

New Connections

HELPING YOU FIND YOUR WAY THROUGH TREATMENT



Issue 18

How Spirituality

Might Help People Who Have Cancer



Spirituality is generally described as an awareness of and a belief in something greater than the individual self. Spirituality takes many forms and can be practiced in many ways. It is probably most often expressed through one or another form of religion, just as it has been for thousands of years. But spirituality is also practiced outside of formalized religion. Many people rarely or never attend religious services, yet follow spiritual paths through meditation, regular prayer, 12-step programs (such as Alcoholics Anonymous), communing with nature, and service to others.

Spiritual Dimensions of Health Care

Proponents of spirituality claim that it can decrease the negative effects of disease, including cancer; speed recovery; and increase the effectiveness of medical treatments. It is also thought to improve coping and to provide comfort during illness. Although scientific evidence is mixed, religious service attendance is sometimes linked with improvement of various health conditions such as heart disease, hypertension, stroke, colitis, uterine and other cancers, and overall health status.

Some religious groups, such as Christian Scientists, claim prayer can cure any disease. These groups often rely entirely on prayer in place of conventional medicine. This belief is based on a spiritual rather than a biological explanation of how disease develops. There have been some reported cases of prayer leading to tumor regression.

Many people believe that the spiritual dimension gives people the ability to find meaning in life and can therefore help people accept their own death and the death of those they love.

Many medical institutions and health care providers now embrace spirituality and prayer as important components of healing. In addition, most medical institutions have chapels and contracts with ministers, rabbis, clerics, and voluntary organizations to serve their patients' spiritual needs.

How Spirituality Helps Some People Facing Disease

To some degree, the proof is in the person. If someone *believes* that prayer, faith, or spirituality has helped him or her, it has. While there is no research supporting claims that spirituality can cure cancer or any other disease, there have been demonstrated psychological benefits of spirituality: reduction of stress and anxiety, promotion of a more positive outlook, and the strengthening of the will to live.

Studies on the impact of spirituality often focus on the effect of *religious* beliefs on health, survival, and quality of life. The results of these studies have been mixed. Some have not found any health benefits related to religion and survival, but others have found that religious groups with orthodox beliefs and behaviors have lower cancer death rates.

The United States Office of Technology Assessment reported that a survey of 10 years of issues of the *Journal of Family Practice* found that: 83 percent of studies on religiosity found a positive effect on physical health.

Another study on 12 years of issues of two major psychiatric journals found that for the studies that measured religiosity, 92

percent showed a benefit for mental health, 4 percent were neutral, and 4 percent showed harm. Religiosity was measured by participation in religious ceremony, social support, prayer, and belief in a higher being.

An analysis of 43 studies of people with advanced cancer noted that those who reported spiritual well-being were better able to cope with terminal illness and find meaning in their experience. Major themes of spiritual well-being included: self-awareness, coping with stress, connectedness with others, faith, empowerment, confidence, and the ability to live with meaning and hope.

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