

The Meaningful Connection Pathway Model

Spiritual Waypoints to Prevent Suicide

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This article introduces the meaningful connection pathway model, which outlines the mechanisms of spiritual fitness. The model represents a new tool for the Department of the Air Force's (DAF) suicide prevention efforts, introducing spirituality as a meaning-making activity vital to warfighter readiness. Using the total force fitness framework and critical realism, the model aligns with DAF priorities, providing leaders with a replicable strategy and caregivers with a practical way to enhance well-being among Airmen and Guardians by preventing disconnection, fostering a safer, more cohesive military environment, and deepening connections to the self, others, and life. The model holds implications for the advancement of suicide prevention strategies as well as operational readiness across the national security spectrum.

How the Department of Defense—and specifically the Department of the Air Force (DAF)—define *spirituality* is integral to forming a strategy to prevent suicides within the service. The service components within the Defense Department are focusing on spirituality in a targeted emphasis to protect personnel. Such efforts are in line with current research, which indicate that higher levels of spirituality can offer protective factors against individuals acting on suicide ideations and suicide behaviors.¹ The US Army, for example, is investing in spirituality to increase connectedness as a prevention to social isolation and loneliness and grow positive relationships for personnel.² Likewise, the Marine Corps also highlights spirituality to its personnel as a way to increase connection through social support systems in an attempt to reduce suicide risk.³ But what exactly does spirituality entail?

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1. See, for example, Tanya Aneja and Rita Kumar, "A Pathway to Healing: Exploring the Role of Spirituality as a Predictor of Suicidal Ideation," *Tuijin Jishu/Journal of Propulsion Technology* 44, no. 4 (2023), <https://doi.org/>; Eric B. Elbogen, et al. "Psychosocial Protective Factors and Suicidal Ideation: Results from a National Longitudinal Study of Veterans." *Journal of Affective Disorders* 260 (2020), <https://doi.org/>; and Melissa A. Smigelsky et al., "Religion, Spirituality, and Suicide Risk in Iraq and Afghanistan Era Veterans," *Depression and Anxiety* 37, no. 8 (2020), <https://doi.org/>.

2. Chester Curtis, "Preventing Suicide Through Spirituality," US Army (website), 11 September 2021, <https://www.army.mil/>.

3. HQMC Behavioral Programs, Program Evaluation and Research, "Spirituality, Religion, and Suicide Risk," Marine Corps Community Services, accessed 12 February 2025, <https://albany.usmc-mccs.org/>.

Spirituality fosters meaning making, connectedness, and hope, all of which provide a framework for coping with life's challenges. Spirituality manifests within the connections that build social support between oneself and the broader community, meaning and purpose in one's life, and strong personal beliefs about oneself, others, and the world.⁴ For military personnel, such spiritual factors increase hope and optimism and remain key to suicide risk reduction.⁵

In particular, such strong personal beliefs are an integral part of what the Department of Defense and Air Force refer to as *spiritual fitness*.⁶ Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction 3405.01, *Total Fitness Framework*, defines spiritual fitness as “the ability to adhere to beliefs, principles, or values needed to persevere and prevail in accomplishing missions.”⁷ It also points to the significance of fostering this aspect within service members, as “a strong spirit promotes resiliency and enhances one's ability to mitigate adverse responses to stress.”⁸ Although it does not offer a clear definition of spirituality, the instruction suggests that spiritual fitness and spirituality are synonymous: “Capturing spirituality's contribution to total fitness is essential to optimizing the well-being and resiliency of the total force.”⁹

The DAF reiterates this definition and recognizes spiritual fitness as one of the four pillars of resilience in the comprehensive Airman fitness framework.¹⁰ While it defines spiritual fitness as “the ability to adhere to beliefs, virtues or values needed to develop a fulfilling life with quality of service,” it describes spirituality as “the means to find ultimate meaning and purpose in life.”¹¹ Both of these definitions are supported within the Air Force chaplain corps as well, which has been officially acknowledged by the US government for its part in suicide prevention efforts. Recognizing the importance of fostering spirituality among service members, the government has tasked the chaplain corps to provide support services to service members and their families to help “in building and maintaining a strong family structure, or to support the resiliency, suicide prevention, or holistic wellness [of these individuals].”¹²

Yet while such guidance outlines spiritual fitness as an end-state that complements other fitness domains, it does not propose standard criterion for assessing spiritual fitness

4. Kyle, “Spirituality.”

5. C. J. Bryan, E. Graham, and E. Roberge, “Living a Life Worth Living: Spirituality and Suicide Risk in Military Personnel,” *Spirituality in Clinical Practice* 2, no. 1 (2015), <https://doi.org/>; and see Smigelsky et al., “Religion.”

6. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction (CJCSI) 3405.01, *Chairman's Total Force Fitness Framework* (CJCS, 2011, current as of 13 September 2013), A-2.

7. CJCSI 3405.01, A-2.

8. CJCSI 3405.01, A-E-1.

9. CJCSI 3405.01, D-4.

10. Department of the Air Force Instruction (DAFI) 90-5001, *Integrated Resilience* (DAF, 23 July 2024), <https://static.e-publishing.af.mil/>.

11. DAFI 90-5001, 79.

12. DAFI 52-101, *Chaplain Corps Planning and Organizing* (DAF, 29 November 2023), 18, <https://static.e-publishing.af.mil/>; and Chaplain-led Programs: Authorized Support, 10 USC § 1789.

or delineate the mechanisms that inform how an individual achieves it. Current evidence about spiritual fitness and readiness reveal that these definitions are outcome-focused and lack a contextual standard application. Discussion about suicide prevention thus has a vested interest not only in spirituality because of its contribution to total fitness and optimization of total well-being and resilience but also in related terms like *spirit* and *spiritual* as well, historically elusive words whose definitions are as varied as the context in which they are used.

This article proposes a model for tracing one's path toward healthy spirituality—referred to here as a *model of meaningful connections*—to help Airmen and Guardians and their caregivers understand how to foster a healthy spiritual self. In a different context—for example, in organized religion—spirit, spiritual, and spirituality can take on different meanings. In the context of the Air Force's comprehensive Airman fitness framework, however, they can be understood as *meaningful connections*, or what one analysis describes as the “subjective quality of relatedness to others so essential to bolstering well-being and quelling loneliness.”¹³ In outlining the development of spirituality and the stages of that process, this article provides practical suggestions for using the model for oneself or the caregiving of others to understand the wisdom and value of meaningful connections. While this article proposes this model of meaningful connections for reducing suicide risk in the DAF, it also recognizes that this process is one that remains open to development and conversation among Airmen, Guardians, and their leaders.

The Theoretical Approach

Critical realism provides the context to understand the nature of one's spiritual existence and the relationship between the ideas of spirit, spiritual, and spirituality used in the proposed meaningful connection model. Critical realism is effective because it enables one to grasp a full understanding of reality as both observable and unobservable events. It also accounts for unseen forces acting on lived experience. As a theoretical approach, critical realism explains the sequential movement from spirit to spiritual to spirituality as a continual movement in one's life. Spirit, spiritual, and spirituality exist on a looping continuum as one experiences and responds to life events, ever evolving their spiritual self.

According to critical realism, reality is made up of three domains: the real, the actual, and the empirical. The real domain consists of underlying structures. The spirit is nested within the real domain, which is a place of origination that gives rise to the actual domain. The actual domain is where observed and unobserved events take place. The spiritual is nested within the actual domain; thus the spiritual state of humanity exists with all a person's responses to life events. Finally, the empirical domain is where an individual's personal experiences of events that have led to their beliefs and behaviors are now their lived truth. Spirituality, also known as the spiritual self, is nested in the empirical domain

13. D. Smallen, “Experiences of Meaningful Connection in the First Weeks of the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 38, no. 10 (2021), <https://doi.org/>.

and is where individuals live out their tested spiritual beliefs and practices. One's spirituality, known as the spiritual self, is ever evolving and becoming as it is a product of the spiritual/actual domain.

Spirit, spiritual, and spirituality are best understood as sequential stages in one's journey toward spiritual fitness, with distinct milestones in each stage. Spiritual fitness starts with the movement toward meaning. The spirit creates and reinforces meaning-making activity toward the events of life. In some ways, the spirit can be likened to the core at the center of the Earth that is made up of hidden forces that actively drive everything above—it is largely unseen yet represents deep invisible structures that influence everything on the surface. The spirit is an underlying structure of causality that generates one's motivation to seek the meaning of life and meaning in life.

The spiritual stage consists of meaningful events, traits, behaviors, and discoveries that are products of the spirit's drive toward making meaning of life's events. The spiritual can be likened to the Earth's crust and mantle that rest just under one's feet, consisting of both observed and unobserved life events. Life's events are like geologic and tectonic shifts, volcanic eruptions that initiate a response in the form of thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and actions. Spiritual is an adjective describing an individual's spirituality but also a noun delineating the sense-making within their life. Individuals form beliefs, practices, and thoughts—many of them spiritual—about what is happening to them in an effort to make meaning. The spiritual is the phase of one's journey when they search for and test various thoughts, beliefs, and practices that enable them to make sense of the events of their lives.

Spirituality is best described as meaningful practices and beliefs that are developed from one's drive toward understanding life's experiences and the testing of specific beliefs, practices, and thoughts. These meaningful practices and beliefs can be understood as the spiritual self.¹⁴ Spirituality is therefore like the Earth's surface—that observable part of reality where one lives, walks, breathes, and observes the world around them. Spirituality is that state where one lives out their spiritual underpinnings, whether that looks like religion, philosophy, or a general spiritualism. The meaning one has discovered rests just beneath the surface, becoming rich soil for one to live out their spiritual self. In this way, as beliefs and practices endure as true meaning for the individual, a sense of connection and spiritual fitness are reinforced.

The Meaningful Connection Pathway

The meaningful connection pathway is comprised of six phases, as outlined below (fig. 1), that build upon one another and lead either to connection or disconnection. The phases represent states or conditions but also actions and movements. The pathway begins with the human capacity—or spirit—that moves individuals to think, feel, or act in a spiritual manner toward something or someone beyond themselves. In this way, people move toward

14. Joseph J. Amato et al., "Spirituality and Religion: Neglected Factors in Preventing Veteran Suicide?," *Pastoral Psychology* 66 (2017), <https://doi.org/>.

transcendence and enhance their meaning or embrace spirituality. Not only does this model define the phases in an individual's process toward spiritual fitness, but also these six milestones provide caregivers a way to diagnostically investigate one's spiritual struggle and engage as precisely as needed.

The phrase meaningful connections has three distinct connotations. First, each of the six phases along the pathway is meaningfully connected to the others. Second, the individual's ability to connect with what has happened in their life honestly and openly without denial enables one to discover deep truth. Finally, as humans journey through life, their discovery of self opens up a larger community of others that hopefully brings about meaningful connectedness as they inventory who or what has helped them along the way.

Figure 1 shows the meaningful connection pathway model with the six phases together and color coded to understand which waypoints along the pathway are associated with which of the three stages of the theoretical approach: spirit, spiritual, or spirituality. In this model, the spirit gives life to the living, optimizing well-being when it meets specific needs in each phase of the journey. Healthy spirituality, or spiritual fitness, is defined as meaningful connectedness, and this connectedness is achieved by successfully moving through each of the six phases. Key factors of spirituality are that it is essential in nature, it is actively engaged, it enhances flourishing, it is experienced as truth, it connects to a more powerful or knowledgeable other, it contains a larger reservoir of resources, and it heightens one's experience of truth and thus becomes the foundation of personal flourishing and warfighter readiness.

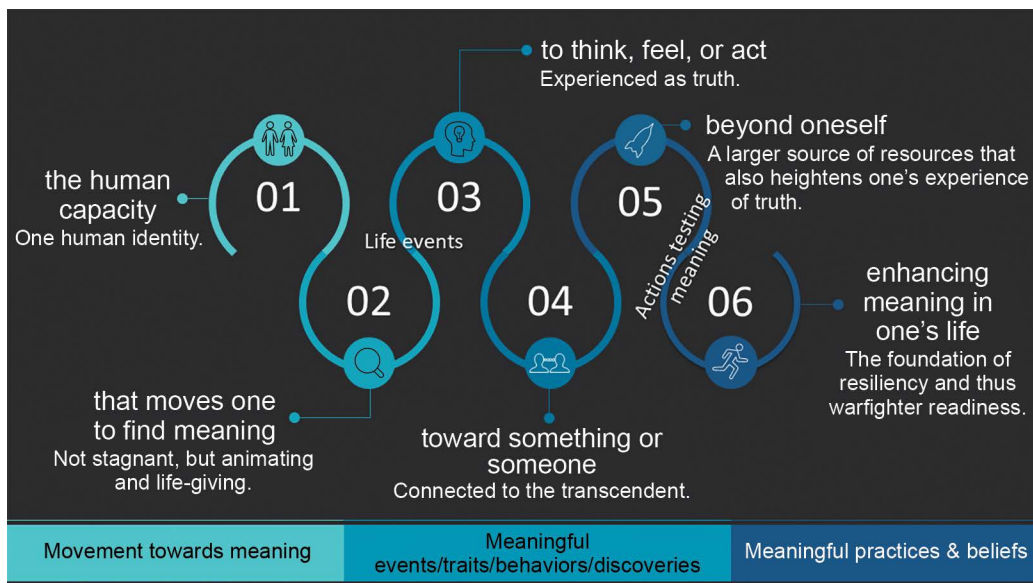


Figure 1. The meaningful connection pathway model

How might one understand what meaningful connectedness looks like and how that leads to flourishing and a healthy spiritual self that result in what the DAF defines as

spiritual fitness? In the following explanation, each waypoint along the spiritual pathway is defined in detail.

Phase 1: The Human Spirit

The first phase involves the essential human capacity toward meaning making. This phase is the waypoint acknowledging that within all humanity resides the spirit, making all humanity spiritual beings. While there are many ways to define spirit, in the context of the Air Force's comprehensive Airman fitness framework, the spirit is best understood as a human quality everyone is born with that drives them toward meaning-making activity. The spirit is the source from which one desires and seeks meaning in life and the meaning of life. As a human quality, spirit is not necessarily a religious term, although a religious definition of spirit can co-exist with this understanding of a force within all humanity that provides an essential capacity to search for meaning. As mentioned above, the spirit is a motivational force that originates from the core of humanity, essential to the deepest part of the self.¹⁵

In this phase, a caregiver can start by assessing whether the Airman or Guardian accepts they are a spiritual person, as evidenced by the spiritual act of meaning making. Do they identify with an energy from within them, a spark from which special moments of connection and belonging to someone or something outside themselves originate? One might ask them to define what it is about them that makes them spiritual or want to understand their life. Specific questions a caregiver can ask are provided in a latter section.

Phase 2: The Drive To Make Meaning

Humanity searches, at some level, for meaning in and of life—an indication of the spiritual second stage. Therefore, everyone has the potential to achieve mature, healthy spirituality. Humanity's resting state is that of a traveler, recording all of life as a story.¹⁶ The first truth of being human is that everyone has an inner drive to find meaning. To be human is to seek to know and understand oneself and the universe. Airmen and Guardians will sometimes say they are not spiritual, but the existence of such meaning-making activity reveals the presence of the spirit and the essentialness of the spirit because the spirit is the force that drives them to make meaning to understand life.¹⁷ Humankind starts and spends

15. Patrick J. Sweeney, Sean T. Hannah, and Don M. Snider, "The Domain of the Human Spirit," in *Forging the Warrior's Character: Moral Precepts from the Cadet Prayer*, ed. Don M. Snider and L. J. Matthews (Jerico LLC, 2007); and Kenneth I. Pargament and Patrick J. Sweeney, "Building Spiritual Fitness in the Army: An Innovative Approach to a Vital Aspect of Human Development," *American Psychologist* 66, no. 1 (2011), <https://doi.org/>.

16. Brendan I. Cohn-Sheehy et al., "The Hippocampus Constructs Narrative Memories Across Distant Events," *Current Biology* 31 no. 22 (2021), <https://doi.org/>.

17. Sweeney, Hannah, and Snider, "Human Spirit."

their life on a journey of increasing meaningful connectedness by considering how they have responded to the events of their life and who or what has helped them along the way.

In this stage, a caregiver can continue their spiritual assessment by evaluating whether the Airman or Guardian accepts they are a spiritual person, as evidenced by the spiritual act of meaning making. Caregivers can also guide them in recognizing the role of life events in this meaning-making process. Traits, behaviors, and beliefs are formed through the events of life. Events that move an individual toward meaning typically move them internally; such events are specifically important and alter their course in life.

A caregiver can use narrative therapy techniques to have Airmen and Guardians diagram or write a timeline of the life events they believe helped to shape them. Writing out their life story is a powerful tool to help them consider what these events are. Examples of such events or moments that can initiate their search for meaning can range from something as momentous as the birth of their first child to the experience of a negative trauma event, and from something as seemingly inconsequential as the sound of trumpets at the beginning of the *Rocky* theme song to a view of a sunset or to the narration of a sermon, poem, or philosophical idea. When someone experiences these kinds of events, they interpret them in a unique and personal way. A caregiver can look for interpretative language. Many times, these interpretations are influenced by the following phases in the pathway.

Phase 3: Life Experienced as Truth, Leading Toward Understanding

The spirit's motivation toward meaning making is catalyzed when one begins experiencing life events. Upon reaching the third stage of spirituality, individuals become self-aware and differentiate from others around them. One becomes cognizant of their own life events and memories, turns curious about ultimate causes, and begins asking, Why? These are different questions than what a toddler might ask. Such questions are more existential and ultimate.

In fact, a first response to the events of life is asking why. For example, if someone believes humanity is created in the image of God, they might believe the role of the spirit as the prime mover inside humanity—causing one to seek meaning—is that part of God's image that seeks to reunite humanity with the divine. To be human is to ask why bad things happen; why evil, hurt, and pain exist in the world; and why one must endure it? A caregiver can listen for these why questions as they interview Airmen and Guardians. Such questions tend to focus on what has happened in their life in the previous phase. These events are both joyful and traumatic and typically have significance in shaping individuals both positively and negatively. Caregivers can help them recognize the two factors that determine the effects of such shaping.

The first factor is the thoughts, feelings, and actions in response to the events of the Airman's or Guardian's life. These thoughts, feelings, and actions are also shaped by the events of life. This is where individual self-awareness is activated. Humanity is faced with a choice on how to respond in thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, based on the yearning to understand and make meaning of life events. A caregiver can look for ways in which

the Airman or Guardian has responded. Is it through arrogance or overconfidence or by rejecting others? Perhaps they medicate their pain with all forms of self-soothing. Maybe they choose to reach out to others, share the celebration, and laugh at their own situation. Individuals can decide to seek guidance or direction, study, or pray. Airmen and Guardians choose many ways to respond that will determine whether they stay connected and continue their journey toward meaning making or whether they become disconnected and experience loss of meaning.

Phase 4: Movement Toward Someone or Something

Here the emphasis is on the movement of the individual as they recognize their part in a larger story in the universe. This alludes to the second shaping behavior—understanding that each individual is part of something bigger than themselves that creates a sense of awe and wonder that opens them up to a greater community outside the self. This sense of something larger than themselves allows for others to enter their situation, join the journey, and “be in relation,” as one theologian writes.¹⁸ That recognition leads an individual down the path toward the critical moment in the spiritual stage, or self-transcendence—to find someone or something to help make sense of the events of their life and inform thoughts that lead to healthy behavior.

This is known as a meaningful connection practice and offers caregivers an intervention through nonjudgmental, curious inquiry of the existence or awareness of these spiritual factors in the Airman’s or Guardian’s conscience. Specific examples of this inquiry activity are described in the practical implications and application section of this article, but generally, caregivers here explore the support systems and connections—or lack thereof—Airmen and Guardians share with others around them and within the broader context. They may feel a connection to bigger causes, larger purposes beyond themselves. Service in the military may be one of these larger causes and purposes of service. As mentioned, individuals are inclined, by their humanity, to seek meaning and to understand the events of their life, which lead them to think, feel, or act either toward or away from someone or something that can provide wisdom for interpretation, understanding, or empathy, which then leads them to want to make a greater impact. A caregiver can assess how the Airman or Guardian serves the world around them. Another way to facilitate this phase is to inquire where the Airman or Guardian has experienced awe and wonder in their life.

These connections are vertical if individuals come to believe in a higher power or philosophy for living. They are horizontal as they invite those in their immediate community into their lives to draw from a relationship, mentorship, coaching, or some other guidance. This meaningful connection can also be internal as individuals connect with themselves and recognize these experiences within a broader context and not deny their existence or replace them with false narratives.

18. Colin E. Gunton, *The One, The Three and The Many: God, Creation, and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge University Press, 1993).

The caregiver can assess the efficacy of an Airman's or Guardian's support systems and their awareness of being part of a larger universal story. As this is done, they move toward phase five along the pathway.

Phase 5: Resources Beyond Oneself

Phase five involves the movement toward a larger pool of resources that leads to a greater personal truth. This phase is tied to the previous phase of moving closer toward someone or something beyond oneself and is focused especially on the added resources this brings in closer proximity. Individuals discover new and broader resources outside of themselves that can be drawn from, and they begin to form new understandings about their experiences by looking back through the perspective of others in a community or with literature that offers insight, knowledge, or deeper understandings of life. They begin to realize community can be helpful, a life event unto itself. People do not need to walk the world alone, and they possibly discover the wisdom that joys are multiplied and difficult loads are lightened when shared with others. The additional perspective and resources bring new wisdom and interpretation toward meaning making. So as individuals continue to journey through the meaningful connection pathway, they test the meaningful truths they discover to determine their worthiness. From that testing comes new depths of meaning as experiences become understanding.

Through curiosity in conversation, caregivers stay observant to the Airman or Guardian, and through exercises, they foster an understanding of the resources that have helped the service member discover their current worldview. The caregiver should ask directly about support systems by taking note of the service member's family and social history, learning about their interests and hobbies and work life. Some formal assessment tools for exploring support systems and personal resources include the social support questionnaire, the multidimensional scale of perceived social support, the life satisfaction index, and the strengths and needs assessment. Most important is to understand the perspective of the Airman or Guardian. Understanding their core values—and values by which they live and how they came to believe in them—is the key to assessing this phase of the journey.

One now has many thoughts, beliefs, and ideas for how to act that are informed by the connections with self and others along with additional resources that can be brought to bear to determine the way forward toward meaning. While not a waypoint along the pathway, this part of the journey on the pathway has been taking place since phase 3, but it finds its fullness here. The Airman or Guardian acts in order to test meaning based on a hypothesis about their understanding of life; such tests give them information that will develop into one's truth or meaning in and of life. These will also turn into spiritual practices and can become what many know as religious, atheistic, agnostic, and philosophical worldviews.

Phase 6: Finding Ultimate Personal Meaning

Finally, as one tests different thoughts and behaviors, enduring practices of spirituality form. Some of these behaviors result in religious practices, spiritual practices, and other

personal methods of coping and working out meaning in life and meaning of life. Therefore, the need in the spiritual stage is to develop healthy beliefs and practices that fulfill the drive toward finding meaning.

In the spiritual stage an individual will find it helpful to seek a guide, coach, mentor, or philosophy that aids in confronting difficult challenges that are larger than their ability to interpret them. In this case that individual has an opportunity to form healthy beliefs, values, and virtues from these events and prevent unhealthy distortions. In this way, spiritual states are tested, and if the thoughts, beliefs, and practices enable that individual to flourish, these spiritual states form traits that are their truth or worldview, and meaning is realized. This spirituality can then provide meaning in/of the world and can be understood as spiritual fitness.

A caregiver can assess for healthy beliefs and practices with curiosity and without judgment to determine how well each is helping the Airman or Guardian to flourish. Thoughts, behaviors, and practices define unique states of being for each individual. These states become ingrained traits and explain why individuals behave and believe in the way they do. Thus caregivers can further explore the Airman's or Guardian's core values. A clarity of personal core values reveals purpose. Values reveal beliefs and what feels true to the Airman or Guardian. A caregiver can ask how fulfilled they feel in their work, their personal life, their family, hobbies, and so on. Do they feel like they are nourished by their occupation, their community, their hobbies, or personal life? If not, what is interfering with that?

This meaningful connection pathway model is a way of understanding how meaning is developed and operationalized in relation to Airman and Guardian spiritual fitness. It incorporates the individual's natural drive toward meaning making. If the spiritual pathway connections occur in healthy and meaningful ways, then through testing one finds enhanced meaning about the events of life. One's interpretations along the way are influenced by their support systems, education, or some form of inspiration that can be self-guided understandings or divine intervention. These outside sources are often useful in providing additional resources outside oneself. In this way, two people can experience the same event but interpret that event differently according to their unique constitution, educational opportunities, and support systems, which serve to interpret their life events. Through the testing of thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors, one finds a way to understand and move through the world.

It is important to note that this process is never complete but circles back to any part of the pathway the Airman or Guardian needs when new events come into their life. In this way, their spirituality or spiritual self is not wrong because it is different from another; it is just uniquely formed. Caregivers thus may intervene at the same waypoints multiple times as each Airman or Guardian experiences their journey to spirituality in a continuous process. This idea of spirituality as an ongoing process supports the pluralistic context of the Air Force chaplain corps and is the foundation of human flourishing and warfighter readiness.

Disconnection

The phases of healthy spirituality develop meaningful connections if the individual's needs are met in each phase. If so, then the successful completion of one phase leads one to the next and in a circular pathway through life. This dynamic of succession makes each of the six phases along the pathway meaningfully connected. The movement from one phase to the next provides for movement forward, backward, and continuously restarting toward a new journey of meaning making throughout the lifespan. Breaks in these six connections are shown in figure 2 between the latter phases of the process—between phases 3 and 4, 4 and 5, and 5 and 6. When breaks occur it means the Airman or Guardian has not reconciled the basic human need in the preceding phase, which creates a stuck point that negatively affects progress.

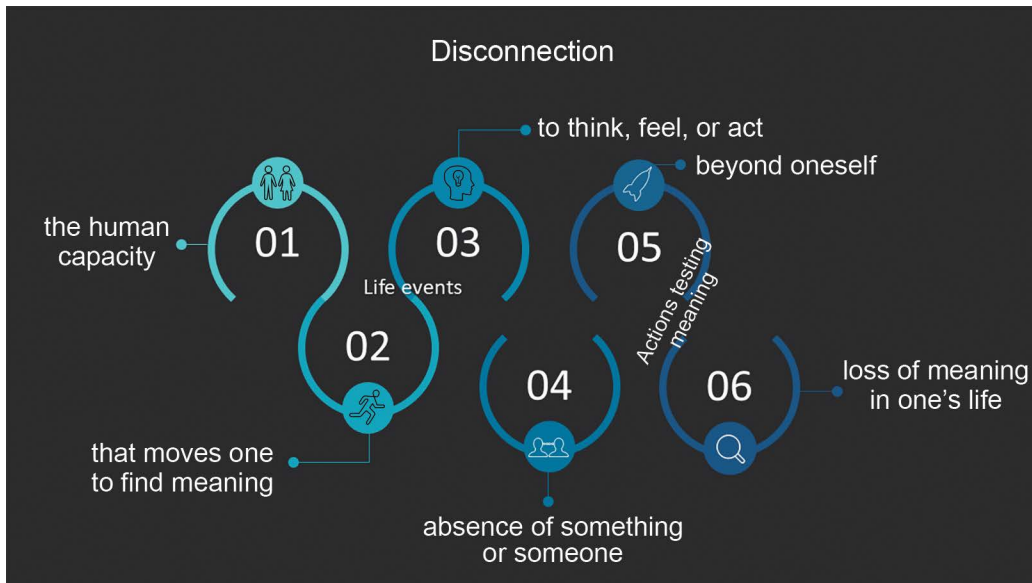


Figure 2. Where disconnections happen along the pathway

To illustrate disconnection, consider an individual who has experienced a difficult and overly challenging childhood. That individual is driven to understand the meaning of their difficult life, possibly leading to cognitive distortions or acting out behavior (breaks from phases 3 to 4). They find no one to help them understand and answer the why questions (breaks from phases 4 to 5), and they continue to think, feel, and act in ways that are counter to producing life within and finding meaning (breaks from phases 5 to 6). Such a person feels alone in their struggle to find anyone or anything beyond their self. A loss of meaning is experienced. In such a case, any intervention would start at the earliest disconnection point. As Airmen and Guardians can find support within their broader community, caregivers share the responsibility of their well-being with other caregivers. It is important to recognize that not every caregiver is adequately able to help every Airman or Guardian.

If their presenting issue cannot be resolved by the current caregiver, then they should be referred to another caregiver with adequate resources or life experiences to assist.

Exploring Archetypes to Navigate the Pathway

Humans are shaped by one another, either by commission or omission. One's character is lived in community, contributing and receiving to and from one another. In the context of suicide, living in community is a deterrent to loneliness, recognized as an epidemic by the US Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy.¹⁹ Community is also essential to military leaders who rely upon the ability to organize groups of people toward the achievement of specific operational goals.

To live a meaningful life is to live a life in meaningful connection with one's self and others. Living in community compels people into places and situations where they can be encouraged, edified, and also challenged. Rubbing up against others informs the individual of their growing edges and the need for them, and it provides the individual with the personal resources to gain strength to overcome the challenges of life.²⁰ The significance of community is exemplified through the example of recently returned combat veterans, who are cited as having specific challenges with reintegrating into family, social, and community settings, placing them at higher risk of suicide.²¹

This dynamic of living in community can perhaps be best understood through the archetypal hero's journey present in storytelling and mythmaking as far back as the time of Odysseus and his passage through the narrow strait between Scylla and Charybdis. Such an archetypal motif endures in today's stories of heroes and the paths they have taken, whether it is in the narratives about Luke Skywalker, Frodo, Iron Man, or Batman. Archetypes in general serve as mirrors of the human condition, providing an excellent picture of how meaning making works. They enable one to understand universal aspects of the human condition across cultures and time as vehicles for humanity to experience the world, to experience a call to action, and to provide useful role models for how to carry forth that action.²² And because of their larger-than-life portrayals of everyday human experience, they can provide impactful meanings that are relevant to today's Airmen and Guardians.

19. Marissa King, "Working to Address the Loneliness Epidemic: Perspective-Taking, Presence, and Self-Disclosure," *American Journal of Health Promotion* 32, no. 5 (2018), <https://doi.org/>; and Vivek H. Murthy, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community* (US Public Health Service 2023), <https://www.hhs.gov/>.

20. Bryan, Graham, and Roberge, "Living a Life."

21. Marek S. Kopacz et al., "Religious Coping and Suicide Risk in a Sample of Recently Returned Veterans," *Archives of Suicide Research* 22, no. 4 (2018), <https://doi.org/>.

22. Sophon Shadraconis, "Leaders and Heroes: Modern Day Archetypes," *LUX: A Journal of Transdisciplinary Writing and Research from Claremont Graduate University* 3, no. 1 (2013), <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/>.

In the hero's journey, the hero is often portrayed as rising from an ordinary life then overcoming some challenge or obstacle with the help of a mentor who guides them to find meaning, often amid a tragic situation. Such heroes must find themselves and define who they will be, what they will believe in, and what they will value and fight for. The hero's journey can be simplified into three phases: the departure, which outlines the journey within a larger context; the initiation, where the hero overcomes trials to prove their worthiness; and the return, where the hero resolves the initial crisis.²³ Significantly, the hero does not sojourn successfully by themselves but is accompanied by a wise person or mentor who calls them forth and guides the hero through their departure and initiation. As part of this process, sometimes the hero becomes the mentor for another departing on their own journey.²⁴

This relationship can include both direct instruction to a protégé or one of influence through example that bonds the mentor and student together. In *The Iliad*, for instance, Achilles finds this bond with Patroclus. Achilles adjusts his own quest for honor and revenge by journeying with Patroclus and committing him to lead the Myrmidons into battle dressed in his armor. The meaningful connectedness between the two is evident in the grief Achilles experiences following the loss of Patroclus.

The meaningful connection pathway can be understood as akin to the hero's journey. From departure to return, the journey is filled with events and individuals intended to teach the hero some special knowledge that will help them resolve the crisis they confront. Often the greatest danger to the hero is manifested as the trickster archetype, which comprises the hero's inferior traits and represents their shadow reflection.²⁵ The hero giving in to their inferior traits can be equated to disconnection and the inability to find meaning, symbolized in the breaks that may occur along the pathway. But the defeat of the trickster enables the hero to overcome the crisis and fulfill the destiny they were called forth to achieve—which in the pathway is phase 6, spirituality.

Meaningful connections make it possible for every Airman and Guardian to transition from ordinary person to hero, in the sense that they are being called forth on an odyssey that will require self-sacrifice, hardship, and bravery, whether on the battlefield or in the conference room. This journey also applies to today's leaders, who must help other Airmen and Guardians make sense of their context, bring order to chaos, or right the wrongs of their unit.²⁶ There will be situations where a nemesis—whether in the form of a physical enemy or one's internal struggles—will seek to control the hero, standing in opposition to one's purpose. But meaningful connections gained throughout the journey will help Airmen and Guardians prevail. In the case of combat veterans who

23. See Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, The Collected Works of Joseph Campbell, Bollingen Series XVII, 3rd ed. (New World Library, 2012).

24. Bálint Szántó, "Mythological Archetypes in Marvel Film Adaptations," *AMERICANA E-Journal of American Studies in Hungary* 15, no. 1 (2019).

25. Szántó.

26. Shadraonis, "Leaders and Heroes."

are challenged by their recent return home from war, being called forth toward great feats is aided when they have others to travel alongside who invite them back into a shared community.

While heroes may suffer in crisis, lacking an understanding of their purpose and struggling in their search for meaning, they do not have to journey alone. Every organization has its share of mentor archetypes to call forth future heroes and guide them toward self-realization. Although Airmen and Guardians live in different ways with various philosophies of life that they have worked out for themselves along the pathway, the successful journey of every individual involves finding their community to discover meaning and to overcome the morally injurious experiences of life. In this way, spirituality, the product of the path of meaningful connections, becomes the way to find ultimate meaning and purpose in life.

Practical Implications and Application

As community members intersect the lives of others who appear to have breaks in their meaningful connection pathway, one can refer to the six phases of the meaningful connection pathway model to diagnose and provide aid. The following are examples of the kinds of questions that are designed to engage Airmen and Guardians in a meaningful spiritual discussion based on the three domains, shown in parentheses.

- Where do you find meaning in your life? How do you define the meaning of life? What energizes you? (spirit, spiritual, and spirituality)
- Is there a spark from which special moments of connection to something outside yourself comes? (spirit)
- What spiritual traits, characteristics, or behaviors have you seen or participated in? (spirituality) This question helps caregivers understand how an Airman or Guardian has arrived at where they are and enables the service member to understand how their spirit is lived out and how it has formed. A caregiver becomes curious about the Airman or Guardian at this point and nonjudgmental while engaging them in meaningful conversation that focuses on them and distances itself from proselytizing, because the conversation is descriptive and not prescriptive.
- How do you understand or how have you interpreted the events of your life? (spiritual) The Airman's or Guardian's personal experience is important; however, the moments when someone is truly interested in another's personal experiences enough to ask may be rare. A caregiver can challenge them to consider that various people could look at the same event with a different interpretation of it, but that none are necessarily wrong. Their concept of the spirit will lead them to a conclusion about how they experience the spiritual in the world. This enhances respect and understanding while accentuating an appreciation of individual differences.

- How have you found a community or a sense of belonging to someone or something outside of yourself? (spiritual) This will directly influence what some believe to be a leading cause of suicidal ideation. It also speaks to transcendence without referencing it specifically.
- How has an event in your life helped you to be who you are today? How have you grown through the events of your life? (spiritual and spirituality) Readiness is enhanced through these engagements as caregivers help Airmen and Guardians tap into their spirit—that part of them that is common to all humanity—to give them a source of inner strength and a lens through which to interpret the events in their life. This provides perspective, which is a part of the Air Force's definition of spiritual resiliency.

In presenting the meaningful connection pathway as an explanation of healthy spirituality that leads to spiritual fitness, this article also offers caregivers other types of questions that may be helpful in understanding the process itself:

- Who or what should I connect with? Connections are vertical, with a higher being or higher understanding; horizontal, with other people including a unit leader or one's peers; and internal, such as with one's own emotions or physical sensations. Some answers may point to the importance of connection, the emphasis on the need to belong, or to connect to oneself or one's story. The connection is both outward and inward—"To know thyself" and "to thine own self be true."
- Why do we need connection? Possible responses might be to gain understanding, perspective, or wisdom, and to maintain a sense of community.
- What makes a connection meaningful? Ask, is the connection life-giving and helpful toward living in congruence with oneself and the community?
- Are there non-meaningful connections? In life's journey, those who help us in understanding the events of our lives are the guides, coaches, and helpers who increase meaning and enable us to find and appreciate things like awe, compassion, gratitude, love, inspiration, appreciation, among others.
- What happens when I am not connected? Some answers may include loss of meaning, loneliness, or isolation.
- Why do I need this? One answer may be that connection is part of our need to seek understanding that leads to meaning making. Perhaps asking how that statement challenges our thinking is important. Maybe that is where we need to begin.

Connection as a whole remains a public health strategy to protect individuals from the threat of suicide. For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have outlined

that connectedness happens in many social spaces and when utilized can deter suicide.²⁷ DOD and specifically DAF definitions of spirituality and spiritual fitness are based on the mechanisms of meaningful connections. The meaningful connections established along the journey to spiritual fitness, exemplified in the proposed model, can be used to deter suicide risk in the Department of the Air Force.

As government leaders in Congress have made suicide prevention a responsibility of the chaplain corps through Title X legislation, senior Air Force leaders have expanded resources inclusive of all comprehensive Airman fitness domains to add to the efforts of the Air Force surgeon general and Air Force integrated resilience. Integrating spirituality into the lives of service members and those they care about increases connection and belonging, creating a more supportive environment to combat the negative effects of disconnection and loneliness that increases suicide risk. ✈✳

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27. National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, “Connectedness as a Strategic Direction for the Prevention of Suicidal Behavior” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009), <https://stacks.cdc.gov/>.