

Spiritual Distress

What is spirituality? Spirituality is a sense of connection to something bigger than ourselves, and involves a search for meaning in life or life's purpose. If asked the question, *What lifts your spirit and gives you the strength to carry on?*, each person may have their own unique answer.

Some sources of spirituality may be family, relationships, nature, religion, love, music, art, or a mission or purpose in life. One does not have to follow a religion in order to have spiritual beliefs and values.

What is Religion?

Religion is an organized system or set of beliefs, values, behaviors, rites, and rituals based upon faith, community, and a relationship with God or a higher power.



Together, spirituality and/or religion can help us feel connected, provide comfort, support beliefs, and find meaning. Spirituality can often provide a sense of peace.

Your spirituality and religion are very personal matters. They can make a big difference during difficult times. Spirituality and/or religion can offer inner peace and connection to others. They can also define beliefs about life and its importance.

What is Spiritual Pain or Distress?

Spiritual pain or distress happens if you have questions and become upset about your belief and value systems. It occurs when a person is unable to find sources of meaning, hope, love, peace, comfort, strength, or connection in life. This may happen when something happens in our life that conflicts with our beliefs about ourselves and how we are in the world.

Spiritual pain or distress can be normal feelings for someone who is living with illness. Spiritual distress most often occurs when a person is experiencing change, challenges, physical and emotional pain, other symptoms, and losses associated with serious illness.

What Are Signs and Symptoms of Spiritual Distress?

- Asking questions about the meaning of life
- Questioning your own belief system or suddenly losing spiritual or religious beliefs
- Asking questions about pain and suffering
- Thinking bad thoughts or negative self-talk in your head, like asking, "Why are bad things happening to me?"
- Feelings of anger and despair
- Suffering from feelings of sadness, depression and anxiety
- Feeling of being isolated and alone or abandoned by God

- Feeling lost, without direction, or a sense of emptiness
- Having difficulty falling asleep
- Seeking spiritual or religious guidance

What May Help?

Keep a journal or diary. Here are some of the things people keep track of in their journal:

- Thoughts
- Feelings
- Concerns
- Questions
- Answers that come to your mind
- Accounts of events and interactions with others
- Disappointments
- Accomplishments
- Changes in mood, feelings or thought patterns

A journal or diary is a good place to measure whether you are feeling better, worse, or the same over time. Research shows that writing in a journal can help people face stressful events, lessening the impact that stress can have on their physical and emotional health.

Connecting with Your Spiritual and Religious Beliefs

Spiritual or religious beliefs may help people during illness. Spirituality and religion may:

- Help reduce depression and anxiety
- Reduce feelings of isolation or loneliness
- Help cope with the effects of the illness and treatment
- Increase the ability to enjoy and appreciate life
- Find meaning in the most difficult situations
- Improve health

Some people will “reconnect” with their beliefs. Others may find new beliefs. This can be done through getting back in touch with the things that gave you the strength to cope with the more difficult challenges throughout your life.

For some, it is through organized religious groups. If this is the case, talk with your clergy or religious leader.

Some people benefit from surrounding themselves with family, pets, and the beauty of nature, music, art, or dance. Some find comfort in support groups. Others prefer the assistance of a counselor.

Talk to your doctor. Your health care team can offer resources and suggestions.

Patient Education Series

Spiritual Distress

When your symptoms are managed, you will:

- Enjoy activities and have more energy
- Enjoy family and friends
- Feel less stress and anxiety
- Get better sleep at night
- Have a better quality of life

This educational material is provided by the Palliative Care Project, a partnership between Community Care of Brooklyn and the MJHS Institute for Innovation in Palliative Care.