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Support the Patient's Spiritual Concerns

Spiritual concerns raise fundamental questions about life. Why are we here? What is a good life? What happens after death? These profound questions become especially important as life nears its end. As a caregiver, you can support the patient in thinking about his or her own answers to these questions.

Spiritual questions are not answered easily, of course. For those people whose faith gives answers and comfort, your support of that faith will be both helpful and appreciated. For those who are troubled by uncertainty, you can help by sharing your own questions and uncertainties - showing that their concerns are normal and reasonable. If you can admit to the possibility, it may be helpful to say that not all spiritual questions can be answered. It also may be useful to ask about beliefs that were helpful to the patient before this illness and if they can be helpful again now.

Professionals such as clergy or counselors who have experience helping people with spiritual problems near the end of life can be very comforting to the person you are caring for - provided that he or she wants their help. Spiritual questions are very personal; therefore, the person with these concerns is the one who knows best who can help. Bringing in someone who is not wanted can backfire and cause rather than resolve problems. Let the person you are caring for know that you will be happy to arrange visits by clergy or others who could help - but that this decision is entirely up to him or her. Do not expect all clergy to be equally skilled in working with people during the last stage of life, however. If one is not helpful, keep looking until you find one who is. Hospice or palliative care staff can help you locate someone with the necessary skills, and hospital chaplains usually are experienced in working with people near the end of their lives and may be able to help.

If the patient is seriously depressed because of spiritual concerns, seek help from a mental health professional or clergy with training in mental health care. Also, be available to listen. Speaking with another person who is understanding helps to put one's thoughts in perspective and also to see that others appreciate and understand them. The person with advanced cancer may want to make sense of life his or her experiences - to

reminisce, talk about the past, and look for meaning in what has happened. As a caregiver, listening is the most important thing you can do to help. Let the person you are caring for know about your willingness and availability for these discussions when and if he or she wants them. If you find it very difficult to listen to the patient's concerns, then find someone, such as a member of the clergy, family member, or friend, who can.

For people whose religion is very important and gives meaning to both their lives and their dying, you can help by asking questions that allow them to tell you, if they wish, what about their faith has helped them through life and is helping them now. You must be careful to accept and respect views that are different from your own, however. Let them tell you if there are ways you can encourage and support them in their faith. Would they like to listen to a tape of hymns or other religious music? Is there a religious symbol that would bring them comfort? Would they like to share with clergy from their faith one of their traditions, such as a bedside prayer service?

Share your views and feelings when you are asked or think that he or she would like to ask. Hearing another person's thoughts and feelings can be helpful to someone who is troubled by spiritual problems, but always let the person you are caring for be your guide - never impose. Sometimes, reading together from spiritual writings can be comforting and may help to resolve unanswered or unresolved questions. These readings also can provide an opportunity to share how you feel about these issues as well.

You may be worried yourself about spiritual questions. Watching and helping someone who is dying sometimes can bring up very difficult issues. These may be about the unfairness of the situation, fear about what will happen to the person you are caring for after his or her death, fears about your own death, and general confusion and anxiety about what life is about. Talking with clergy, counselors, hospice staff, or health professionals who work with the family and friends of dying people can be very helpful. They have experience helping those like yourself. They will listen and help you to think through these issues. You may find it easier to talk to some people more than others, and you also may find that some are more helpful than others. If the first people you talk to cannot help you, keep looking until you find the person who can.

Source: American College of Physicians