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Spiritual Concerns at the End of Life

Who am I? What is my purpose in life? These are questions that many of us ask ourselves at times. They help us not only get in touch with our inner selves, but the answers can help us deal with the situations we face in our lives.

At no time is the issue of addressing spiritual concerns more important than at the end of life. When illness occurs, many people turn inwards in an attempt to understand and deal with the crisis. “Why me?” “Why is this happening?” For seriously ill individuals and their loved ones, this search for meaning becomes even more important. As death approaches, many of us will strive to make sense of life and death.

Conducting a Life Review

One of the best ways to address spiritual concerns is through a life review. By looking at photographs, watching movies, or listening to music from particular periods, individuals can reminisce about events and relationships throughout their lives. This allows them to rediscover legacies, meaning, and spiritual strengths.

Why Are Spiritual Issues So Important?

In order to take care of the “whole” person, psychological, social, biological, and spiritual needs must be met.

Addressing spiritual concerns at the end of life can be as vital to the patient’s well-being as medications and comfort. Not only does this provide an opportunity for the individual to grow and find peace, but also these issues may influence the behavior and decisions of both the dying person and family members. Loved ones must also address their own spiritual issues as they deal with their pending loss.

Spirituality means different things to different people. Our own personal spiritual issues are formed from individual characteristics and beliefs that make us each unique. Serious illness may cause you to rethink what it is that really matters in life, changing your focus and priorities. As death nears, when the physical body becomes more frail, the individual’s inner being can become stronger as spiritual concerns are addressed. Spirituality offers an opportunity to die in peace and provides a chance for inner growth.

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What Is the Difference between Spirituality and Religion?

Spirituality is the deep inner essence of who we are. Related to our soul, spirituality comes from the unique qualities of each individual. It is based on personal experiences and relationship with God, nature, or a Higher Power. It answers the question, “Why am I here?”

Religion is a set of structured guidelines of belief that are practiced within a religious institution, such as a church or synagogue. They are designed to bring people together in community worship.

What Spiritual Issues Should Be Addressed?

Because spirituality is based on an individual’s inner being, each person addresses it differently. Yet, even though we each approach our spiritual core in a unique personal way, researchers have found issues related to spiritual fulfillment that are universal. Everyone wants to:

- **Find meaning in one’s life.** “Is my life worthwhile?” is a common question asked by seriously ill persons who are trying to find out if their life has made an impact on the lives of their loved ones in particular and society as a whole. By doing a life review, people are able to integrate their goals and

experiences in a way that leads them to find the meaning of their life.

- **Die as you wish.** Terminally ill persons can die meaningfully, that is, in a way that is consistent with their own identity. Because death is a personal experience, each person will define his/her own appropriate death differently. As part of this process, a terminally ill person may seek to feel connected to others. This may lead to maintaining and deepening existing relationships, putting affairs in order, and taking care of unfinished business.
- **Have hope beyond the grave.** A third spiritual need — transcendence — focuses on a person’s awareness and acknowledgement of issues that transcend, or go beyond, earthly concerns. Each person may want assurance that, in some way, our life will continue after death occurs — “What will happen to me when life ends?” Some people may turn to God for guidance and comfort, while others may focus on the legacy they leave behind.

Dealing with Spiritual Issues

- Meditation;
- Relaxation techniques;
- Create a legacy;
- Enhance relationships;
- Turn to your priest, rabbi minister, chaplain, or religious representative for guidance.



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