



SPIRITUAL ASPECTS OF DYING AND DEATH

From Family Hospice Care © 2002 Harry van Bommel

How to Support Each Other Spiritually

Whether facing a terminal or life-threatening illness or dealing with grief, spirituality has been a comfort to people for thousands of years. The belief that we are not alone gives us a sense of reassurance that things will turn out okay. Prayer and meditation give us rituals, routines and strength to face difficult situations. Religious practices give us a sense of belonging to a spiritual community that stands by us.

Spirituality can also be difficult for people who believe that they are unworthy of a peaceful afterlife. Their religious beliefs, or lack of them, may lead them to believe that their death is the beginning of a terrible experience or no experience at all. They need opportunities to share these feelings, fears and beliefs with others who can listen, comfort and share in peaceful prayer or meditation.

It is often hard to put into words what spirituality can and cannot do for people. Sometimes reading biographies of people who have gone through similar situations is helpful and inspiring. Your local library has a collection of these books.

Definition

Spirituality is about the human spirit and our interconnectedness with each other and with God, however we define the creator. Faith describes our specific religious beliefs usually learned in childhood and refined as we continue to try to find the answers to "what do I believe?" Religion is a particular system of faith and worship usually organized by a formal authority such as a church or holy book.

Spirituality is at the heart of the hospice movement. One does not have to have a specific faith to be spiritual. One does have to believe in the connection between all people at all times. There is often a blurring between meeting people's emotional and spiritual needs. Emotions are personal and individual experiences. Spirituality is the connection of all experience based on a faith in God, however one defines God.

A spiritual foundation can lead to even greater emotional support and comfort for people who have a terminal or life-threatening illness. Spirituality and faith can help to answer some difficult questions: "Do I matter?" "Does anyone love me?" "What is my role and purpose in my family, my community and my world?" At other times, spiritual beliefs can help us deal with



questions for which there are no 'scientific' answers: "What will happen to me after death?"
"Why me?"

Hospice care is about meeting the physical, emotional, spiritual and information needs of people who have a terminal or life-threatening illness. I believe it can only be accomplished to its fullest potential from a spiritual foundation. Dr. Dorothy Ley, a pioneer in Canadian palliative care put it this way:

Spiritual care lies at the heart of hospice. It says we are here. We will be with you in your living and your dying. We will free you from pain and give you the freedom to find your meaning in your life -- your way. We will comfort you and those you love -- not always with words, often with a touch or a glance. We will bring you hope -- not for tomorrow but for this day. We will not leave you. We will watch with you. We will be there.

Spirituality has to do with who we are as people. Religion has to do with how we practice our spirituality, if at all, through various religious beliefs, practices and rituals. I believe we are all spiritual people in the sense that we all have a need to know our lives have value and meaning. We are connected to each other as members of a living community. Most of us share a belief in a power or force greater than ourselves. We may define that force as nature, God or gods, collective human spirit, the Creator or a higher power. The only thing that separates us spiritually is our belief that separateness is possible. Our spirituality is often best developed and expressed in times of great joy or distress.

The following quote from Ram Dass and Paul Gorman's book *How Can I Help?* is about helping each of us to see the 'whole' person. Not the diseased person, the dying person, or the disabled person. The whole person. The person who has exactly the same physical, emotional and spiritual needs as everyone else.

I've been chronically ill for twelve years. Stroke. Paralysis. That's what I'm dealing with now. I've gone to rehab program after rehab program. I may be one of the most rehabilitated people on the face of the earth. I should be President. I've worked with a lot of people, and I've seen many types and attitudes. People try very hard to help me do my best on my own. They understand the importance of that self-sufficiency, and so do I. They're positive and optimistic. I admire them for their perseverance. My body is broken, but they still work very hard with it. They're very dedicated. I have nothing but respect for them. But I must say this: I have never, ever, met someone who sees me as a whole... Can you understand this? Can you? No one sees me and helps me see myself as being complete, as is. No one really sees how that's true, at the deepest level. Everything else is Band-Aids, you know.



By seeing each other and ourselves as whole, we start to recognize the spiritual connection between us and the care, love and respect we all deserve and need. (See *Mr. G's Story* in Chapter 4 as an example of this.)

How to Support Each Other Spiritually

Spirituality is not separate from emotional support. They are connected even when we separate them by chapters in a book. The following suggestions incorporate some emotional supports with spiritual supports. The main difference is the underlying attitude that we are all members of the human family. Patients and families have complex relationships. There is not always a strong bond of love. There may be years of conflict, abuse or trauma that separate the person who is dying from some of the people caring for him. Whether our spiritual support of a loved one comes from a sense of love or a sense of service and duty, our support can make a positive difference in the last weeks and months of someone's life.

The following story in Ram Dass & Paul Gorman's *How Can I Help?* by a non-religious person may explain how spirituality can help us see the power within the idea that we are members of the human family:

I never had any real relation to Christ at all, and I can't say that I did at that moment (of visiting dying father). But what came through to me was a feeling for my father's identity as...like a child of God. That was who he really was, behind the 'distressing disguise'. And it was my real identity too, I felt. I felt a great bond with him that wasn't anything like I'd felt as father and daughter. In a way, this was my father's final gift to me: the chance to see him as something more than my father; the chance to see the common identity of spirit we both shared; the chance to see just how much that makes possible in the way of love and comfort. And I feel I can call on it now with anyone else.

Some tips:

Recognize that you are directly connected to everyone you meet; even people you do not like.

No one can like everyone but everyone can be treated with respect, compassion, excellent medical care, love and a common spirituality.

Help create memories, using humor and creativity and a 'conspiracy of well-meaning' people to help each other. These memories serve people well as they go through the process of living fully until death. For families, these memories are an anchor of love as they go through their grieving process.

For example, a young woman who had recently married was nearing the end of her life. She wanted to have one more special dinner with her husband at her favorite restaurant but could



not leave her home. Several friends arranged to pick up her favorite meal from the restaurant and serve the couple in their home. The friends dressed up formally, served the meal quietly as would be done in a fancy restaurant, cleared and washed the dishes and left the couple alone for the rest of the evening. The young woman had a memory of intense love for her husband and for her friends before she died. The husband and friends carry that special evening with them for the rest of their lives.

Relationships are more important than things, work or health. When you feel hurt, joy, anger, happiness, grief or love -- share these feelings to allow others to help you and maybe to help themselves as well. Sharing your feelings through prayer and meditation is also very comforting.

Near the end of life many people look back and understand that it was the people and relationships in their lives that were most satisfying. It was not the material things they collected or the amount of work they got done. It was the relationships with family, friends, colleagues at work, neighbors and caregivers that were truly important. It is a perceptive family who learns this lesson from someone who is dying to use as new beginning in their own lives -- lives dedicated to building and strengthening their own relationships with others.

Prayer, meditation or a spiritual bond shared in silence are powerful tools to help us feel connected with each other and to a higher power. Whether one believes in God, in a creator, in the cosmic energy of love or however one describes one's belief in a high order, that belief can provide strength, direction, love and hope. Sharing one's belief with others of similar beliefs can be a powerful source of comfort.

We can express our spirituality through traditional forms like meditation, prayer, religious rituals and sacraments, and through connection with a member of the clergy. Rev. Douglas Graydon of Toronto's *Casey House Hospice* explains that non-traditional forms of expressing one's spirituality can also be very powerful and comforting. For example, creating personal rituals by bringing together people, places, things and symbols of personal significance is very moving now and as a memory to look back on for strength and comfort. Just as non-traditional weddings may occur at a park's waterfalls or in one's back yard, personal rituals around dying, death and bereavement can be held anywhere and include almost anything of personal significance.

Other forms of non-traditional spiritual expression are seen in people who remember and think about their dreams to search for spiritual meanings, clarity or comforting thoughts. (Note: Some medications suppress dreams.)

Sharing one's life story and experiences with those who are interested is also a meaningful way to share one's spirituality. Sometimes this is done through one-to-one conversations and other times through peer support groups.



Rituals give us a set form of behaviors to follow when we do not know what to do. For example, rituals from one's faith are a way to dramatize the importance of a moment or event. Shared meals, holiday festivities, wedding and funerals are all rituals that help us celebrate life, love and faith. Using them when someone is dying or after their death can structure time and activity during periods of intense emotion and, possibly, chaos. This may also be a time to create new rituals that reflect one's evolving beliefs.

Books, audio, and videotapes can be very spiritually comforting. People's stories of going through similar circumstances can be very helpful and enlightening. Sacred religious books have provided people with perspective, peace and comfort. They may enjoy reading these books or having someone read favorite passages to them.

Providing physical and emotional support from a spiritual perspective means that a massage turns into an intimate sharing of love and faith; a walk in the park becomes a sharing of God's many gifts of beauty and peacefulness. A silent prayer shared together becomes a moment of lasting memories of time spent together.

Dr. Larry Dossey describes in his book *Healing Words* how prayer and spiritual practices act to influence physical health. His summary of possibilities include:

- Adopting health-related behaviors by modifying one's lifestyle to the specific circumstances.
- Increasing our social support through participation in spiritually based community rituals.
- Encouraging the process of emotional and spiritual expressions and resolutions.
- Using faith to change a belief that you are blessed into the comfort of knowing you are blessed.
- Experiencing the presence of healers and healing fosters a sense of belonging and support that is healthful (even for people with a terminal or life-threatening illness).
- Being the receiver of people's prayers or laying on of hands or other rituals may stimulate an endocrine or immune response that can help you feel better and reduce pain and symptoms.
- Preparing physically for special spiritual rituals and events such as fast, meditation or abstentions, may promote your feeling better.

When someone's faith, religious beliefs and rituals are frightening, such fears are not easily reduced or erased. My grandfather's strong religious convictions led him to believe that he would go to hell for swearing, for his unkindnesses and for his 'bad' thoughts. Prayer and faith were not comforting to him. The following thoughts helped him a bit but could not completely erase 90 years of firmly held beliefs.



- Talking about my own faith and beliefs, which were more comforting than his own, calmed him at times. It opened up an intellectual discussion that led to prayers that addressed his specific concerns.
- Talking about research into near death experiences helped identify what other people's experiences were and how this confirmed the most positive and loving images of what happens to people when they die. His own daughter, my mother, had such an experience. He found it was a powerful, comforting image to concentrate on.
- Reminding him of the good he had done through his life, the love of the people around him who were caring for him day and night, helped him remember that his life had meaning and value to both himself and to others. The world was better for his life and that gave him some comfort as well.

The spiritual support of the hospice philosophy of care reminds us all that being there, even from a great distance in prayer and thoughtfulness, is the root of spiritual support that binds us all.