

TOPIC 14:

How to Respond to Emotional and Spiritual Needs



WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

People may experience intense bouts of emotional suffering whenever they experience a health crisis, when they are first diagnosed with a life-threatening illness, and when they are nearing end of life. The experience of suffering is associated with a sense of hopelessness, the fear of being a burden on others, the loss of dignity, the loss of identity as their role in the family changes, and sometimes even a loss of will to live. The emotional impact of physical changes on an ill person's self-image can create feelings of sadness, depression, anxiety, grief, and anger. You cannot minimize or change those feelings but you can allow the person to express them and you can keep interacting with the person in a natural way.

Spiritual Support

When faced with suffering, many people find that their spiritual well-being becomes more important to their quality of life. Sometimes there is a greater interest in spiritual or religious beliefs, sometimes people feel angry or “let down” by their god. This is not a time to impose your own spiritual belief. Follow the person's lead. For example, the person you are caring for may appreciate praying with you.

Recognize that **organized religion** and **spirituality** are two different things. Spirituality includes a sense of connection to something bigger than us or a search for meaning in life. Of course, such questioning is part of the universal human experience. The connection between the spirit world and the mortal world is an important one for

many Canadians. A person may never have gone to a church or synagogue or mosque and yet feel the need for a spiritual connection and association. Be supportive and non-judgmental. You may want to help the person that you are caring for engage with an elder or healer, a medicine man, a minister or priest, spiritual leader of a nearby synagogue or mosque or you may want to help them connect spiritually with the world around them.

Easing Emotional Suffering

Caregivers can support people who are suffering emotionally by providing a committed presence, by affirming the person's value and worth, by being compassionate and kind. Caregivers can support and reinforce dignity, hopefulness, and a sense of control or resilience by giving the person an opportunity to have their thoughts and wishes heard and acknowledged.

Questions to ask:

What are you most proud of about your life and yourself?

What part of you is strongest now?

What gives you the greatest joy in your life?

How has the circle of life affected you?

What about your emotional suffering as the caregiver...

Fear, worry and stress, bi-products of caring for someone with life-threatening illness, can manifest themselves physiologically in many ways. While traditional health care practices are used to treat the symptoms, complementary therapies can also bring caregivers a sense of peace and emotional wellbeing. Remember that the best care team is one where each person uses their different strengths, talents and abilities and together the whole team offers a better level of care as a result.

More Strategies

Some complementary therapies you as a caregiver might consider sharing with the person include the following:

Humour: Even if someone is very ill or dying, do not be afraid to use appropriate humor. Funny stories, jokes, sharing incidents where people said the wrong thing that you can now laugh about now all help to lighten the scene and there is much therapeutic effect in laughter.

Reading or Listening to Books, Poetry: Sharing an inspirational poem, passage or prayer can be extremely soothing. Offer to go to the library to pick up some "books on tape." These can help the person who is ill pass long days of being in bed especially if reading or holding a book is too taxing.

Journal and Letter Writing: Writing is an excellent tool for self-exploration and has been linked to increased well-being and immune function. There is no right or wrong way to do this. The following guidelines and suggestions may help both you as a caregiver and the person that you are caring for to get started.

- Write quickly and spontaneously, disregarding any "shoulds" and "oughts."
- Keep your hand moving; don't stop to think or analyze.

- Don't edit. Disregard spelling, grammar, punctuation or the urge to cross out.
- Include drawings and abstract shapes and colours when words no longer serve your self-expression or add them to your words.
- Write deeply, honestly. Write about what is scary or painful. Write too about your gratitude.
- Experiment with different papers and writing tools. Try blank and lined bound books, spiral notebooks, three-ring binders and artist over-sized sketch pads. Try an assortment of pens, pencils, coloured pens and pencils, highlighter pens, pastels and paints.

Music: It is part of being human to engage in the arts both by defining us as human and making us more humane. Music therapy, as a form of psychotherapy, can be a useful support when coping with anxiety, fears, sleep disturbance, breathing difficulties, or pain. You can provide the person that you are caring for with the opportunity to listen to different types of music, or you could use guided imagery with nature sounds to help the person imagine a lovely place to be in nature, or perhaps you could encourage the person that you are caring for to write a special song to share. They may also find it helpful to journal while listening to music, writing down any thoughts and feelings that arise.

Meditation: The process of calming the mind by using different techniques involving breathing, focusing of attention and relaxation can be practised in many ways. Most people think of meditation as sitting cross-legged in a quiet environment. However, you can meditate sitting on a chair, or even lying down in a bed or on a couch or by walking. By calming the mind, the person's body changes into a state of relaxation. When practiced regularly, meditation has been shown to decrease pain, blood pressure, and anxiety.

Bucket Listing: This phrase has become far more common and includes the process of identifying things a person wishes to have experienced. It might mean that you could help to find creative and maybe even modified ways of doing so together; this can be very satisfying.

In short, there is much involved in being a caregiver. Very often the help you can provide goes beyond the physical.

WALK IN THESE SHOES



1. Read this scenario.

They say that people's personalities don't change very much when faced with impending death. Helena used to be a devout member of the congregation at her church. Since she has become more elderly she has stopped attending. She is such a private person that it is difficult for you to know as her caregiver if she is missing her religion but you know for sure that Helena is still a spiritual person.

2. What might you suggest and what might you do to try to help fill this void in Helena's life. Think about what you might say and do before you check the sample answer.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



Use these additional resources to learn more about the topic of how to offer spiritual support.

Offering Spiritual Support www.caringinfo.org/files/public/brochures/faith_brochure.pdf