

Like Oil and Water? Occupational Health, Spirituality, and Employer-Provided Spiritual Wellness Services for Offshore Oil Workers

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Abstract

Background: Offshore oil rigs are isolated and potentially dangerous environments that present challenges to workers' physical and mental health. Accident and injury prevention programs and employee assistance programs intend to address these occupational challenges. While vitally important, these programs do not typically address spiritual health. Spirituality has been shown to contribute to health and wellness. Yet, little is known about whether employer-provided spiritual wellness services have the potential to support the occupational health of this population.

Methods: We conducted a scoping review of three bodies of literature published in the last 35 years: the mental and physical wellness of offshore oil workers; the role of spiritual practice in promoting mental and physical wellness; and the provision of spiritual wellness services as an adjunct to employee assistance programs.

Results: Offshore oil workers experience a range of challenges to their physical, mental, emotional and social wellbeing. Spiritual beliefs and practices have been shown to contribute to wellness. Some scholars suggest that providing spiritual resources at work benefits employees and employers alike, while others argue that spiritual practice does not belong in the workplace. There is no published research that specifically examines the spiritual wellbeing of offshore oil workers or whether employer-provided spiritual services would promote occupational health in this population.

Discussion: The findings of this scoping review are both promising and cautionary. Evidence suggests that improving offshore workers' ability to engage in spiritual practice may improve their mental and physical wellbeing. However, this literature is characterized by several methodological shortcomings: the conflation of correlation with causality; the difficulty of creating meaningful standardized measurements of spiritual wellbeing; and concerns around sampling biases, clinical versus population-level effects, and the inability to control for confounding factors. Furthermore, promoting spiritual wellness within the workplace raises controversies at the intersection of capitalism and spirituality. Further research is needed in two key areas: refining theory and method to improve our understanding of the links between spiritual practice and wellness; and deepening the debate about the ethical implications of employer-provided spiritual resources.

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Conclusion: Discussion of occupational health and safety in the offshore oil industry often focuses on accident and injury prevention. This is extremely important work. However, worker wellbeing is further improved when industry leaders adopt a more expansive concept of wellness that is supported through employee assistance programming. Determining if and how spiritual resources might constitute part of this support for offshore oil workers requires focused evidence-based research and sensitive ethical consideration.