

Spiritual Considerations



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KEYWORDS

• Spirituality • Spiritual distress • Existential distress • Spiritual well-being

KEY POINTS

- Spiritual or existential distress is highly prevalent in patients with cancer and can impact the overall management of distress.
- It is critical that all members of the team screen for spiritual or existential distress.
- Spiritual or existential distress can be treated by compassionate listening, referral to appropriate resources, and especially by working closely with certified chaplains or spiritual care professionals.
- Consensus-based models have identified recommendations and tools for assessing and treating spiritual distress by all members of the team.

INTRODUCTION

The experiences of patients with cancer—from diagnosis through treatment, survivorship, and death—encompass many aspects of their lives—physical, social, emotional, and spiritual.¹ From the moment of diagnosis, patients' lives are changed forever, with the diagnosis often triggering questions of meaning and purpose, as well as finding hope and fulfillment.^{2,3} Scientific advances have resulted in longer life for patients with cancer, many of whom are now considered survivors. With more than 15 million cancer survivors in the United States today,⁴ a cancer diagnosis raises questions about living well with the disease through treatment and survivorship, rather than planning for imminent death. With an estimate that 39% of people born today will be diagnosed with cancer during their lifetime,⁴ the National Cancer Institute and other

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cancer organizations are shifting their focus to longevity and quality of life across the continuum of cancer care. Quality of life for patients with cancer has been shown to encompass the spiritual as well as the physical and psychosocial domains of care, with spiritual well-being found to be as significant as physical well-being.^{5,6} The concept of quality of life is recognized as encompassing spirituality, with increasing recognition that this includes religious support as well as existential aspects of spirituality related to meaning or purpose in life.⁷⁻⁹

A diagnosis of cancer, especially when the patient is in pain, raises spirituality-related questions and concerns, both existential and religious.^{10,11} The uncertainties and myriad decisions may raise spirituality-related issues more often in persons diagnosed with cancer than with other long-term illnesses. Studies show that individuals may have increased levels of spiritual distress and clinical depression after a cancer diagnosis, and at the end of active treatment when predictable routines end.^{12,13}

SPIRITUALITY

Spirituality is defined as a way people find meaning and purpose and how they experience their connectedness to self, others, and the significant or the sacred.^{7,14} Spirituality is seen as a universal human characteristic, one's relationship with the transcendent, expressed through one's attitudes, habits, and practices. Religion, one expression of spirituality, is a set of organized beliefs about God shared within a community of people.¹⁵⁻¹⁷ Having a strong sense of spirituality helps patients to adjust to and cope with an illness, including cancer, and to find meaning and peace. Spirituality may help a patient to define wellness during cancer treatment and survivorship, despite fatigue or pain, and may assist patients in finding a sense of health in the midst of disease.^{3,12}

Other studies have shown that spiritual well-being in patients with cancer has been associated with lower levels of depression, better quality of life near death, and protection against end-of-life despair, and a desire for hastened death.^{2,12,15} Patients with cancer report their spirituality helped them to find hope, gratitude, and positivity in their cancer experience, and that their spirituality is a source of strength that helps them to cope, find meaning in their lives, and make sense of the cancer experience as they recover from treatment.¹⁸⁻²⁰ Spiritual well-being has been associated with lower levels of distress and greater quality of life across life expectancy prognoses, and as a source of strength. Religion helps people with spiritual suffering by offering them historical understandings of suffering and ways to reframe their distress. Rituals and spiritual practices may help people to cope with cancer-related pain and suffering, including physical pain and psychosocial or spiritual suffering, and with facing dying or experiencing anticipatory grief.¹⁹

Numerous studies have reported that spirituality and/or religion may be important to patients with cancer and may influence medical decision making. Patients with cancer often consider spirituality to be at least somewhat important in their treatment decisions, and frequently of extreme importance. Patients report that belief in God is an important factor in decision making about treatment, often more so than the efficacy of treatment.²¹⁻²³

SPIRITUAL DISTRESS: A CLINICAL DIAGNOSIS?

Spirituality impacts coping, decision making, and quality of life, but may also be a source or contributor to distress. Examples of spiritual distress are listed in [Table 1](#). Spiritual suffering may influence how a person experiences and expresses pain, with a spiritual intervention as effective as a medical intervention in pain management. Untreated spiritual suffering may worsen the pain experience.¹¹ For some patients

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