



Finding a Spiritual Companion

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How a spiritual companion can help

A spiritual companion is someone who listens to you and is with you as you face the challenges of your illness. This person can help you to identify resources you already have within you that will help you.

"Why is there suffering?" "What is the purpose of life?"

Emotional and spiritual questions like these tend to come into sharper focus in times of illness. Just having someone to talk with about these issues can be a relief. Your spiritual companion may be a friend or family member, someone on your health care team, a leader in your spiritual tradition, a member of your faith community, or a [hospice palliative care](#) volunteer. Anyone willing to help with the spiritual questions and concerns that you are experiencing can be a spiritual companion.

Ultimately, a spiritual companion may increase your sense of well-being. Some of the ways spiritual companions can help is by offering you an opportunity to explore and engage in ways such as these:

- express whatever is on your heart or mind;
- explore how your illness affects you, and your family and friends. This could involve talking about
 - your hopes and fears at the present time
 - your struggles in making sense out of what is happening
 - challenges your family or friends face in coping with your illness
 - other experiences of illness that affect your family's reactions;
- celebrate and complete your life story. Without someone to listen to the stories of your life, you may feel unnecessarily isolated. When another person receives and appreciates the stories of your life, you get a better sense of the legacy you have given the world. You may also be able to identify what you still want to add to your life story – gratitude you still want to express, love you want to share, forgiveness you want to offer or receive, or wrongs you want to right;

See also: [Sharing Your Story](#)

- draw upon healing resources you have within you, such as these:
 - your breath which connects you to an inner stillness
 - your capacities for loving, trusting, and forgiving
 - your intuition which puts you in touch with your deepest longings
 - your imagination which helps you to picture new ways of living and loving
 - your sense of humour
 - your resiliency, which instills hope
 - memories of experiences that have opened your heart;
- draw upon healing resources around you, such as these:
 - the symbols, rituals, beliefs and practices of your spiritual tradition that connect you to a higher entity;
 - visits from spiritual leaders in your tradition that reassure you and support you in your spiritual practices. For example, you may want your spiritual leader to pray, chant or meditate with you, bring communion, anoint you, or burn sweetgrass and smudge you;
 - discussions of spiritual questions, such as these:
 - difficulties in praying
 - religious questions related to illness, dying, death, or life after death
 - conflicts between your beliefs and your experience of illness
 - forgiveness for sins and reconciliation with a higher entity
 - alienation from your faith community
 - ethical questions about treatment or care decisions;
 - connecting with those who have been your guides, mentors or soul friends. These people can bring a similar encouragement and support if you do not belong to a spiritual tradition;
 - music and the arts;
 - nature;
 - family and friends.

See also: [Rituals for Patients and Families](#)

Sometimes all spiritual companions need to do is be there, offering their respectful and compassionate presence. You may find relief simply in speaking frankly about these matters with someone who is comfortable exploring them.

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You may already have a spiritual companion but have never thought of this person in this way. This person may be a friend, a colleague, a neighbour, or a member of your faith community. Family members can be good spiritual companions for each other too. However, sometimes they are not able to provide the kind of support you are looking for because they need support too.

Many times you will know someone outside the family who is open to talking about personal matters and the questions surrounding them. Maybe you had these kinds of discussions with someone before the illness and you trust that he or she will be able to be supportive in this experience too. Other times, you may want to draw upon a spiritual leader from your faith community.

If you feel that you do not have anyone to be a spiritual companion, speak to a member of your health care team. Many teams have spiritual care providers who can either be your spiritual companion or help you find one. These people are often referred to as chaplains and are on the staff of most hospitals and nursing homes. In the community, your health care provider can arrange for you to talk to someone who works as a spiritual care provider.

Professional spiritual care providers

Spiritual care providers will help you to meet your spiritual needs no matter what your faith tradition or whether you belong to one. When you meet with a spiritual care provider, you can decide whether he or she will be a good spiritual companion for you.

If you are receiving care from a spiritual care provider, he or she likely has experience working with people receiving palliative care.

Spiritual care providers are trained to:

- provide a compassionate presence during health crises;
- help individuals explore the meaning of illness in their lives;
- help individuals review their life stories and use their illness as an opportunity to celebrate achievements, rectify past mistakes and add something new to their stories;
- help individuals draw on their own spiritual resources for strength, including the resources of their spiritual tradition or faith community;
- provide spiritual care that is sensitive to culture and religion;
- assist individuals in making treatment and care decisions;
- work with a health care team in providing care for the whole person.

The frequency of a spiritual care provider's visits with you will depend on your spiritual needs, on his or her availability, and on what kind of other supports you have. What you discuss in those visits will be considered confidential although the provider may seek your permission to share information that would help other team members in their care of you.

Spiritual care providers are also open to talking with family members and sometimes can help families to talk together about concerns related to the illness. At difficult periods during the illness or when death occurs, families may ask providers to provide or arrange for prayers or other rituals. Sometimes spiritual care providers also help families to arrange a memorial service or to find bereavement support following an individual's death.

Potential challenges in finding a spiritual companion

Sometimes finding a spiritual companion who is right for you is not easy. Perhaps you face one of these challenges:

- You are reluctant to ask for spiritual support because you feel it would be a sign of weakness.
- You do not consider yourself religious and wonder if a spiritual companion could accept you that way.
- Your health care providers do not seem interested in the spiritual dimension of your illness.
- Your health care team does not have a spiritual care provider and no one is available to meet your spiritual needs.
- You feel nervous about discussing your spiritual needs with someone who is not part of your spiritual or cultural tradition.
- You have lost touch with the current spiritual leader from your own faith community or do not feel comfortable with him or her.
- You worry that others may try to impose their religious beliefs on you.

You may feel that finding a suitable spiritual companion is not possible or important. However, good spiritual care can be as important as good physical care. It can make a difference in your ability to cope with your illness. Here are some ways it could happen:

- A spiritual care provider may approach you to discuss your spiritual needs and assist you in meeting them.
- If a spiritual care provider is not available, you could discuss your spiritual concerns with a health care provider whom you trust and ask for help with them.
- If you belong to a faith community, you could discuss your spiritual needs with the community's spiritual leader or another representative.
- When spiritual struggles or religious needs are neglected, sometimes a family member or close friend becomes a helpful advocate.

Spiritual care is an important part of health care and you have the right to expect that respectful and competent spiritual care will be available to you.

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A note for families

If you have someone with a life-limiting illness in your family, you may have your own needs for spiritual support. The introduction of a life-threatening illness into family life is ominous and heavy. The whole family has to face sickness and possible death, parts of life that most people like to avoid. As illness interferes with the patient's ability to carry on his or her usual roles in your family, other family members have to take on new responsibilities. These role changes and the possibility of death dismembering your family can threaten your family's stability and identity. Your family begins to grieve the losses that have already occurred and those they anticipate.

Your family may be pulling together well in the midst of this crisis. Yet, you may feel a need to talk with someone outside the family. Because each relationship in a family is unique, you may feel that nobody else can fully understand the impact of this illness on you. You may be interested in meeting with a spiritual companion who will support you as your family adjusts to this time of loss and change.

You may also have particular questions that you want to discuss. For example, you may be wondering:

- how to talk about what the illness means for the patient, for you, and for other members of the family. You may wish your family could talk more openly about the illness, but not know how to get this started;
- how to talk with children and adolescents in the family about the illness. You may be concerned about frightening them or unsure about how to answer their questions about suffering or death;
- how to discuss questions you may have about care and treatment decisions. For example:
 - *"When is it right to stop pursuing active treatment?"*
 - *"How do we handle the patient's wish to die at home?"*
- how to make sure you and your family members have good self-care while caring for the patient. You may find caregiving stressful and exhausting and need an outside perspective to help you regain some balance in your life.

Spiritual leaders from faith communities and spiritual care providers on health care teams are usually as concerned about the family as about the patient. However, you may need to take the first step to arrange for a time to discuss your concerns. Sometimes it is helpful to let a health care team member know that you want to arrange to talk with a spiritual leader from your tradition or with a spiritual care provider. The team member can then make a suitable referral for you.

Perhaps you want to arrange for spiritual support for the person who is ill, but you have no spiritual leader in the community to turn to. You may suspect that the person has things to work through, but is unwilling to talk about them with family members. You may feel that the person has spiritual questions or concerns that need to be addressed. There are several ways you can approach this.

You can check directly with the patient about whether he or she is open to talking with a spiritual care provider. Here are some examples of how to do this:

- *"The team has a spiritual care provider who talks with patients about how their illness is affecting them as persons. Would you like to meet him (or her)?"*
- *"I met the spiritual care provider who is on the team and found that our talk was really helpful. I wish you could have a visit too. Would you be open to that?"*
- *"Sometimes you look (or sound) so sad (or worried). I wonder whether you might find it helpful to talk about what's going on with a spiritual care provider."*

Alternatively, you can speak to a team member about your concerns for the patient and ask that a spiritual care provider visit him or her to assess spiritual needs. This may be the best approach if you

find the patient unwilling to talk with you about their feelings and concerns. When talking to the team member, you might also mention any needs you have for spiritual support.

In times of serious illness both patients and families can benefit from spiritual care. Sometimes you can play an important role in making sure the patient in your family gets the spiritual support that is needed. However, it is the patient who decides whether and how to use the spiritual support that is offered and you must be respectful of his or her wishes. Even if the patient does not make use of the spiritual support that is available, you can take charge of arranging for the spiritual support you need.

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