

# What Is Spiritual Care?



SUPPORT FOR SERIOUSLY ILL PATIENTS  
AND THEIR LOVED ONES

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# Introduction

When you or a loved one are seriously ill or injured, you may look for meaning in the world around you. You may ask, “Why is this happening? What is the meaning of life?”

Spiritual care can help patients, caregivers, loved ones, and clinicians dealing with serious illness. This booklet will help you learn about spiritual care. Questions throughout can help you share your spiritual needs with the care team.

If you are caring for someone who cannot speak for themselves, try to answer the questions as the patient would. Be sure to also note your own feelings and concerns.

Spiritual care may not provide all the answers, but it can give you a safe space to ask important questions. Spiritual care can promote spiritual healing, lead to personal growth, and guide you to your own answers.

## What Is Spiritual Care?

Spiritual care (or “pastoral care”) is emotional support with a focus on spiritual well-being. It’s an important part of health care. Spiritual care helps patients, families, and medical staff find meaning and hope during difficult times. Spiritual care can also benefit those who feel at peace with their journey.

Spiritual care can help you define your values. Knowing your values can help you focus on what matters most to you. This is an important step in making treatment decisions. Be aware that your unique spiritual care needs may change as your health changes.



# Why Is Spiritual Care Important?

There is a strong link between our spiritual well-being and our bodies. Physical pain can lead to spiritual pain. Likewise, spiritual pain can make physical pain worse. Spirituality/religion can also impact:

- How you experience pain and how you respond to treatment or pain management
- How you talk about illness and make treatment decisions
- How you handle emotions and find hope during a crisis

Spiritual care can help you ease physical symptoms, choose treatments that are in line with the patient's values, and avoid treatments that do not add quality of life. Spiritual care for medical staff and family caregivers can boost morale, help prevent burnout, and lead to better care for patients.

## Difficult emotions during serious illness

Though some people cope with serious illness well, it is normal to struggle with difficult emotions. Spiritual care can help you work through these feelings. **Check any emotions that apply to you below.**

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Anger          | <input type="checkbox"/> Loss of hope                              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fear           | <input type="checkbox"/> Loss of independence                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grief          | <input type="checkbox"/> Loss of control                           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sadness        | <input type="checkbox"/> Loss of purpose/meaning/<br>sense of self |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Depression     | <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling alone or abandoned                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Shock          | <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling like a burden                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Confusion      | <input type="checkbox"/> Other:                                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Guilt, shame   | _____  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Worry, anxiety | _____  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Numb           | _____  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Empty          | _____  |

## Spiritual pain and suffering

Spiritual pain is the distress you might feel if you struggle to find purpose, comfort, or connection during hard times.

Common signs are listed below. Spiritual care can help ease these symptoms. **Check all that apply to you.**

- Physical symptoms (pain, shortness of breath, nausea) that do not get better with treatment
- Not sleeping well
- Not eating well
- Having intense dreams or nightmares
- Being restless, agitated, or grouchy
- Loss of interest in favorite things or people
- Other symptoms you have that might be caused or made worse by spiritual pain: \_\_\_\_\_

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## Spiritual strength

Spiritual care isn't all about suffering and distress. Many people face serious illness with strength and peace. Spiritual care can help you reflect on what spirituality means to you.

**How do you show spiritual strength? Check all that apply.**

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Acceptance of what is/ what will be | <input type="checkbox"/> Sense of gratitude                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Positivity, resilience              | <input type="checkbox"/> Strong spiritual or religious beliefs |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Humor, laughter, joy                | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____                          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sense of self-worth                 | _____  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sense of peace, hope                | _____  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sense of forgiveness                | _____  |

## Whole-Person Care

“Whole-person care” or “patient-centered care” is care that treats the whole patient — physically, emotionally, and spiritually — and provides support for family and loved ones. It is provided by a care team that may include:

- Doctors
- Nurses
- Aides
- Social workers
- Spiritual care professionals
- Therapists
- Pharmacists
- Others as needed

Spiritual care is an important part of whole-person care. The patient’s beliefs and values guide the care plan. Spiritual practices (such as prayer, yoga, meditation, visualization, breathing techniques, etc.) can also be used alongside medical treatments to help ease symptoms.

Doctors and nurses may not have enough time or be trained to give all the emotional support a patient needs. That is why care teams often include spiritual care professionals.

“I will remember that there is art to medicine as well as science, and that warmth, sympathy, and understanding may outweigh the surgeon’s knife or the chemist’s drug.”

— Dr. Louis Lasagna, former dean  
of the Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences,  
Tufts University, in his Modern Hippocratic Oath

# Who Provides Spiritual Care?

Spiritual care professionals can be found in hospitals and nursing homes, on palliative care or hospice care teams, and in other healthcare settings. These specialists are trained to support patients of all backgrounds and their families.

Some care teams might have one spiritual care professional on staff. Others may have a whole spiritual care team. Spiritual care professionals might also have different titles, depending on the healthcare setting. These titles include:

- Chaplain
- Spiritual Care Coordinator
- Spiritual Care Counselor
- Spiritual Care Manager
- Director of Spiritual Care
- Spiritual Care Specialist

Whatever their title, spiritual care professionals all serve similar roles. Like other high-level medical professionals, these specialists all must:

- Have an advanced degree (Master of divinity, theology, or pastoral studies)
- Have hundreds of hours of hands-on training
- Pass a review process
- Take continuing education

These spiritual care providers set their own beliefs aside and listen without judgment. They also know how to work with medical charts so they can communicate the patient's/family's spiritual needs with the whole care team.

Spiritual care can give  
you the unique support *you* need,  
no matter what beliefs you hold.



## I Don't Think I Need Spiritual Care...

"I'm religious. I already have a faith leader."

If you prefer that your clergy member provides spiritual care, we can still help. Our spiritual care services will never take the place of your faith community. Instead, spiritual care professionals can work alongside your clergy as added support.

Clergy can provide excellent spiritual care, but most do not have the formal healthcare training of a spiritual care professional. Spiritual care professionals can help you think about how your religious beliefs might play a role in your treatment decisions. They can also stand in if your clergy member cannot be there.

"I'm NOT religious. I don't want you to pray over me."

Atheists or agnostics sometimes turn down spiritual care because they think there will be preaching and prayer. Remember, spiritual care does not have to include religion. It might help to have someone listen to your life story, to talk with you about your fears, or just have a light conversation to take your mind off things for a while.

"I'm at peace with where I am. I don't need support."

Even those who show great spiritual strength can benefit from spiritual care. These patients may not need help working through difficult emotions. But spiritual care can still help these patients reflect on what gives them meaning and celebrate their lives.

# What Can I Expect?

When the spiritual care professional visits, they introduce themselves and explain why they are there. The first step is to understand your current spiritual needs. You might need prayer, to talk...or to be left alone.

If you want to talk, the next steps are to LISTEN, look for cues (see below), and ask questions to get to know you. A spiritual care plan can be formed from there.

Language that might indicate spiritual pain

- “What did I do to deserve this?”
- “What is the point?”
- “When I get better...”
- “Isn’t there something we can do?”
- “I don’t want to be a burden...”

Behaviors that might indicate spiritual pain

- Denying how serious the illness is or obsessing over a miracle cure
- Refusing medicine, treatment, or help from others
- Having power struggles or ongoing conflicts with others
- Self-harm or making unsafe choices
- Drastically changing religious views

Items that may sometimes indicate a person’s religion

- Pictures, art, figurines
- Jewelry, accessories
- Books
- Hairstyles, head covering
- Clothing
- Markings on face/skin

A spiritual care plan may include

- Offering companionship and friendship
- Holding hands or just being a calm, quiet presence, especially for people who cannot communicate
- Talking about
  - your life, values, fears, hopes, or dreams
  - difficult healthcare decisions
  - ways to find hope and purpose
  - honoring or healing relationships
  - giving or asking for forgiveness
  - letting go of anger, hate, or past wrongs
  - the meaning of life and what happens after death
- Connecting you with other staff members to help with matters that may be causing worry or pain
- Arranging visits with your clergy, if possible
- Offering prayer, religious rites, or reading religious texts, if desired
- Spiritual support for loved ones, family, or caregivers who may be struggling
- Support in making funeral or memorial service plans
- Grief support for the family after the patient's death, such as phone calls, visits, or going to memorial services

# Spiritual Growth

Many seriously ill people can find healing and growth, but this does not always lessen spiritual suffering. It may help to know that spiritual pain is a normal part of being human and something we all share.

Examples of spiritual growth

- **Life review**—looking back on life and celebrating its joys
- **Connection with loved ones**—expressing love, gratitude, forgiveness; saying goodbye; healing broken relationships
- **Spiritual courage**—having conversations about life, death, the afterlife, or the meaning of life; finding deeper ties to faith or to a higher power; exploring other faiths
- **Serenity, peace, hope**—acceptance; knowing you will be okay; knowing loved ones will be okay

**We are here for you and your loved ones.** Our hope is that you are able to find value in having compassionate emotional and spiritual support.

“We can live each day fully, even as we accept the certainty of death. To accept medicine’s inability to put off death is not defeat. It is accepting the world as it was created, while at the same time having a deep sense that life is a gift.”

— Adapted with permission from *Hard Choices for Loving People*, by healthcare chaplain Hank Dunn, MDiv

# Spiritual Care Assessment

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Answering the following questions will help us know more about your spiritual needs, which will help guide the spiritual care plan.** Thinking about these questions is also an important part of advance care planning (planning ahead for your care in case you can't speak for yourself later). Ask us if you'd like to know more about advance care planning.

If you are a caregiver, answer the questions as the patient would answer them. Consider writing down your own answers, as well.

- 1) Do you practice a religion?     Yes     No
  - If yes, which religion? \_\_\_\_\_
  - If no, skip to #7
  
- 2) Are you part of a religious faith community?  
 Yes     No
  - If yes, name your place of worship:  
\_\_\_\_\_
  
- 3) Do you feel you have the support of your faith community?     Yes     No     I don't know
  
- 4) Are there trusted faith leaders or clergy you want to be involved in your care?     Yes     No
  - If yes, list their contact information below:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Phone #

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Phone #

5) Do you have religious beliefs that might affect your healthcare choices? (Examples: I cannot eat animal products; I cannot receive someone else's blood)

Yes     No     I don't know

- If yes, list them: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

6) Do you feel as if your religious beliefs conflict with your goals of care?     Yes     No

- If yes, in what way? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

7) If you are not religious, what are your spiritual beliefs?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

8) How important is religion/spirituality to you?

Not at all     Somewhat     Very

9) Do your religious/spiritual beliefs bring you comfort?

Yes     No     I don't know

- If yes, how do they bring you comfort? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

- If no, why? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

10) What ways do you find hope, courage, strength, and peace during tough times? \_\_\_\_\_

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11) Does your spiritual or cultural background affect how your family talks about illness and medical treatment?

Yes     No

• If yes, how? \_\_\_\_\_

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12) Do you have specific spiritual concerns? What else should the care team know about you or your family? \_\_\_\_\_

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“We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.”

— Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

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