Religion and Spirituality in Health Care

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What is Religion?

Harold Koenig, MD, in MEDICINE, RELIGION, and HEALTH:

-- a system of beliefs and practices observed by a community, supported by rituals that acknowledge, worship, communicate with, or approach the Sacred, the Divine, God (in Western cultures) – or Ultimate Truth, Reality, or nirvana (in Eastern cultures). May be public, social, institutional - May be private, personal, individual

What is Spirituality?

David Hufford, PhD (medical humanities): Spirituality is one's personal relationship to the transcendent <u>Religion</u> is the community, institutional aspect of spirituality Why do religion and spirituality matter in medical practice?

Increasing Fluidity of Americans' Beliefs re: Spirituality/Religion

Source: Pew Research Center



EVER HAD A MYSTICAL OR RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE? UNITED STATES:

<u>1962:</u> 22% YES 2009: 49% YES

Increasing Religious/Spiritual Heterodoxy

29% of Americans believe in reincarnation: one in ten evangelical Christians believe in reincarnation
13% of white evangelicals believe in astrology
26% of Americans believe that spiritual energy is located in physical things like mountains, trees, and crystals

Source: Pew Research Center

Spirituality and Religious Practice: Doctors vs. the Public

Daaleman et al, J Fam

Pract. 1999



The Gap: Doctors and Patients

From a national survey of <u>family physicians</u>: 35 % pray or spend time in spiritual practice regularly (versus 75 % of the American public)

Implication for practice: Cross cultural gap between doctor and patient – may affect healthcare quality and outcomes



What are the stats for pharmacy professionals?

Daaleman TP, Nease DE. Patient attitudes regarding physician inquiry into spiritual and religious issues. [see comments]. Journal of Family Practice. 1994;39(6):564-8.

Patients demand Meaning

- Illness, crisis challenges us to meaning-making
- What is the role of this event in my life?
- How does it change my life?
- How do I engage it?
- Very nuanced and complex –
- We don't know unless we ask about it



For patients.....

Spirituality may engage the process of finding/making meaning and integrating a challenging/critical life event



Spirituality and Coping – the Evidence

Religious beliefs and practices can enable the sick (and their loved ones) to cope better and experience psychological growth from their negative health experiences.

Koenig/Larson/Larson, 2001

- Spiritual practices affect physical processes
- A large proportion of published empirical data suggests that religious commitment may play a beneficial role in
- preventing physical and mental illness
- improving coping
- ✓ facilitating recovery

Matthews et al, 1998

Religion and Spirituality: Linkages to Physical Health Lynda H. Powell, Rush-Presbyterian-St. Luke's Medical Center Leila Shahabi University of Miami, Carl E. Thoresen Stanford University

Intercessory prayer: not persuasively correlated with positive health outcomes

High level of religious participation: <u>persuasively correlated</u> <u>with longevity</u>

Specific religious groups: <u>variations</u>, such as unusually <u>positive health indicators for Seventh Day Adventists (mostly</u> <u>vegetarians</u>)

SUMMARY: Active participation in a religious community

is strongly associated with positive health outcomes.

The content of religious practice is less strongly related.



Tip: Ask the Patient

- Not all Jews keep kosher not all Muslims keep halal – not all Indians are vegetarians
- Not all Jehovah's Witnesses will refuse transfusions – not all Christian Scientists will refuse to see doctors

There are wide variations of belief/practice within most religions ASK THE PATIENT how his/her faith or spirituality factors in his/her medical care decisions and relationships with medical professionals

Screening for spiritual needs -

Door openers ...

Visual clues

Religious items, religious art: holy cards, sacred books, objects invested with healing powers **Verbal clues** "With God's help" "That's a blessing" "You play the hand you are dealt" "If God wills it" "She's always been a fighter ..."



Screening for spiritual needs and resources

Provide some context:

"Often spiritual beliefs and practices help patients while they are in the hospital. I want to ask you a few questions so I can address as many avenues of assistance as possible while you are here."

Boundaries

- Prayer at times initiated by patients
- Considerations: authenticity
- Adding to paternalism
- Physician belief and patient belief
- Faith language and ritual

Possible response:

- refer to chaplain
- "Perhaps you could say a prayer, and I am happy to be with you as you express your intentions"



HOPE Screening for Spiritual Needs

H: Sources of hope, meaning, comfort, strength, peace, love and connection
O: Organized religion
P: Personal spirituality/Practice
E: Effects on medical care and end-of-life issues

THE SACERDOTAL **FUNCTIONS OF MEDICAL** PROFESSIONALS



We All Do!

A study shows that the placebo effect works even when the subjects of the research are told that the medication they are taking is indeed a placebo.

Believing that the pill is real medicine, even when it is not, is not required. It appears that the "active ingredient" of the placebo effect is going to the doctor, getting attentive care, getting a prescription, and taking the pill.

"This is the specific effect of the ritual of medicine," says the reseacher, Ted Kaptchuk, at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center and Harvard Medical School in Boston.

Kaptchuk has done further FMRI research to identify the neural pathways that correspond to the placebo effect. He believes this may eventually result in a class of drugs that can mimic the placebo effect.

MEDICINE IS RITUAL – RITUAL IS MEDICINE!

Medical Rituals

Waiting room – ritual space

The White Coat - a ritual garment

Nurse brings patient to exam room: Ritual ushering into sacred space

The exam: a ritual

The prescription: sacred document given in a ritual manner

BEING INTENTIONAL ABOUT MEDICAL RITUAL

- Welcome your patient into your treatment space with intentionality as if ushering them into a "ritual" space.
- Place an "altar" with electric flicker candles and "offerings" from nature – sea shells, rocks, sage bundles, etc. – in your treatment space.
- When a patient asks you a question, look the patient in the eyes, pause for just an extra moment, and then respond... infuse micro-moments of sacred silence into your patient contacts.
- What else can you do to evoke the healing power of the ritual aspects of your work? in ways that are natural and appropriate for you and your patients?

Take-Home Message

- Spiritual and religious beliefs and practices impact health and health outcomes
- Communicating about beliefs is a crosscultural skill (needing practice!)
- Refer patient to appropriate chaplaincy resource as needed
- How can you refine the ritual aspects of your patient care, in order to maximize their healing potential?

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