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# Spirituality & Religion: Resources for Healing

By Rev. George F. Handzo, BCC

For most people, religious belief and practice is one of their major resources to help them cope with illness. Even for those who are not religious, spirituality, including the search for meaning and hope, is often central to their quality of life.

## *Find Out What Works for You*

The "right" way to use religious or spiritual resources is in a way that helps you. Others can give you suggestions to try, but no one can determine what is right for you except you.

A good starting place is to think about how you have coped with adversity in the past and the role religious and spiritual resources played in that coping. Did you pray or meditate more? Did you read? Did you go to worship or talk to a clergyperson of your faith group? Did you listen to music or go for walks?

Next, you might think about what part of your belief and practice is less helpful now? Do you find it difficult to pray? Has your illness made it hard for you to be a part of your religious community? Do you now have doubts about the goodness or helpfulness of the God or Higher Power you believe in? Coming to understand where your beliefs and practices may have broken down is the first step to finding new ways of using them to your full advantage.

## *Identify the Resources That Can Help You Now*

Next, what are the resources you can call upon? Keep in mind, no one resource will work for everyone or is right for everyone. Here are the most widely used resources people who are sick have drawn on during their most vulnerable times. They are only suggestions.

## *Praying*

Many people are helped by expanding their concept of what prayer is. Prayer can be very formal and structured, or completely informal. It can consist of the prayers of our faith tradition we learned as children, or a simple conversation between us and that which is beyond us. It can contain words or sounds, or be totally silent. It can be simply allowing that which is beyond us to be present to us and speak to us. Thought of in this way, any distinction between "prayer" and "meditation" may not be useful or helpful. Don't worry about what it is called. If the practice allows you to feel better, what you call it is irrelevant. For example, many people find that the book of Psalms in the Bible express much of what they want to say in a prayer, because the Psalms express a full range of emotions.

### *Reading Sacred Texts or Whatever Comforts You*

Many find reading the sacred texts of their faith helpful. There are many books containing different types of readings on spiritual topics. Try a few and see if they help. If reading is too difficult, it is easy to obtain the Bible, Torah or the Qu'ran on audio tape. Your local library or house of worship may have it or will obtain it for you. In the same way, if public worship has been a major help to you, you might ask someone in your congregation to tape the service for you. Many congregations do this routinely. In many areas, you can also find worship services from a congregation of your faith group broadcast on TV or on the radio.

### *Talking to a Clergy person or a Multifaith Chaplain*

You may want to seek out a religious professional who is trained to help people use their own religious and spiritual resources to cope with illness. If you do not have a clergy person or feel comfortable going to one about these kinds of issues, one option is to seek out a spiritual director or pastoral counselor in your community.

The Web site of the American Association of Pastoral Counselors ([www.aapc.com](http://www.aapc.com)) lists pastoral counselors by geographic location. All accredited hospitals are required to provide chaplains to serve the spiritual and religious needs of their patients, in both inpatient and outpatient settings.

Let the hospital know you prefer a chaplain who is certified by the Association of Professional Chaplains, the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education, the National Association of Catholic Chaplains or the National Association of Jewish Chaplains. These chaplains are trained to be present with you emotionally and be respectful of whatever your personal beliefs and practices are. They will be happy to help you no matter what your faith or lack of faith. They sign a code of ethics that prohibits them from imposing their own beliefs on you.

As mentioned in the section about a dialysis patient in the 2005 annual report of The HealthCare Chaplaincy, ([www.healthcarechaplancy.org](http://www.healthcarechaplancy.org)) "while professional chaplains can and do pray appropriately for God's intervention and care, they also help patients simply to understand, accept, and take a fresh look at their illness and whenever possible create new meaning and discover new reasons for hope in their loss, disability and suffering."

### *Spiritual Pain, Like Physical Pain, Can Be Relieved*

The most important message of this article is, if religious or spiritual resources have been important to you in the past and they are not working for you now in a way you would like, seek help either on your own or through others. Spiritual and religious beliefs and practices should be and can be an important source of support, rather than a source of distress to anyone who is ill.

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