

# Understanding Spirituality, Spiritual and Existential Distress

## What is Spirituality?

Spirituality is a core aspect of humanity through which people seek their meaning, purpose, and transcendence (being able to go beyond normal limits or boundaries). People experience spirituality through their relationship to self, family, others, community, society, nature and the significant or sacred. Spirituality is expressed through beliefs, values, traditions, practices, rituals, and experiences.<sup>1</sup>

People with cancer may have spiritual health needs. They may start looking for ways to:

- Have meaning and purpose in their life
- Cope with a diagnosis
- Express themselves
- Connect to their faith or beliefs

## What is spiritual distress?

**Spiritual distress** is a lack of spiritual well-being. It happens when something, such as a cancer diagnosis, disrupts your core identity and spirituality. It is a conflict between your spiritual belief system and your current reality. Spiritual distress is a common and understandable response to a critical illness. Patients, family members and caregivers can all experience it both mentally and emotionally. It can cause feelings such as worry, fear, sadness, and anger. These can affect your physical well-being and recovery.

Spiritual distress may cause you to ask questions such as “Why has God let this happen to me?” or “What have I done to deserve this?” You may feel like your Higher Power has abandoned or betrayed you in your time of illness. You may be angry or unable to pray or meditate. You may lose your desire to participate in any rites, rituals, or cultural ceremonies.

You may believe in a Higher Self and that you create your own destiny - that you have done everything “right”: eating healthy, exercising, being a positive person, having positive thoughts. Yet, you have been diagnosed with cancer. You may feel guilty or shameful. You may ask “Why is this happening to me?” or think “This is not fair!” These feelings can affect your ability to have a sense of peace or harmony.

Feelings of spiritual distress are temporary and can be managed. The experience of spiritual distress can often be resolved and lead to spiritual growth and renewal, which may in turn have positive affects on recovery.

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## Situations that may cause spiritual distress:

- Waiting for a diagnosis or difficult prognosis
- Major or repeated setbacks
- Physical pain or prolonged suffering
- When your spiritual or cultural beliefs do not align with the treatment plan your health care team has recommended
- When you feel a ritual of your faith or culture is needed and you are unable to do it or access it
- Family members and caregivers may experience compassion fatigue
- A family member making decisions on behalf of a loved one may also experience spiritual distress

## What is existential distress?

**Existential Distress** happens when people think about their own loss of life. It includes feelings of helplessness, worry, loneliness, fear of death, and loss of meaning and purpose.<sup>2</sup>

With existential distress, you may lose a sense of meaning and purpose in your life. You may feel you do not have a reason to live and say things like “What’s the purpose of my life now? I am not really living. I am just existing.” You may feel overwhelmed and say “I’m scared” or “I don’t know how I’m going to cope.” These are common responses to a critical illness. The feelings are temporary and can be managed.

If you are experiencing spiritual or existential distress, make an appointment with the **Spiritual Health Practitioner** at 604-877-6000 ext. 672115.

<sup>1</sup>Definition of Spiritual Distress derived from Puchalski, CM et al. “Improving the Spiritual Dimension of Whole Person Care: Reaching National and International Consensus”. *Journal of Palliative Medicine*, Vol 17. #6 (2014)

<sup>2</sup>Definition of Existential Distress derived from Vehling S, Kissane DW. Existential distress in cancer: alleviating suffering from fundamental loss and change. *Psychooncology*. 2018;27(11):2525–30