

Creating Awareness of Spiritual Issues for Health Care Professionals

By Donald Koepke

How can long-term care professionals become aware of the spiritual issues that surround them day after day and offer support when those issues are often not expressed or understood clearly? These care providers must be able to recognize signs such as spiritual distress before they can actually make a difference. Once recognized, they can then form an assessment, focus on beliefs and values that provide strength, hope and meaning and offer spiritual support.

Recognizing spiritual distress is always a challenge. What care providers must understand is that a person's spirituality can be found at the root of every conversation, action and expressed emotion. Charles Topper wrote, "Spiritual distress describes the reality of a weakened human spirit. It is the state in which the individual or group experiences or is at risk of experiencing a disturbance in the belief or value system that provides strength, hope and meaning to life" (Spirituality in Pastoral Counseling and the Community Helping Professions. New York: Haworth Press. 2003. 26. ISBN 0789008610). I have found that spiritual distress is usually embedded in the everyday experience of living and can't be as obvious as hearing words like, "I am having trouble feeling the presence of God today." It is masked by a noticeable sense of grief that won't go away, crankiness, giving up or in expressions like, "I want to go home."

There are tools to help assess spiritual distress. Christina Puchalski, MD formulated a tool for clinical practice which is divided into four areas: 1) Faith or beliefs, 2) Importance and influence, 3) Community and 4) Address (Taking a spiritual history allows clinicians to understand patients more fully. *J Pall Med.* 2000;3:129-37). This tool is also referred to as FICA. Using this tool, a person's spiritual needs are assessed by first exploring faith and beliefs and uncovering what they believe gives meaning to life. Secondly, importance and influence discovers the role those beliefs have had in their life. Third, community explores persons or organizations that are important to them. Lastly, to address spirituality, we must ask, "How would you want me to address these issues in your healthcare?" When a person is exhibiting distress of any type, it may be helpful for the long-term care professional to evaluate the person based upon these four spiritual needs.

Recognizing such issues is, however, more than just applying a tool. There are other ways that care providers can become aware of spiritual needs. In spiritual care, the use of clinical tools is effective, but only if they are applied through the heart. Listening with the heart is an excellent way to really understand persons with spiritual needs. Spiritual care seeks discernment, not diagnosis. Simply put, to become aware of a resident's spiritual issues professionals need to give up control over the situation and simply receive as the resident chooses to give.

Only after spiritual distress is recognized and assessed can care providers begin to offer spiritual support. Part of giving spiritual support is determining beliefs and values that provide strength, hope and meaning. Highfield and Carson suggest that we all have four spiritual needs that we are continually seeking to fulfill: 1) the need for meaning and purpose in life, 2) the need

to give love, 3) the need to receive love and 4) the need for forgiveness, hope, and creativity (“Spiritual Needs of Patients: Are They Recognized?” Cancer Nursing 1983, p.188). Meeting these needs result in spiritual wholeness, which can often be seen in people who continue to grow, change and enjoy life no matter what their physical condition.

Ways that long-term care providers can assist residents in achieving spiritual wholeness is to engage those in need with activities such as providing reflection on the meaning of an activity or event. Activity professionals can engage residents in discussions of "books of meaning" like Tuesdays with Morrie (Albom. New York:Doubleday. 1977. ISBN 0358484518) or Counting of Kindness (Lustbader. New York:Free Press. 1991. ISBN 0029195160) and comparing the authors' philosophies of life and aging with their own. While completing their essential care of the body, nurses can encourage residents to participate in personal rituals of meaning, whether the ritual is as simple as cookies and milk before bedtime, as complex as a Yom Kippur service or as reflective as praying several times a day. Social service personnel can begin providing service to a resident by assuming that there is a spiritual component to every distress and accompanying the resident as they listen with the heart and get in touch with those spiritual needs.

Long-term care professionals are challenged daily on how to address the spiritual needs of those they serve. In addition to using clinical tools, these needs are only recognizable when we are willing to "listen with our hearts" and not just with our ears. Listening from the heart involves paying attention and seeking understanding from the resident's perspective. It encourages and perceives meaning that can only be discovered by the resident from the inside, not imposed by a professional from outside. In doing so, we become aware of the spirituality in their life and are better able to support the spiritual needs of those we serve.

Recommended Readings

Albom, Mitch (1997) *Tuesdays with Morrie* New York, Doubleday

Byock, Ira (1997) *Dying Well: The Prospect of Growth at the End of Life* (1997)
Riverhead Books

Eiesland, Nancy (1994) *The Disabled God* Nashville, Abingdon Press

Frankl, Viktor (1959) *Man's Search for Meaning* New York, Simon and Shuster

Frankl, Viktor (1988) *The Will to Meaning* A Meridian Book

Kurtz, Ernst and Ketcham, Katherine, (1992) *The Spirituality of Imperfection* New York,
Bantam Trade Paperback

Lustbader, Wendy (1991) *Counting on Kindness* New York, The Free Press

Miller, James and Cutshall, Susan (2001) *The Art of Being a Healing Presence*
Willowgreen Publishing, Fort Wayne, Indiana ISBN 1-885933-32-0