

# Spirituality and Health



“I used to think spirituality was only for religious people or people who are dying...so I was surprised by how much better I felt after talking to the spiritual care worker at the hospital about my diagnosis and fears – and we didn’t talk about religion at all!”

**Jenny**  
**Diagnosed with breast cancer**

## What is spirituality?

There is no one definition for spirituality. Spirituality may differ for each person because it is determined by each person’s perspective and understanding. Spiritual advisors take into account the individuality of each person in order to meet them where they are in terms of their definition of spirituality and religion. Generally, spirituality is manifested in our beliefs, religious or not, our values and our rituals.



## How does this affect me?

You may find that you are struggling with stress or feelings of anger, confusion, fear and sadness around your cancer diagnosis and treatment. Most patients feel all or some of these emotions at various times. You may be struggling with hard questions like why me? Am I going to die? Or you might be concerned about people around you, asking yourself how they will manage if you aren’t around. These are big questions—it is not unusual to look for meaning or purpose in life following a cancer diagnosis. A sense of spiritual distress can be brought about at many different points of the cancer journey. For example at diagnosis, at setbacks or complications, or pain from treatment. You may feel spiritual distress when treatment recommendations go against your beliefs. Health care involves the whole person, mind, body and spirit. Your healthcare team will not only help to heal your body, but they are also interested in your overall wellbeing. This includes your spiritual health and you can ask for their support in facing all of your

concerns. Better physical wellbeing can be achieved with better spiritual wellbeing.



### How can I explore the impact of my illness on my sense of meaning and purpose?

Serious illness can bring us face to face with many of life's deeper questions. You may find yourself struggling with questions about how cancer has impacted your sense of self, your role within your family, your beliefs and your closest relationships. The following suggested actions may help you think about these questions:

- Speak with the hospital's Spiritual Care Professional, see [What help do I need?](#) for more details.
- Speak with community members. These can be from whatever religious, spiritual, or community traditions speak to you.
- Write in a diary about the questions you have and what is troubling you.
- Make or view art or music.



## What help do I need?

Sometimes it can be difficult to speak to those close to you about your concerns. It can be easier to speak to a trained professional you can confide in. The spiritual care practitioner in your healthcare team is specially trained to work with people in hospital. They can help you, and your family members, sort through your ideas, doubts and beliefs.

Spiritual care practitioners can offer many things to help you with your inner struggles or questions:

- Listening without judgement
- Providing support and encouragement when needed
- Help finding inner strengths and resources
- Working with beliefs and values
- Support in making difficult decisions
- Facilitation of religious rituals and prayers, if desired
- Contact with other clergy and leaders from faith groups as needed



## Where can I find help?



### Your healthcare team

Your healthcare team may already include a spiritual care practitioner. If not, you can request a referral. They can facilitate the expression of your concerns and emotions regardless of race, colour, culture, belief system, gender, or sexual orientation.



### Canadian Cancer Society

The [CancerConnection.ca](https://www.cancerconnection.ca) online community provides a forum to connect with other people with cancer and loved ones to share their experiences.



### Quebec Cancer Foundation

The Foundation provides a [resource directory](#) where you can search for the organizations near you offering a variety of services including spiritual care, home help, lodging, transportation, and other supportive resources.



### What can I do to look after myself?

Relaxation strategies can help you focus your mind and reduce physical tensions to bring you to a state of well-being. You can experience health benefits by reducing the stress you feel. Here are a few strategies you can try to see what works for you:



## Practice Relaxation Strategies

Taking care of yourself by finding ways to relax can help your mind and body. This can lead to better sleep and reduced stress. These easy relaxation strategies can be done anywhere!

- Even a few minutes of deep breathing can help your body relax. Try breathing exercises such as slow, deep, counted breathing.
- **Progressive muscle relaxation.** This involves tensing and relaxing a muscle, or groups of muscles, one at a time.
- **Guided imagery or visualization.** Imagine being in a place that makes you feel calm in real life. You can use a recording to guide your visualization or find help from a trained instructor.
- **Massage therapy.** Use a certified massage therapist who has experience working with cancer patients.
- For more information see [Relaxation strategies](#).

## Resources

For more information on spirituality/faith, check out the resources below.

[Canadian Cancer Society – Spirituality and cancer](#)

[MUHC – Care for the mind, body and spirit of each cancer patient](#)

[CHUM – Les soins spirituels](#)

## Acknowledgement of sources

The content of this document has been adapted from the following sources:

- BC Cancer. Spiritual health. 2020.
- Canadian Cancer Society. Life after cancer treatment. 2018.
- Canadian Cancer Society. Spirituality and cancer. 2020.
- CHUM. Les soins spirituels.
- Nova Scotia Cancer Care Program. Spiritual care. 2018.
- Puchalski, CM. Spirituality in the cancer trajectory. 2012.
- University Health Network. Spiritual care. 2019.

## Healthcare professional endorsement

The content of this document has been reviewed and approved by a team of healthcare professionals and clinical experts.

## Disclaimer

Please note that this fact sheet is not intended as a substitute for consultation with a healthcare professional. If you have questions about your health, or any medical issue, you should contact a healthcare professional right away. You should not delay seeking medical advice, or disregard professional medical advice, because of information in this fact sheet. Before beginning any health treatment, always consult your doctor. All care has been taken to ensure that the information contained in this document is accurate at the time of publication. e-IMPAQc is not responsible for any injury or damage to persons or property arising out of, or related to, any use of the fact sheet, or because of any errors or omissions.

## **Reproduction and copyright**

Any reproduction or distribution, in whole or in part, of this factsheet is prohibited without obtaining prior written consent of the e-IMPAQc project lead. Permission can be obtained by writing to [e-impaqc@mcgill.ca](mailto:e-impaqc@mcgill.ca).

**Last updated:** May 30, 2022