Spiritual Distress and Spiritual Care

Spirituality is based on the idea that there exists something, be it a state of mind, a being, or a place, that is outside the experience of our five limited senses. Spirituality is broader than religious belief, and can be independent of religion. Religion is an organized faith system of beliefs, practices, rituals and symbols designed to facilitate closeness to the sacred, God, high power or ultimate truth. Persons advanced illnesses may rely on spiritual or religious beliefs and practices to help them.

What is spiritual distress?
Spiritual Distress is a disruption in one’s beliefs or value system. It affects a person’s entire being. It upsets the basic beliefs of a person’s life including sources of meaning, peace, hope and connection.

Common concerns that may cause spiritual distress:
- Distance from a person’s religious or spiritual community
- Need to reconcile with God, others, and self
- Spiritual beliefs being different from family, peers and/or healthcare team
- Lack of access to religious or spiritual rituals
- Distress and/or despair anxiety related to the struggle to find meaning in the experience of illness, suffering, death and dying

What are the signs and symptoms of spiritual distress?
- Questioning the meaning of life, belief system or meaning of suffering
- Seeking spiritual help
- Being afraid to fall asleep at night or other fears
- Feeling a sense of emptiness; loss of direction
- Talking about feelings of being left by God/higher power or having anger at God/higher power
- Having pain and/or other physical symptoms

What to report to the hospice/palliative care team?
- Behaviors listed above. Behaviors that are out of character
- Symptoms that are getting worse or not relieved by medication; side effects of medications
- Known history of spiritual distress
- Not caring about self and life in general, talking about suicide
- Sudden rejection or neglect of previous practices or beliefs
What can be done to help spiritual distress?

**Spiritual distress is common with advanced illnesses.** Not everyone experiences spiritual distress in the same way or to the same degree.

- Do not feel that you are a burden by asking questions
- Look for ways to keep and honor desired rituals and ways of life
- Remember not everyone has spiritual distress
- You may not feel up to talking with many people. It is very important to have at least one person who you trust to talk about your fears and concerns
- Do not be hard on yourself for not feeling very “spiritual”
- Allow yourself to be angry. Try to talk about your feelings
- Listen to devotional tapes or music. Meditate
- Allow someone to pray with/for you when you don’t have the energy
- Write poetry or work on an art project
- Take medications as ordered
- Forgive yourself

**What the family can do:**

- Provide a calm, relaxing setting
- Be willing to be present without having to “do” something
- Treat the person with dignity and respect
- Enjoy time together, look for ways to make memories
- Do not say “I know how you feel” because you do not. Instead, offer empathy
- Support any desire to maintain links with friends and family
- Be willing to listen and reminisce
- Contact the minister, rabbi, priest, etc. for additional support

**Conclusion**

Spiritual distress is a disruption in one’s beliefs or value system and may be troubling to the person. Spiritual care is being attentive to the whole person. The hospice and palliative health care team are available for support and to answer your questions.

Other HPNA Teaching Sheets on are available at [www.HPNA.org](http://www.HPNA.org).

**Reference**

Berlinger, N. “Spiritual and Existential Care” Presentation at 5th Annual Clinical Practice Forum; Hospice and Palliative Nurses Association; September 16-17, 2011; Pittsburgh, PA.


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