



## How do I help someone ...

...with spiritual distress?

### What is spirituality?

Spirituality is the core of our being'. The Apostle Paul suggests it is our 'inner being' (Eph 3:16 I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being...) This verse says a lot. For the committed follower of Christ, God uses His Spirit to strengthen our spirit – our inner being; the part of our life that is central to our purpose and existence.

### So, what is spiritual distress?

We spend a lot of time thinking about our, or another person's spirituality, something central to them which helps them, if it is in a healthy state, to achieve comfort and peace of mind. Often healthy spirituality can be

tempered by an experience of spiritual distress. This happens when a person finds that circumstances change and they become very distressed in their spirituality, i.e. what is central to their being.

We always have to keep in mind what a broad understanding of spirituality is. It includes a number of domains. It involves our connection (in varying degrees) with our individual self, to others, to something higher or bigger than ourselves (which may include religion and our relationship to God), nature, and creative expression. Distress may occur when there is a breakdown in the connection between any or all of these domains - depending on the severity.

### Some examples

We can become distressed within ourselves if we become unhappy with the way that we are performing in whatever activity we want to be successful. As a result of a number of things in which we do not perform to the best we can, we might lose our self-esteem which could create in us some despondency. Another example might be our relationship with God. In this situation, we might be distressed because

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we find that God does not seem to help us in the way we would like. Another example might be the way a person connects with nature. Many people who have a strong commitment to the land and spend their life in a way that relies on the closeness of themselves to nature, may find that when there is, for example, a natural calamity, their spirituality has become distressed because they are unable to connect in the way they have in the past. In this situation it would seem that nature has let them down.

**In younger people**, spiritual distress may develop when some of the person's aspirations are not met. They pray earnestly for something, yet it doesn't happen as soon as they would like, or, in some cases, not at all. The person can have their faith and confidence in God shattered and become quite stressed.

**In older people**, spiritual distress may show itself through such things as a loss of hope in the future, a lack of purpose and meaning in life, and a breakdown in family or other relationships. It may come about also during the period of prolonged chronic illness or acute illness. The person may question the value of their beliefs when there does not appear to be any way out of their current predicament.

### **What can we do about this?**

If we have a clear understanding of what we believe spirituality is in terms of the domains we mentioned above, then when we are talking to anyone, we can listen for the domain in which may seem to be having difficulty. Say for example, this is family relationships. We can explore that domain with the person so that by exploring their feelings about their situations, we may be able to help them reconnect with the family or the person with whom they are having difficulties. The aim of this would be to restore the connection and reduce their spiritual distress. The same approach could also be used to identify for example, the lack of connection a person has with God. Helping them to understand the relationship and talking through their breakdown can help them understand their position in the scheme of things and their distress might be reduced. The same can occur with their own self-esteem. Exploring with them the reason for their lack of self-esteem and trying to encourage their greater self-belief, may help them to reduce that spiritual distress which has become evident.

### **Some more details of other signs and symptoms and what we might do to help**

The most important thing to do is to **listen attentively**. This means concentration, and the occasional noise of affirmation that you are hearing what is being said. This might include an "Uh huh" or, an "Mmmm" or, "Is that what is happening?" or, "Is that how you feel?"

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Something more specific... (The following basic headings have been suggested on the website <https://www.crossroadshospice.com/hospice-palliative-care-blog/2018/october/10/signs-and-symptoms-of-spiritual-distress/> . The comments are contributed by the authors.

- **Feelings of anger or hopelessness**

Noone wants to feel angry. It is stressful, yet becoming angry probably happens to most of us at some time. This can often lead to a feeling of hopelessness – we want to get out of the anger feeling yet it stays with us. How do we help someone who seems like this to us? The first thing (as we often emphasise) is to listen to what the person is saying. We should try to explore the root cause of the person's anger with them. Often talking about something will help them to clarify their own thinking.

- **Feelings of depression and anxiety**

You will see by now that the essential aspect of helping in stressful situations is to listen to what's being said. What is the cause of the person's depression or anxiety? Is it health, family, work, etc.? Can you explore this with them? You may not be able to offer solutions but listening and showing interest can help immensely.

- **Difficulty sleeping**

This can often be traced back to depression and anxiety. You know the situation – we have all been there. We toss and turn, get up, go back to bed; walk around ... What is the root cause of this anxiety?

- **Feeling abandoned by God**

This can be debilitating. A not uncommon situation with believers is that we are determined that something should happen, and we pray about it. This might be an illness; a job application; a wish for a close personal relationship with someone; pregnancy and children. Yet, it doesn't happen. We can think – “What is the point of praying. God doesn't hear my prayer. He hasn't given me what I asked for”! In the case of illness, it may be that we are not returned to health the way we would like. It may be that our pain is immense, and it is not being reduced, despite our earnest, sincere prayer.

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How do we help? Listen and offer to pray with them. Sometimes, in these situations a person finds it very difficult to pray for themselves. We can offer to pray with them. Often praying and holding hands (depending on circumstances) can be a wonderful help to someone. We might use the words that they would like to use but have difficulty in finding themselves.

And, of course, in the days of digital media, a telephone, text or media message, or an email prayer can be helpful. The advantage of this in our helping is that firstly, we are placing ourselves in God's hands and secondly, we are showing practically that we care.

- Questioning the meaning of life or suffering

"Why bother!" is a phrase we sometimes hear. A person is depressed that their efforts are not 'rewarded' with their wishes not granted. This phrase seems to be more prevalent nowadays, especially when it appears that society is becoming more unkind, uncaring and more violent.

- Questioning beliefs or sudden doubt in spiritual or religious beliefs

A negative response to our prayers can often lead to a questioning of our fundamental belief in God and His Word. Things don't go the way we would like. We might suddenly see something in the Bible that may explain something in a very different light than what we have been used to. We may see some event befalling a friend that is catastrophic for them. We can ask, "Why has God allowed this to happen to such a wonderful person?" And, nowadays, we often hear the question, "Why does God allow so much suffering in the world?" This goes back to a fundamental understanding of Scripture and God's purpose. We need to understand the Scriptures to see what answers God provides.

- Asking why this situation occurred

Something happens in a person's life and we do not know why. For example, a friend has a son who dies. He is a young husband and father. There is no apparent reason for his death. The son was exemplary in his behaviour. He was an up and coming faithful Christian and potentially, was going to be a strong leader in his church community. Or, a young wife and mother may have been diagnosed with a terminal illness with the potential of leaving her headband and twin 2 year old children behind. What can we do?

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- Seeking spiritual help or guidance

It is important that we talk over our concerns with another respected person who has the same hope and beliefs as we do, if we can. This may not always be possible so it may be good to discuss your issues with a qualified counsellor. While such a person may not have the same spiritual foundations as we have, he or she is trained to listen to their client and not be judgemental. They may recommend something with which you may not agree. But you do not have to accept their advice. On the whole trained counselling professionals will listen to you and try to reach a situation that will be helpful to you.

### In conclusion

Spiritual distress is not uncommon. Sometimes people may not want to discuss it as they may feel that it is an admission of weakness that they “do not want others to know about”. However, kind, compassionate listeners will not be judgemental but they may be able to offer some perspectives and help, in prayer that can assist you in reducing your distress.

