

## Spiritual Distress

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### What is spiritual distress?

Spiritual distress is a disruption in a person's belief or value system. It may occur when a person is unable to find sources of meaning, hope, love, comfort, strength, and connection in life or when conflict occurs between his/her beliefs and what is happening in their life. It may affect his or her entire being. Something in a person's past can also be a cause of distress.

### What are the signs and symptoms of spiritual distress?

- Sadness, anger, despair, depression, anxiety.
- Questions the meaning of life. Questions the meaning of suffering.
- Asks why this is happening, "Why now?", "Why me?"
- Afraid to fall asleep.
- Questions his/her belief system.
- Feels a sense of emptiness, loss of direction, abandonment.
- Talks about feelings of being left or forgotten by God/higher power.
- Seeks spiritual help or guidance.
- Pain and other physical symptoms may be expressions of spiritual distress.

### What to report to the hospice/palliative care team?

- Signs of behaviors listed above.
- Side effects of medications.
- Behaviors that seem out of character.
- Symptoms that are getting worse.
- Talk about suicide, ending it all, asking for help to die.
- Known history of spiritual distress.
- Not caring about self and life in general.
- Sudden rejection or neglect of previous practices or beliefs.

### What can be done for spiritual distress?

Spiritual distress is common with terminal illnesses. Not everyone experiences it the same way or to the same degree.

## Patients and Family

- Do not feel you are bothering the hospice/palliative care team by asking questions.
- Look for ways to keep and honor desired rituals and ways of life.

## Patient

- Remember, not everyone has spiritual distress.
- Have at least one person to talk with whom you trust about your concerns, fears, or anger.
- Do not be hard on yourself for not feeling very spiritual.
- Listening to devotional recordings may offer comfort.
- Listening to instrumental music may be soothing.
- Allow someone to pray with/for you. Meditation may be helpful.
- Write, paint, or draw your feelings.
- Take your medication as prescribed.
- Forgive yourself, forgive others, and forgive God/higher power.
- Say thank you.

## Family

- Provide a calm, relaxing setting.
- Treat the person with dignity and respect.
- Be willing to be present. Provide support.
- Be willing to listen and reminisce.
- Enjoy the time together, look for ways to make memories.
- If asked, be open to contacting a spiritual leader (minister, rabbi, priest).

Other HPNA Teaching Sheets on are available at [www.HPNA.org](http://www.HPNA.org).

## References

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