Don't shy away from discussing the importance of spiritual fitness. Integrate it into your leadership conversations, training plans, and overall squadron culture. When you prioritize spiritual fitness, you send a powerful message that it's essential for mission success.

2. CONNECT THE DOTS: TIE THE DAILY WORK TO A HIGHER PURPOSE

A leader can employ a proactive approach through their daily leadership behaviors, both in what they say and what they do. Leaders help fortify spiritual fitness in their people by *tying the routine tasks of the unit to the larger ideals and principles that all service members have sworn to support and defend*. The more a leader can connect an Airman's work to "the bigger picture" of their service to their fellow citizens, the ideals of the nation, and other higher powers, the more an Airman's spiritual

fitness is cultivated. Leaders avoid the “why” at their own peril. While some leaders have been reluctant to advocate for spiritual fitness out of fear that their efforts will be perceived as endorsing a religion, a leader has *a responsibility to help their followers “connect the dots” from what they do daily to the higher ideals behind why they do it.*

3. SHARE A STORY: SPARK A CONNECTION

Vulnerability builds connection. Share personal stories about how spiritual fitness has helped you navigate challenges. Spiritual strength can come from connection to others. That “other” can be God, a person, an animal, or even an idea. Sharing your personal story creates vulnerability, which deepens connection and demonstrates that spiritual fitness is valuable and needed as a source of strength. Encourage others to do the same. You might be surprised by the strength and wisdom found within your own team. Within your work environment there are those who have experienced life’s struggles. Many of these people have employed spiritual fitness as a resource toward healing and wholeness. If appropriate, and if they are willing, invite them to tell their story to you and then to those you invite to hear. Peers can be a force-multiplier when it comes to motivation and advocacy. Remember that fortifying spiritual fitness is about improving your ability to keep going, transform suffering, make-meaning, and never give up. It is directly connected to readiness.

4. FIND INSPIRATION IN UNEXPECTED PLACES

From the words of a favorite musician to a quote from a movie character, inspiration can be found in many forms. Use these relatable examples to spark conversations about resilience, perseverance, and finding meaning. If an artist or character speaks to values or morals, your Airmen and Guardians may connect with the “insider” inspiration found in them. You will need to do some homework and be creative to get this right, but when you do, the impact will be worth the effort. Discover the things your people enjoy. Assess their interests and find content that you can link to spiritual fitness. Here are some examples:

- “There is a comfort in iron, a promise of safety, a second chance if mistakes are made.” (*Dungeons & Dragons*)
- “Strength does not come from winning. Your struggles develop your strengths. When you go through hardships and decide not to surrender. That is strength.” (*Arnold Schwarzenegger*)
- “I have failed over and over and over again, and that is why I succeed.” (*Michael Jordan*)
- “Whenever I’m about to do something, I think, ‘Would an idiot do that?’ And if they would, I do not do that thing.” (*Dwight Schrute, The Office*)

Share these kinds of meaning-making quotes on a meme, slide or whiteboard where others can see it and use it as a starting off point for discussions on spiritual fitness.

5. EMPOWER YOUR RELIGIOUS SUPPORT TEAMS

Leaders can also be proactive in fortifying spiritual fitness by ensuring their Religious Support Teams are integrated into the daily battle rhythms of the unit. Your Chaplain Corps is a valuable resource. Integrate them into squadron events, training days, and even casual gatherings. Their expertise can provide tailored guidance and support for your Airmen and Guardians. Everywhere your people are, your chaplains and Religious Affairs Airmen should be.

6. ENCOURAGE SPIRITUAL FITNESS PLANNING

Everyone comes to the table with their individual spiritual identity and unique experiences that inform and shape their current spiritual fitness level. The SSFS can be used to assess where Airmen and Guardians stand on the spiritual fitness map. Just like we create physical training plans, we can develop plans to strengthen our spiritual core. Work with your Religious Support Team to guide Airmen and Guardians through a process of self-reflection, goal setting, and finding support. Spiritual fitness planning guides Airmen and Guardians through a four-step process toward strengthening their spiritual core: “identifying your purpose, plotting your path, practice for progress, and engaging with people who support your purpose.”

As leaders, we have the privilege and responsibility to ignite the flame of spiritual fitness within our squadrons. When we cultivate a culture that values purpose, meaning, and connection, we unleash a powerful force. Major General John LeJeune said, “There is no substitute for the spiritual in war. Miracles must be wrought if victories are to be won, and to work miracles men’s hearts must be afire with self-sacrificing love for each other, for their units, for their division, and for their country. If each man knows that all the officers and men in his division are animated with the same fiery zeal as he himself feels, unquenchable courage and unconquerable determination crush out fear, and death becomes preferable to defeat or dishonor.” *This statement is about spiritual fitness* and the power it holds to motivate and meld people together for a common purpose, allowing them to do seemingly impossible things together. When we tap into our purpose and when our actions are animated by things that matter deeply to us, we will sacrifice, endure pain, and tolerate discomfort to achieve, protect, and defend those things that hold ultimate meaning for us. By fortifying spiritual fitness, we empower ourselves and our squadrons to not only face any challenge, but to rise above them, achieving victory in ways we never thought possible.



THE 4 SPIRITUAL STEPS TO STRENGTHEN YOUR SPIRITUAL CORE



APPENDIX

CHALLENGES, MISCONCEPTIONS, AND INTEGRATION OF SPIRITUAL FITNESS IN THE DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE WARFIGHTING CULTURE

1. *Why should a leader be concerned about a topic like spirituality that is so deeply personal?*

Spirituality is a core part of being human. When individuals are spiritually fit, they engage better with the world around them. This includes the mission, their work center, their peers, and the unit. Leaders are responsible for ensuring the overall health and the fitness of their unit members. Additionally, spiritually fit Airmen and Guardians exhibit better health across all comprehensive domains. Warfighter readiness is directly bolstered by spiritual fitness, aligning fundamental questions to battlefield outcomes by connecting warfighters to their ultimate sense of meaning and purpose. This ensures the force has the “attributes required to compete, deter, and win in the high-end fight characterized by ambiguity and uncertainty” (CSAF Action Orders).

2. *What should a spiritual fitness program look like?*

Providing for the spiritual health of Airmen and Guardians requires thoughtful consideration due to the very nature of spirituality. What is helpful for one individual may not be helpful for another. As a result, ensuring spiritual health requires understanding what gives purpose, meaning, and motivation to your troops. *Often activities such as ritual, reflection, volunteering, or other contributions to a greater good assist people in finding meaning outside themselves.* Rituals are not a new concept in the military. The Air Force and Space Force are full of examples of transition rituals, like Change of Command, Retirement Ceremonies, and Graduation Ceremonies.

While programs that assist servicemembers to fortify spiritual fitness are available through DAF resources, they should also be supplemented by community connections that assist in personal spiritual development, helping individuals to articulate a well-balanced “workout plan” toward the cultivation of their spiritual fitness.

3. *What course of action should I pursue when I suspect that one of my troops is spiritually unhealthy?*

First, it is important to remember that a low SSFS score is only *a potential indicator* of overall health. It should not be used as a discriminator (go/no-go decisions) by itself. Asking probing questions when you suspect that someone is not doing well is the norm in other CAF domains and should be an acceptable practice when we suspect that someone is struggling in their spiritual fitness as well.

As with other concerns that are deeply personal, an Airmen or Guardian may not be willing to share intimate details of his or her struggle. *It is important to acknowledge in a non-judgmental manner that you notice that they may be struggling, that you care, and that you are paying attention.* A lack of spiritual health almost always impacts other domains; therefore, the full spectrum of helping agencies can be involved in forming an integrative approach to assist both you and your subordinates.

Because spirituality is so individualized, there is no one “commander’s improvement program” for the spiritual domain. Work in this area requires extensive listening, empathy, and awareness of the needs of Airmen and Guardians. This is a part of the general role of counseling that every supervisor should be conducting on a regular basis with their subordinates. Luckily, the primary SMEs for spiritual health are your Chaplain Corps Religious Support Team. They can help those who are struggling explore their spiritual state and create a personal Spiritual Fitness Plan tailored and contextualized to their specific worldview and convictions.

4. What could indicate a spiritually unhealthy organization or unit? How can I address this in the unit I lead?

The overall organizational culture of a unit can be spiritually unhealthy, just like with individuals. This is most often expressed in a toxic work environment. A unit where there is a perception that leaders do not understand the concerns of members, or where the unit culture emphasizes results over people can be spiritually unhealthy. Occasionally, there are even situations where individuals behave in ways that are actively detrimental to the well-being of others, indicating faltering unit spiritual health. The “esprit” (spirit) in esprit-de-corps must be carefully cultivated, and each leader’s actions will determine the character and quality of this “spirit” for each group of people that they lead.

It is helpful to ask the difficult questions about the implied vs. the actual values of a unit. What does our time and effort say about what we think is important? Is there an alignment between what occurs day-to-day versus the values that the organization claims for itself? Camaraderie and a willingness to help others can be an important indicator of organizational spirituality, whereas friction between shifts, shops, and subcultures indicate a lack of corporate spiritual fitness.

Building a spiritually fit organization begins with spiritually fit leaders who align their actions with the values of the organization. Transparent conversations about values and efforts to address a lack of mutual care are a starting point for transforming organizational spirituality. When a leader misses the mark, vulnerability and accepting responsibility is also vital to building trust among teams. Your Religious Support Team can assist with facilitating these kinds of conversations and actions.

5. What are the potential risks of implementing spiritual fitness concepts among the Airmen and Guardians I lead?

One of the most prevalent concerns regarding the implementation of spiritual fitness concepts is the potential for undue influence. Leaders should recognize the significant difference between helping Airmen and Guardians understand their own need for spiritual fitness and pushing a particular type of spirituality onto others. Leaders can assist troops in developing personal spirituality, regardless of the similarities or differences to their own preferences and convictions. *As long as the right to individual spiritual understandings, traditions, expressions, and beliefs is protected, there should be no concern regarding coercion.* Every human has a spiritual domain that can and should be fortified and developed.

The Constitution enshrines a delicate balance when it comes to religion. On the one hand it forbids the “establishment of religion” while on the other it ensures a fundamental right to “the free exercise thereof”. It is because of free exercise that the Chaplain Corps exists. Without the Chaplain Corps it is likely that the constraints and mission of the military would degrade or deny the free exercise of religion of those who serve. This means that while no particular church, faith, religious group or spiritual tradition can or should be made an official part of the state, as in other countries, neither should anyone have their right to freely exercise their religion curtailed.

To put it another way, we maintain a free market and an inclusive, pluralistic model when it comes to religion and spirituality. “Free exercise,” furthermore, means that a person’s faith or spirituality is not simply something they are entitled to in the quiet privacy of their own mind, but something they are able to exercise in public so long as it does not suggest a preferential establishment of their faith, or religious faith in general, over the faiths or non-faith of others. *Leaders can and should speak about their sources of spiritual strength in this context, while avoiding even the perception of preferential treatment of members of one faith, or any faith.* Speak thoughtfully about yourself and what you have found to be your source of spiritual strength.

6. What are the potential benefits of implementing spiritual fitness concepts among the Airmen and Guardians I lead?

Ensuring the spiritual health and fitness of those you lead will allow them to grow and flourish. Spiritual fitness is a precondition for most other types of health, and when an individual is spiritually healthy, they are primed to succeed in other areas of life. Additionally, implementing spiritual fitness reaches long term strategic goals. *Protecting the rights of others and emphasizing moral formation increases US credibility on the world stage, as well as within our own ranks.* History is full of examples of battles

either won or lost in direct proportion to the strength of a warfighter's belief in the ultimate rightness of their cause.

Finally, spiritual fitness leads to increased mission accomplishment due to individual thriving and a willingness to engage. When our Airmen and Guardians have a sense of their purpose and future, they can place what they do into the larger narrative of what matters. Transcendent purpose is a powerful foundation for a warfighter's spirit, offering leaders and commanders a clear battlefield advantage.

7. How do I begin to implement spiritual fitness in my unit?

Building spiritually fit warriors requires time, training, and investment. We find this style of training is most effective in small groups that *explore moral decision-making, personal and shared values, and a common sense of purpose*. Your Religious Support Teams can help organize or provide materials for these kinds of discussion groups as a part of their regular training iterations. *Leadership involvement, authenticity, and transparency is critical*.

8. How do I recognize Moral Injury in those I lead?

The table in chapter 2 is a good place to start. One feature of Moral Injury that differentiates it from PTSD is that it is primarily focused on past moral and ethical transgressions. It is not a fear-based response wherein the sufferer becomes stuck in a "fight or flight" mode through continually reliving past traumas. Often PTSD and Moral Injury intersect, and it is not uncommon for people to receive both spiritual and clinical care simultaneously as they work through the complexity of their own trauma and presentation. If you have concerns that a member may be experiencing Moral Injury, have a conversation with them and your Religious Support Team.

9. How do I support or accommodate those who practice a unique or minority spirituality?

Working with people from a religious tradition with which you are unfamiliar presents an excellent opportunity to humbly learn from the Airmen and Guardians that are entrusted to you. Take a few moments prior to a conversation to learn about the tradition of your member. By doing so you are indicating that you care about the culture, history, and values that motivate them. *Expressing genuine, non-judgmental curiosity will lead to an understanding of how best to lead service members from a faith or spiritual background that is different from your own*.

CHAMP/SOCOM Spiritual Fitness Scale (SSFS)

Spiritual Fitness (SF) is a key component of the Department of Defense (DoD) Total Force Fitness framework for maintaining the total well-being and readiness of the force (CJCSI 3405.01, 2011). Spiritual Performance (SP) is a key component of the U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) Preservation of the Force and Family (POTFF) program framework for total well-being and readiness (SOCOM Directive 10-12, 2021). Both frameworks seek to enfranchise nontheists as well as theists. Both also address the importance of maintaining and strengthening the connections Military Service Members hold with their highest beliefs and values, and the connections they hold with other people.

DoD mandates that SF stakeholders produce metrics that provide useful information on individual, unit, and organizational readiness related to SF. SOCOM mandates the same for stakeholders related to SP. However, tools to holistically measure SF/SP remain in

their infancy. The academic literature contains many validated and publicly available survey instruments that assess aspects of spirituality, but they don't adequately capture SF/SP. Available scales are often lengthy and burdensome to administer for baselining and tracking trends over time. They also frequently assume a theistic orientation, so for non-theists these scales risk being invalid or even offensive. Lastly, most are poorly aligned with fitness and readiness objectives. As a result, military leaders lack validated tools to track SF/SP and optimize supporting programs and services.

In response, Consortium for Health and Military Performance (CHAMP) researchers partnered with SOCOM to develop the CHAMP/SOCOM Spiritual Fitness Scale (SSFS), a multi-year project that included input from more than 8,000 people in quantitative panels, responding to an initial 378 items.

During exploratory factor analysis completed within the 6 iterations of the project, 3 distinct spiritual traits emerged, which might be seen as Core Attributes of SF/SP. Each is represented by its own sub-scale.

The 3 Core Attributes/sub-scales are called: Personal Connection with a Higher Power (PCHP); Pursuing Meaning, Purpose, and Value (PMPV); and Service and Sacrifice for the Greater Good (SSGG).

To ensure survey validity for nontheists, a screener was included to allow nontheists to opt out from the PCHP subscale. The scales provide a good balance of the following properties: They are reliable and metrically sound, they're concise but not too narrow (17 items

in the final product), they're sensitive to many belief systems, and they correlate with many wider wellness traits such as gratitude, quality of life, forgiveness, familial commitment, coping, resilience, and adaptive reframing.

Using the SSFS

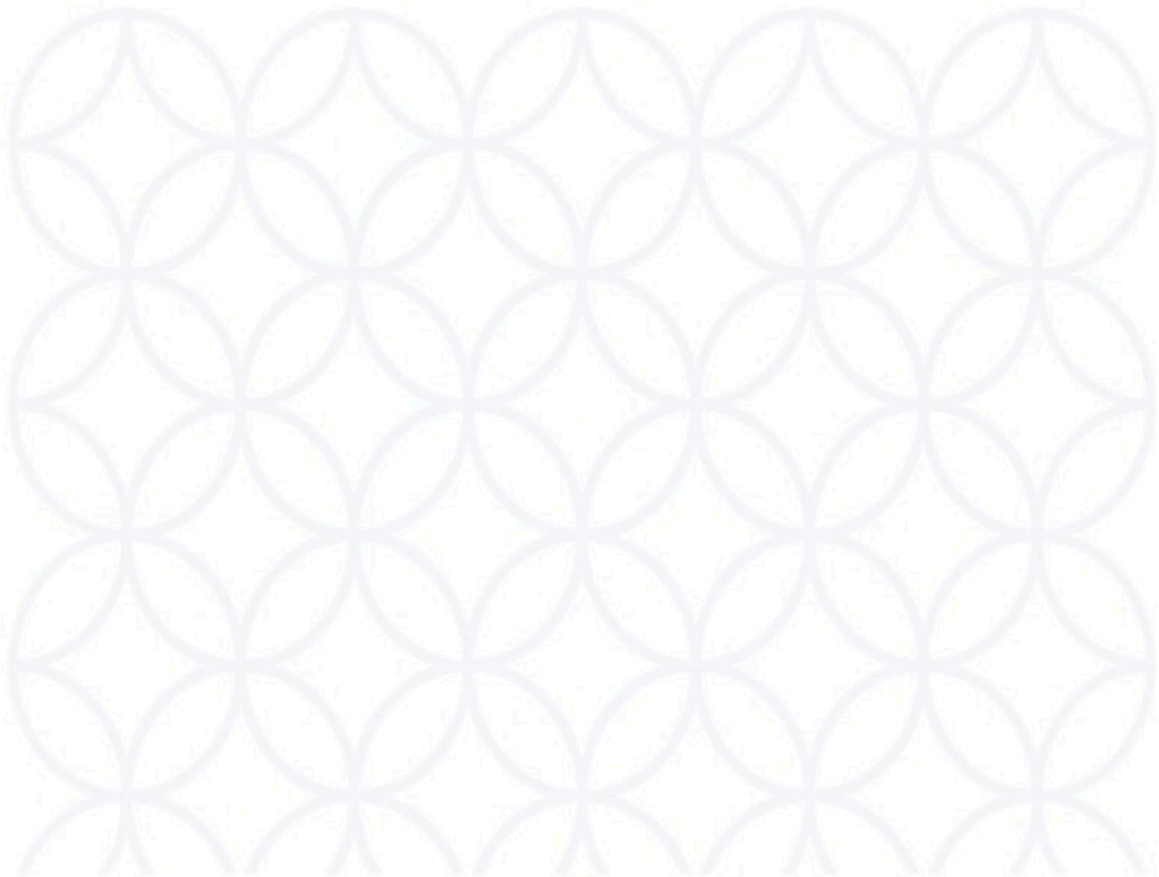
The SSFS is capable of informing and supporting many activities related to SF/SP, including:

- Establishing multi-dimensional baseline profiles for groups and individuals
- Assessing trends over time
- Bridging trends to individual coaching and mentoring
- Providing an evidence base for SF/SP program alignment
- Evaluating the effectiveness of programs designed to impact SF/SP, and articulate the impact of this growth with total well-being and readiness

Administer the scale within two blocks:

- Block 1: PMPV and SSGG
- Block 2: PCHP

To avoid any priming effect, the scale designers recommend administering the horizontal sub-scales (PMPV and SSGG) before the vertical sub-scale (PCHP). When administering the SSFS using an electronic system, the order of the items within each item-block can be randomized. When using paper and pencil to administer the SSFS, consider using the provided version below (this item sequence will minimize likely order-effects).



HUMAN PERFORMANCE RESOURCES by CHAMP, THE CONSORTIUM FOR HEALTH AND MILITARY PERFORMANCE
HPRC-ONLINE.ORG

SOCOM SPIRITUAL FITNESS SCALE (SSFS)

Reflect on your attitudes, commitments, and beliefs and answer as accurately as possible.

1. I know what my life is about.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

2. Human value and respect should be the greatest social value.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

3. I've been able to find a sense of meaning in my life.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

4. Looking at my life as a whole, things seem clear to me.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

5. I believe strongly in humanity and the power of people.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

6. I have a core set of beliefs, ethics, and values that give my life a sense of meaning and purpose.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

7. I often think about a “grand plan” or process that human beings are a part of.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

8. The greatest moral decision is doing the greatest good for human beings.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

9. Being of service to others is an important source of meaning in my life.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

10. I can find meaning and purpose in my everyday experiences.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

The next set of statements reflects commitment to God or a higher power. Even if you don't think of yourself as religious, try to answer as accurately as possible. If you believe a statement doesn't align with your belief system, then choose the option "The assumptions behind this statement aren't consistent with my world views."

11. I believe in God or a higher power.

- Yes No

12. I feel God's love for me.

- Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree
 The assumptions behind this question aren't consistent with my world views.

13. I look to God for strength, support, and guidance.

- Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree
 The assumptions behind this question aren't consistent with my world views.

14. I feel God's presence.

- Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree
 The assumptions behind this question aren't consistent with my world views.

15. I am grateful for all God has done for me.

- Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree
 The assumptions behind this question aren't consistent with my world views.

16. God comforts and shelters me.

- Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree
 The assumptions behind this question aren't consistent with my world views.

17. I've decided to place my life under God's direction.

- Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree
 The assumptions behind this question aren't consistent with my world views.

18. Religious beliefs are what really lie behind my whole approach to life.

- Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree
 The assumptions behind this question aren't consistent with my world views.

SCORING

For profiling, sub-scales should be scored by first coding the response options, such that:

- Strongly disagree = 1
- Disagree = 2
- Neutral = 3
- Agree = 4
- Strongly agree = 5

Averaging

- Each sub-scale should be averaged separately; after this, the sub-scales may be averaged together.
- In the version above, PMPV items (1, 3, 4, 6, 10) and SSGG items (2, 5, 7, 8, 9) are mixed together, and must be unmixing to generate separate averages.

Classifying scores

Rigid cutoffs to classify individual scores can be seen as arbitrary for nonclinical traits that exist along a continuum. However, for the purposes of creating working categories that can be matched with suggested readiness interventions: An average score below 3.5 for any sub-scale can be considered a 'low/lower score,' indicating ample room for growth. Accordingly, an average score above 3.5 for any sub-scale can be considered a 'high/higher score,' indicating the need for a readiness focus on both maintenance and growth.

Other considerations

- PCHP items (12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18) should be scored if respondents indicate they do believe in God.
- PCHP items *should not* be scored if respondents indicate they *do not* believe in God.
- PCHP also *should not* be scored if respondents use the option "The assumptions behind this statement aren't consistent with my world views" on two or more items.
- When using sub-scales to evaluate program-related growth in one of the three Core Attributes of SF/SP, extending to a 10-point, Likert-type format is recommended, with descriptors placed only on points 1 (strongly disagree) and 10 (strongly agree). Change scores in the 10-point format can then be divided by 2 to compare with scores in the 5-point format.

SSFS Qualitative Companion Tool: Spirituality & Performance Coaching Grid (SPCG)

Scales	Notes on Commitment & Connection Related to the 3 Core Attributes			Goals to Maintain or Strengthen Spiritual Commitments
	How has my commitment to this attribute changed in the past 6-18 months?	Which factors might help me strengthen my commitment to this attribute?	Which factors might threaten my ability to maintain commitment to this attribute?	
PMVP				
SSGG				
PCHP				

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USING THE SPCG

You can use the SPCG in conjunction with SSFS to capture narrative feedback corresponding to SSFS item responses. It can also be used as a tool for bridging SSFS results into tailored coaching or mentoring for optimized performance and enhanced readiness.

Note: The SPCG isn't a static tool. Designed as a qualitative companion matrix to the SSFS, its top-column categories can be dynamically adjusted for use anytime an SF/SP stakeholder wishes to capture first-person comments related to SSFS scaling. The top-column categories in the version above are ideal for preparing an individual coaching encounter. However, if an SF/SP stakeholder wishes to use the SPCG as a component in program evaluation, it's expected that the top-column categories would be changed to pursue information on program-related processes and outcomes.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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