

From the Desk of
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The Holidays, Spirituality and the End of Life



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Introduction

The Holiday Season is a time when most people celebrate with family and friends. It is a time of joy and for some, sorrow and a time of reflection on past losses. For the terminally ill person, this season may be the last holiday they experience with their loved ones. It is important for us to be highly sensitive to the needs of our patients, their family and friends and the caregivers who spend their final days together.

Spiritual Needs of the Dying Individual

As we age, we tend to become more spiritual in many ways. Some individuals look back on their lives and turn to a higher power perhaps out of fear or maybe they experience a spiritual awakening. We might desire becoming closer to a higher entity or God. It is very common that most of us will have spiritual or existential issues and questions as we near death. We may ask "Is there meaning to my life and to this suffering that I am experiencing?" or "What was all of this for?" It is not uncommon that we question the meaning of life and the very existence of God.

Many patients and their families are requesting increased attention to the spiritual aspects of their lives and we can be of great help and comfort to them. This may be easier than said, as providing spiritual care may not be such an easy task. As caregivers, do we shut down our spiritual awareness due to our own personal pain or loss? We are healthcare professionals but we are also people who have lost family members and friends. For some of us, the dying patient can remind us of our mother, father, brother, sister or child that has left us. This can be painful and saddening.

When we give of ourselves and provide comfort to the dying patient and their family, we are acting as a "Wounded Healer". This means that we use our past experiences of suffering and pain to enhance the care we provide to make the end of life as painless, comfortable and spiritual as we can. We try to provide our best even though we may be hurting inside ourselves.

The Importance of Spirituality

There are many different definitions of spirituality depending on the sources we refer to. In general, spirituality is the search for the ultimate meaning within one's life experience as well as an illness. It is also a sense of connection to something much greater than ourselves. This connection might enhance one's ability to cope while suffering and at the end of life.

An important role of spirituality is our need to seek and find hope. A hospice patient may hope for many things during this time. The hope to be pain-free, the hope for a cure, the hope that their family will be ok, and the hope that one will not be abandoned or die alone. They may hope to do something special, particularly during the holidays, one last time. They hope to find peace, to be forgiven and to have a good death. Hope provides a light in our moment of darkness. It creates something positive during negative circumstances. Hope is also a healthy coping mechanism.

Spirituality also provides us with meaning, purpose and identity. We may ask "Why is this happening to me?" or "Is there a reason or purpose for this illness?" Life-threatening illness can challenge our sense of purpose and identity. Does it change who we are? What purpose does existence serve now? The end of life may bring uncertainty, unpredictability, fear, anxiety and feelings of powerlessness. Having a deep sense of spirituality can help us with these emotions. It can help us resolve issues, make things right with family and friends, and ask for forgiveness as well as forgive others.

Other benefits of spirituality include dealing effectively with the dying process itself and losing one's bodily functions and mental capacity. It also comforts us concerning meeting the unknown, transitioning to the next life, being separated from loved ones and seeing what awaits beyond death.

Dying During the Holidays and Why Spirituality Matters

Many people, especially older adults with chronic and debilitating conditions, will die during the Holiday Season. Unfortunately, this leaves an emotionally difficult anniversary for surviving family members and friends. Each year, we remember the Thanksgiving, Christmas or New Year's Day that our loved one passed away. Spirituality can play a major role for survivors. It is easy to become angry at God or a higher power. It is also common to experience sadness or depression and anxiety.

"Why did my father have to die around Christmas?" Dying during the holidays raises many questions. Spirituality matters because the dying patient can experience affirmation, as can the

survivors. Regardless of the time of year we die, hopefully we had a good life, one that had meaning. Our story was a good one. Experiencing a good death (i.e. being surrounded by loved ones, minimal to no pain, feeling the presence of God or a higher power) can take the edge off of the time of year death took place. And last, spirituality can give us hope beyond the grave. Many people welcome death with little to no fear. They are ready to meet their Maker. They take comfort in an afterlife and some form of transcendence or immortality.

How Spirituality Can Manage Pain

"Mom died a week after Thanksgiving. Now every holiday will be sad. I'll never forget her pain". Many people will go through this scenario. Spirituality can help. Cicely Saunders, the founder of the Hospice Movement, coined the term "Total Pain" which refers to the culmination of physical, spiritual, and emotional pain and suffering during the dying process. There is a complex relationship between physical, spiritual and emotional pain. Spiritual practices that can help manage pain include:

- Prayer
- Meditation
- Relaxation techniques
- Chanting
- Ritual cleansing
- Acts of atonement

How We Can Help the Dying Person

We can all assist the dying patient and provide comfort in many ways. Our empathetic presence alone can be healing. This means being fully present. We can also normalize the patient's experience and remind them that it is normal to feel what they are feeling. We can assist the patient with their life review and talk about the good things they have experienced as well as their accomplishments and achievements. We can focus on what brings the patient strength and comfort, such as faith, belief and leaving a legacy behind.

Final Words

The Holiday Season brings many things including happiness, sadness and death. Spirituality can be healing, comforting, and much needed during the dying process and after the death of a loved one. Many people have spiritual beliefs and needs. We can help the dying patient and family by listening to their needs, practicing being fully present, respecting their privacy and being respectful of their beliefs. Spirituality can also manage pain in many ways. We can help the dying patient and family through the holidays, explore spirituality and ease the dying process.

Have a beautiful Holiday Season.