Spiritual Care in the Clinical Setting

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Spirituality, broadly defined as that which gives a transcendent meaning to life, is central to the human experience and is often the dominant issue for patients dealing with chronic illness and end of life. As people deal with situations such as illness and life stress which challenge them and their definition of themselves, spiritual questions arise. People begin to question their purpose and meaning in life. Healing involves the restoration of wholeness which may be manifested by a transcendent set of meaningful experiences which may help a person accept their situation and find meaning in the midst of suffering.

Surveys show patients want to discuss their spiritual concerns with their physicians. Studies indicate spirituality is helpful for people coping with serious illness. Over 65 medical schools in the U.S. teach courses on spirituality and medicine. The Association of Medical Colleges supports the development of these courses in recognition of the importance of respecting patients’ religion and spirituality in the delivery of health care. These courses teach physicians and other healthcare professionals how to do a spiritual assessment and how to utilize patient spirituality in the clinical setting. Key elements of spiritual care include the act of listening to patients’ fears and hopes, the practice of compassionate presence and the recognition of spiritual experiences which can help patients as they deal with suffering and stress. The demonstrated benefits of spirituality as well as the recognition of the importance of treating the whole patient, body, mind, and spirit, demonstrates the need for integration of spirituality and medicine.
Spiritual Assessment Tool

An acronym that can be used to remember what is asked in a spiritual history is:

F: Faith or Beliefs
I: Importance and Influence
C: Community
A: Address

Some specific questions you can use to discuss these issues are:

F: What is your faith or belief?
   Do you consider yourself spiritual or religious?
   What things do you believe in that give meaning to your life?
I: Is it important in your life?
   What influence does it have on how you take care of yourself?
   How have your beliefs influenced your behavior during this illness?
   What role do your beliefs play in regaining your health?
C: Are you part of a spiritual or religious community?
   Is this of support to you and how?
   Is there a person/group of people you really love or who are really important to you?
A: How would you like me, your healthcare provider, to address these issues in your healthcare?

General recommendations when taking a spiritual history:

1. Consider spirituality as a potentially important component of every patient’s physical well being and mental health.
2. Address spirituality at each complete physical examination and continue addressing it at follow-up visits if appropriate. In patient care, spirituality is an ongoing issue.
3. Respect a patient’s privacy regarding spiritual beliefs; don’t impose your beliefs on others.
4. Make referrals to chaplains, spiritual directors, or community resources as appropriate.
5. Be aware that your own spiritual beliefs will help you personally and will overflow in your encounters with those for whom you care to make the doctor-patient encounter a more humanistic one.

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EXAMPLES OF SPIRITUAL SUFFERING

- **Spiritual Anger**
  - “I’m mad at God”
  - “I blame God for this”

- **Spiritual Loss**
  - “I feel empty”
  - “I don’t care anymore”

- **Spiritual Despair**
  - “There is no way God could ever care for me”
  - “I’m just a corpse waiting to happen”

- **Spiritual Alienation**
  - “Where is God when I need God most?”
  - “Why isn’t God listening?”

- **Spiritual Anxiety**
  - “Will I ever be forgiven?”
  - “Am I going to die a horrible death?”

- **Spiritual Guilt**
  - “I deserve this”
  - “I didn’t pray hard enough”

SPIRITUAL SCREENING

SUPPORT SYSTEMS
- FAMILY SUPPORT
- FRIEND SUPPORT
- GROUP SUPPORT
- SPIRITUAL GROUP SUPPORT
- SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP SUPPORT

DESPAIR ⇔ HOPE

DREAD ⇔ COURAGE

HELPLESSNESS ⇔ EMPOWERMENT

CURSE ⇔ BLESSING

MEANINGLESSNESS ⇔ FULLNESS