

Managing Spiritual Distress



Life changes in many ways when you or a loved one develops cancer. You might find yourself turning to your beliefs to help you cope. Or you may begin to question your faith. Questions often arise about spiritual matters.

What is spirituality?

Many of us need a sense of meaning and purpose in life. Spirituality refers to our beliefs about, and experience of, the meaning of life, 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, or synagogue or mosque.

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.

How cancer affects spirituality?

Spiritual distress after a diagnosis is a 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 as common a part of the cancer experience as fatigue or psychological distress. Cancer can isolate us from our religious and spiritual communities both physically and emotionally. Some experience spiritual distress to varying degrees.

Using your spiritual resources

There are many different ways of using your spiritual resources to cope with your illness. Talking with people and 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.

- Did you pray or reading scriptures?
- Was it helpful to talk to a religious advisor?

If you can work out why you're questioning your beliefs it may restore your faith.

The most common religious practice for people of all faiths is some form of prayer. 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 to speak to you.

Suggestions for nurturing the spirit

Seek the support of others. It may be easier to share your feelings than handle them alone.

Reflect on your own life. You may want to record your thoughts in a journal or electronically.

Find ways to pray or meditate that are meaningful to you. Prayers or meditation may be comforting.

Read spiritual writings or have them read to you.

Spend time in spiritual places or natural settings. Listening to music and appreciating beautiful surroundings 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.