Assessing & Treating Spiritual Pain

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It is not so much that we are human beings who have spiritual experiences; rather, we are spiritual beings who have human experiences.
“The great error of our day in medical treatment is that physicians separate the soul... from... the body.”

-Plato
“The pain [and illness] cannot be separated from the personal questions and social meanings it inescapably evokes....[and] ... the meanings we create...can prove at least as important as the medicines we consume.”

--David Morris
“I didn’t think God could find me.”

“I pray but nothing happen.”

“I haven’t seen my kids in 40 years.”

“They said there was nothing more they could do for me.”

“I finally had to ask my God-fearing friends to back off.”
“Stories from Spiritual Journeys

“My church friends keep telling me to pray for him to get well. That’s hard to do when I know he won’t. Do I not have enough faith?”

“I won’t see my kid’s H.S. graduation.”

“I know I am a burden to the family.”

“I must’ve done something really bad.”
Stories from Spiritual Journeys

“I miss my fishing.”

“I know I am going to hurt.”

“What if it’s not true? No God, no heaven, nothing.

“I’m scared of the unknown.”
Stories from Spiritual Journeys

- Don’t forget the Family:
  - “He’s too young to die.”
  - “Why does God take the good ones?”
  - “I don’t see how I can make it without her.”
The meaning of illness and pain can arise as a greater tyrant than physical symptoms.
Why Spiritual Concerns are Important

- We are human beings, not human doings.
- We are more than a body.
- The patient is a person experiencing life with body, mind, heart, & soul.
  - The meaning we attach to an event impacts us as deeply as the event itself. A terminal illness may bring great pain to the body. Yet, the meanings attached to the illness may bring even greater pain to the soul.
“Illness is both soul-shaking and soul-evoking for the patient and for all others for whom the patient matters. We lose an innocence, we know vulnerability,… and we will never be the same.”

• Bolen
“One’s beliefs and values can profoundly affect how a person copes with illness and with the treatment of illness. So spirituality is important during all phases of one’s health and illness, but spiritual and religious factors play an especially prominent role in a patient’s experience with a terminal illness, the dying process, and death.”

-- Puchalski
Spirituality & Religion

- Vastly different
- Intimately connected
Religion

- Latin: Re-\textit{ligare}
  - Re-Connect
- Collective, structured beliefs
- Rites & Rituals
  - Symbolic expression of inner beliefs
Religion

- Often a source of comfort for the dying
  - Ritual: A familiar reference point while navigating the mystery of death & dying
  - Presence of God’s representatives

- Can be a source of pain
  - Abandonment & avoidance
  - Failure to integrate faith & present realities
  - Guilt
Spirituality

- Latin: *Spiritualitis*
  - Breath
  - One’s Essence
- Concerning values, meaning, purpose, faith, love, hope, life’s ultimate questions
- Personalized beliefs for making meaning & interpreting life’s ultimate questions
...Spirituality

- That which gives transcendent meaning
  - The fire within
  - The dance of life
  - The song of the soul
  - The story of a journey
- Everyone has spirituality
  - May not be recognized as such
Spirituality

- May be experienced in nature, relationships, art, music, poetry, intellectual exchange, solitude, community, symbol, etc.

- Spiritual experience occurs when one’s essence (spirit) connects with the transcendent.

@ The physician’s touch
Spiritual Pain

- Finite or Trans-finite
- When meaning is absent or negating one’s essence
- “Spiritual pain arises when [the patient’s] view of [their] spiritual life and [their] experience of life are in a state of mismatch or conflict.” -- Burton
Spiritual Pain

- Described as:
  - Absence/Loss of...
  - Fear of...
  - Conflict of...
  - Struggle of...
  - Suffering of...
Spiritual Pain

- Loss of:
  - Hope
  - Independence
  - Community
  - Identity
  - Body Image
Spiritual Pain

Fear of:
- Becoming a burden
- Unmanageable pain/symptoms
- The unknown
Conflict of:

- Belief system and realities
- Family
- Patient and family goals
Spiritual Pain

Suffering/Struggling with:

- Meaning of illness
  - Why is this happening to me? Why now?
  - Is God punishing me?
  - How does my faith speak to illness?

Doctrines of Suffering

- Distinguish suffering and pain
- Redemptive
- Separation
- Pay back time
Types of Spiritual Pain

- From Growth & Maturation
- Result of Injury
- Result of Dysfunction
- Rejection or Alienation
Assessing Spiritual Pain…

- Through human encounter
  - Personal journey
- Create the space/freedom to explore spiritual meaning and reality
- Willingness to encounter reality, the transcendent, the struggle, and the mystery
  - Non-judgmental acceptance
  - Acknowledge the struggle
  - Accept present reality: “I am where I am supposed to be.” >allows to interpret meaning
- Requires being genuine, honest, real.
Assessing Spiritual Pain

- Engage the person’s story
- “It’s not that we all have stories that need to be told; rather, we are stories that need to be heard.”

Listen for:
- Strengths & Struggles
- Values & Vacillations
- Meanings & Missings
- Copings & Coverings
- Faith & Fallacies
Assessing Spiritual Pain

- Indicators
  - Found in signs and symptoms
  - Rooted in story and narrative
  - Featured in disordered relationships
  - Isolation
  - Emotions of fear, anger, depression, meaninglessness, anguish
  - “Inner darkness”
“… the sources of spiritual pain are subtle, just like the spirit. Grand links between the cause and effect, which are relatively easily established in other kinds of pain, do not always hold for spiritual pain. For this reason, discernment is a more appropriate tool for assessment than is diagnosis.”

-- Burton
Assessing Spiritual Pain

- Ask reflective questions:
  - How has this experience affected your spirit?
  - What pains / suffering have you experienced?
  - What’s the toughest part of living with this illness?
  - What fears do you have about the days ahead?
  - What do you think will happen after you die?
  - How do you want to be remembered?
  - What is God/life asking of you now?
  - What are you now asking of God/life?
Assessing Spiritual Pain

- Ask reflective questions:
  - Have you ever been in spiritual pain?
  - If so, how did you know that your spirit was in pain?
  - What did the experience feel like?
  - How did you [deal with] or “recover” from this pain?

--Burton
It is just as important to know the person who has the pain as it is to know the pain that has the person.
Treating Spiritual Pain

- Goal: Spiritual Palliation
- Treat finite & trans-finite pain
- No quick fixes or magic prayers
- View as a struggle on a journey, not a brokenness to be fixed
- Re-framing
- Make meaning full-ness
- Conduct ritual
... Treating Spiritual Pain

- The power of reflective listening
- The Stewardship of Meaning-Making
- The key role of hope
- The power of ritual
  - Traditional
  - Creative
Spiritual Healing

- Restore meaning
  - What else could this mean?
- Renew hope
- Validate/normalize emotion/struggle
- Provide tangible solutions as needed
  - Final arrangements
  - Wills
  - Care of children/spouse
Spiritual Healing

- Identify & call upon inner resources
- Integrate/reconcile beliefs and realities
- Confront “demons”
- Project hopeful images
  - Finite & transfinite
  - @ Brady’s imagery
- Giving gifts
  - Personal
  - Symbolic
  - Intangible
…Spiritual Healing

- Facilitate family meeting
- Say Good-byes
- Ritual
Discussing Patient's Faith?

Think F.I.C.A.

- **Faith or beliefs.** What is your faith or belief? Do you consider yourself spiritual or religious? What things do you believe in that give meaning to your life?

- **Importance or influence.** Is it important in your life? What influence does it have on how you take care of yourself? How have your beliefs influenced your behavior during this illness? What role do your beliefs play in regaining your health?

- **Community.** Are you part of a spiritual or religious community? Is this of support to you? If so, how? Is there a person or group of people you really love and who are really important to you?

- **Address.** How would you like me, your physician, to address these issues in your care?
“Remember only this one thing,” said Badger. “The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them.

If stories come to you, care for them. . . . Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive. That is why we put these stories into each other’s memory. This is how people care for themselves.”

-- Barry Lopez, *Crow & Weasel*

http://cancer-research.umaryland.edu/spirituality.htm

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