
UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING THE RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL NEEDS OF ADVANCED CANCER PATIENTS

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OBJECTIVES: *To review the religious and spiritual needs of advanced cancer patients and how oncology nurses can assess and address unmet needs.*

DATA SOURCES: *Peer-reviewed articles.*

CONCLUSION: *The changing landscape of how advanced cancer patients understand religion and spirituality has created a dynamic set of unmet religious and spiritual needs. Nursing assessment and interventions focused on these needs requires a focus on faith and beliefs and on relationships and meaning-making.*

IMPLICATIONS FOR NURSING PRACTICE: *Using history-taking and spiritual assessment tools, nurses can assess patients for unmet religious and spiritual needs and can use interventions to deepen meaning-making within the nurse–patient relationship.*

KEY WORDS: *religion, spirituality, unmet needs, spiritual assessment, spiritual interventions, meaning.*

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Based on clinical trial evidence, it is now a quality care standard to include palliative care with standard oncology care at the time of diagnosis with advanced cancer.¹ This quality standard notwithstanding, the benefits of palliative care have not always extended to patients from diverse cultures.^{2,3} This includes diverse religious and spiritual cultures.⁴ For example, inattention to religious and spiritual beliefs has been associated with more aggressive end-of-life care and greater use of health care resources.⁵ In contrast, a belief among some rural Christians in the United States (US) that cancer is

a mandate from God affects patients' engagement with the cancer care system and results in cancer care disparities.^{6,7} An expert panel convened by the National Institute of Nursing Research examined these disparities and recommended that palliative care be delivered in culturally and spiritually sensitive ways.⁸ Indeed, palliative care, according to the National Consensus Project for Quality Palliative Care (NCPQPC), includes spiritual care.⁹ For palliative care to be spiritually sensitive, it must include understanding, assessing, and addressing the religious and spiritual needs of patients with advanced cancer. A recent review in this journal described how cancer nurses can include spiritual communication in their practice.¹⁰ This narrative review, instead, focuses on understanding the religious and spirituality needs of diverse patients who are in treatment for cancer and how cancer nurses can assess and address these needs.

The National Library of Medicine and, because this review concerns religious studies, the JSTOR, ALTA Religion, and Grey Literature Report databases were searched in October and November 2017 using the terms "religious," "religion," "spiritual," "spirituality," "needs," and "advanced cancer." Articles and reports were included if they discussed the prevalence of religious affiliation or spiritual identity or the assessment of and intervention on the unmet religious or spiritual needs of patients who are in treatment for advanced cancer. Articles were not excluded based on date of publication. As a narrative review, this article presents an overview of the religious and spiritual needs of advanced cancer patients in the context of the current religious and scientific landscapes and then presents evidence-based interventions that address the religious and spiritual needs of patients with advanced cancer.

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The Diversity of Religion and Spirituality in Contemporary Times

What it means to be religious and what it means to be spiritual – and the overlap between them – is changing in the US. First, more people in the US than ever identify themselves as spiritual. In a 2017 Pew Research Center survey, 75% of all adult Americans reported that they are spiritual. However, 48% of these respondents said they are also

religious, though a smaller group, 27% of respondents, said they are not religious. The percentage of people who said they are spiritual but not religious has increased by 8 points over the years 2012–2017. This growth is true across sex, age, education level, and race and ethnicity. It also differs according to whether the respondent reported religious affiliation: 37% of those who reported being spiritual but not religious also reported having a religious affiliation; 35% of these spiritual-but-not-religious who reported a religious affiliation did so with Protestant Christianity, 14% with Catholic Christianity, and 11% with other religions.¹¹ Thus in the US, to be spiritual and spiritual-but-not-religious is changing, complex, and diverse in itself.

Second, this complexity and diversity increases with changes in how people in the US report their religious affiliation. Between the years 2007 and 2014, the Pew Research Center found that affiliation with Christian denominations fell by 8% to 70.6% of the US population who, prior to 2007, reported affiliation with Christianity. However, affiliation with other non-Christian faiths increased, though only slightly (1.2%).¹² People who said they were atheists and agnostics made up 7.1% of respondents.¹¹ Meanwhile, globally, Islam is the fastest growing religion, and by the middle of this century, it will surpass Christianity as the world's largest religion.¹³

The Definitions of Religion and Spirituality

The difference between religion and spirituality can be hard to distinguish, and in some cases, the two concepts overlap for people. For example, the Pew Research Center surveys, which found that some people consider themselves to be both religious and spiritual, do not define the words "religious" and "spiritual," but rather, ask respondents two separate questions about whether they think of themselves as "a religious person, or not" and "a spiritual person, or not," leaving the respondents to decide upon definitions.¹⁴

Traditionally, religion has been thought of by prominent scholars of religion and health as either a system of beliefs and practices that is related to the transcendent,^{15,16} or as a search for significance in ways related to the sacred.¹⁷ In contrast to focusing on the transcendent or the sacred, definitions of spirituality often focus on universal aspects of human existence. A correlate of spirituality is spiritual well-being, as well-being is one's overall satisfaction with an area (or all of) one's life,¹⁸ in this case with one's spiritual life. Taking

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