



Spirituality, wairuatanga and cancer



Some people use this time to find out what has real meaning in their lives and what can help them through this difficult time.

What is spirituality?

Many of us need a sense of meaning and purpose in life. Spirituality refers to our belief about that meaning, whether we call that God, truth or some other term.

Most of us have a spiritual dimension, whether or not we attend organised services.

Spiritual moments can happen at any time: when you feel close to nature, look into the face of a loved one, reach out to a person in need, or enter a church, temple, synagogue, mosque or place of worship.

This information looks at what spirituality is, how cancer affects spirituality, using your spiritual resources, and suggestions for nurturing the spirit. It also looks at wairuatanga which is a central part of Māori health (hauora).

Life changes in many ways when you or someone you care about, develops cancer. You might find yourself turning to your beliefs to help you cope. Or you may begin to ask questions about why this is happening to you.

“It’s really made me explore life, the reason we’re here and what our journey’s all about. And I’ve talked to two other women who might not necessarily believe in God. But we’ve all basically said the same thing. It becomes a really spiritual journey and you learn a lot about who you are as a person and what’s important to you.”

Cancer Survivor¹

Religions are traditions of spirituality. For some people, traditions help to develop their sense of meaning and purpose in life. Some draw their spiritual beliefs from philosophy, poetry and life experiences. Some of us think deeply about these matters, others simply live their beliefs.

Wairuatanga²

Wairua, sometimes called the ‘two waters’, is a central part to Māori health (hauora). For many it is described as the ‘two waters’ because it allows people to exist fully and fulfil their potential in both Te Ao Kikokiko (the seen world) and Te Ao Wairua (the unseen world).

The wairua isn’t located in any specific part of the body but is central to your whole being, leaving the body at death or when you are asleep. During dreaming hours the wairua wanders through the realms of Te Ao Wairua and returns to the body on awakening. This is why dreams are usually very important to Māori.



The wairua of the individual and whānau, as well as the wider physical and spiritual environment, play a significant role in overall wellbeing.

There are many avenues and protocols that enable your wairua to be well or to become unwell. The wairua, hinengaro, mauri, tinana, whānau and environment are not separate. All things are connected and usually show through wellness or illness.

Te whare tapa whā³ is one model of wellness that shows the relationship of taha wairua (spiritual wellbeing), taha hinengaro (the mental and emotional wellbeing) the taha whānau (family wellbeing) and the tinana (bodily health). The symbolic use of a wharenui shown below, demonstrates that taha wairua (spiritual well-being) does not exist separately from other parts of life .



There are many ways to look after your wairua. Knowing who you are and where you are from, waiata, karakia, te reo, rongoā Māori, spending time with whānau, going into the ngāhere (forest/nature), bathing in your awa or the moana (rivers/sea), seeing a tohunga, or returning to your marae are some of them.

As with most journeys in life a cancer journey is also a wairua journey. Seek out those who will tautoko your journey. Seek comfort from coincidences. If you feel you should go to your tūrangawaewae, or have an urge to see something or ring someone, then listen to your wairua. Your wairua is gently showing you what it is that you need.

*E ngā Rangatira o ngā hau e whā, hokia ki ōu maunga
kia purea ai e ngā hau o Tāwhirimātea.*

How cancer affects spirituality

Spiritual distress after a diagnosis is natural. Many with a strong faith think there is something wrong if they question their faith or practice after a cancer diagnosis. Spiritual distress is a common part of the cancer experience like fatigue or psychological distress.

It is normal to ask some big life questions during your cancer experience. Questions like: who am I, what have I done and where am I going, naturally arise. Many people want someone to talk to about these questions.

Cancer can isolate us from our religious and spiritual communities both physically and emotionally.

Some people are angry with God for allowing them to get cancer, or wonder if they are being punished. Having cancer doesn't mean you are a bad person but you may find visiting a tohunga, elder or spiritual guide helpful at this time to address these feelings. Spiritual care is important for many people at the end of life.

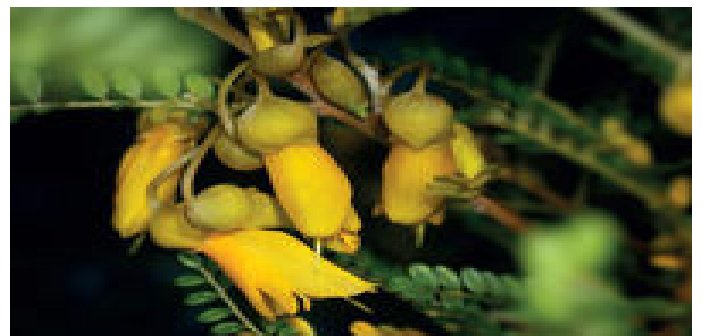
What is spirituality?

There are many different ways of using your spiritual resources to cope with your illness. Talking with people, books and CDs can provide suggestions you may not have thought of.

It is often helpful to ask yourself what has worked for you in crisis situations before.

The most common religious practice for people of all faiths is some form of prayer or karakia. If you feel prayer will help, don't worry about formalities such as kneeling. A favourite word, phrase or religious writing may be comforting. Try being still and allow your God or Atua to speak to you.

Spiritual or religious practices can help you adjust to the effects of cancer and its treatment. People that rely on their faith or spirituality tend to experience increased hope and optimism, higher satisfaction, less regrets and a feeling of inner peace.



Suggestions for nurturing the spirit

Most New Zealanders are not religious, but still have spiritual needs. There are many ways you can care for yourself spiritually that don't rely on religion.

- Seek the support of others. It may be easier to share your feelings than handle them alone. Spending time with family/whānau can be deeply nurturing.
- Reflect on your own life. You may want to record your thoughts in a journal or electronically.
- Find ways to pray or meditate in a way that means something to you.
- Being mindful - become aware of your here and now experience - what's happening for you now and in the world you inhabit. It gives you a space in the present moment to be able to safely deal with stress and painful things that might have happened to you in the past.
- Meditation and relaxation are also mindful practices, because you are in the present moment. They can be helpful at this time.
- Read spiritual writings or have them read to you.
- Spend time in spiritual places or natural settings. Listen to music, sing waiata (songs) and appreciate Papatūānuku (mother earth, the land) and our beautiful surroundings—they can help you feel connected.
- Pay attention to moments of beauty, peace, love and hope. Sharing them with others and remembering them may help during times of distress.

Each one of us expresses a spiritual or a sense of deep belief in our own way. Dealing with cancer may begin a process of looking inward for what is most meaningful and sacred.

For cancer information and support phone 0800 CANCER (226 237).



End notes

1. 'Cancer Survivor Stories' (2014); Richard Egan, Joanne Doherty, Tira Albert, Rebecca Llewellyn, Chris Walsh, Phil Kerslake, Christine Pihema, John Kramer, Al Frost, Marie Retimanu-Pule, Kelly Atkinson, Susan Sutcliffe, Teresea Olsen, Chris Atkinson, Pam Mc-Grath, Sarah Wood. CSNZ Social & Behavioural Research Unit, University of Otago (p89)
2. Goza, T Ngāti Kauwhata, Ngāti Haua, Ngāti Raukawa (2019). Nā te aroha ki te tangata, ka tuku enei kupu ki ngā tangata katoa kia tau ai te mauri ka ora ai te wairua.
3. Durie, M Ngāti Kauwhata, Ngāti Rangatahi, Rangitane (2011). Retrieved from http://www.hauora.co.nz/assets/files/Maori/maori_health_model_tewhare.pdf
4. Thank you to our reviewers: Teresa Goza, Richard Eagan and Naena Chhima Cancer Council Australia-working with cancer