

Mindfulness on the Cancer Unit

Acknowledging Our Fears and Allowing God
To Work

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THE SETTING

- 1976-1978
- St. Johns Hospital, Santa Monica, CA
- Asked why I should get the position of first oncology social worker? “Besides my experience in medicine, neurology, and in-patient psychiatry, I have a close relationship with God and I believe that will help me deal with cancer, dying, and loss, and will bless my relationships with patients and family members.”



MINDFULNESS

- Turning within
- Breathing deeply and slowly
- Taking a scan of your body tension
- Assessing your emotions
- Asking God to help you when you feel helpless
- Divine intervention

Harry

- 59 years old, husband, father, brother
- Dying of metastatic abdominal cancer
- Recently readmitted to the hospital on his birthday
- His brother requested me to see him
- No one has been able to talk about him dying; everyone is depressed

How Am I Feeling?

- Sad:
 - What can I get Harry for his birthday?
 - What would be “good enough” for him?
 - I love Harry and he is dying.
- Worried:
 - Harry has never talked about dying.

How Is My Body Feeling?

- Agitated:
 - My stomach is churning.
 - My heart is pounding.
- Uptight:
 - My muscles are tight.
 - My mind is struggling to find answers.

Brother Asks Me To See Harry

- Everyone in the family is depressed.
- No one will tell him the truth. They avoid his questions about dying.
- I am feeling helpless.
- Harry wants someone to tell him the truth.

My Conversation With Harry

- Harry is hooked up to a machine that is pumping his stomach.
- I sit down and hold his hand.
- Harry: “I think this is it. I think I am dying.”
- I ask him, “Do you believe in life after death?”
- “No, do you?”
- “Yes, and that’s why I have been so sad for you. I can’t imagine facing death and thinking that it is ‘the end.’

HARRY'S DILEMMA

- “Other patients of mine who believe in life after death are less depressed. They are looking forward to their new life.”
- “I am not a religious man. I never attended synagogue.”
- “But Harry, your family tells me you are a very spiritual man: You have loved everyone, you have given freely, and helped those in need. Going to synagogue does not make a person good. Your actions show you are a godly man.”
- “In spite of myself, I am beginning to consider the possibility of life after death. It’s a comforting, good thought.” Tears were streaming down his face.

THE SPIRIT'S INTERVENTION


- “Harry, I wondered what to give you for your birthday and I asked God to give me an idea.
- He suggested I read you a Psalm. May I?”
- “I would love to hear it.”

Psalm 139

“O Lord, You have examined my heart and know everything about me. You know when I sit or stand. When far away You know my every thought.

You chart the path ahead of me, and tell me where to stop and rest.


Every moment, You know where I am. You know what I am going to say before I even say it. You both precede and follow me, and place Your hand of blessing on my head.”



“I can never be lost to Your Spirit! ... If I go up to heaven, You are there; if I go down to the place of the dead, You are there.

If I ride the morning winds to the farthest oceans, even there Your hand will guide me, Your strength will support me.

If I try to hide in the darkness, the night becomes light around me. For even darkness cannot hide from God....”



“You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body,
and knit them together in my mother’s womb....
You were there while I was being formed in utter
seclusion!

You saw me before I was born and scheduled each
day of my life before I began to breathe...

How precious it is, Lord, to realize that You are
thinking about me constantly....”

HARRY'S REACTION

- When I finished reading, Harry was crying and said: “That is the most beautiful writing I have ever heard.”
- At that point, his wife, brother, son, and daughter-in-law came into the room and we shared our discussion. Everyone began crying and started talking openly about death.
- Tension and drawn faces were replaced by peace and openness, tears of sadness and farewell.

FOLLOW UP

- Harry died two days later, very much at peace.
- His family were very sad, but at peace.
- I was grateful the Lord used me to shepherd Harry into the next life.

IN LOVING MEMORY OF HARRY



SYLVIA

- Nurses requested me to see Sylvia – who was crying and depressed
- I walked into her room and saw the frightened sad face of a little girl – who looked like her heart would break
- She had the face and figure of a young girl
- Mother of 3 children, ages 20, 18, 15 and wife of a devoted husband
- She had been fighting Leukemia for fourteen years and now she was dying

MINDFULNESS CHECK-IN


- “Lord, I don’t know this patient and she is in great distress - there is no time to lose.
- Help me be “in the moment” and trust that You will guide me.
- Calm my body and open my heart to hear Your leading.”

OUR CONVERSATION

- “The doctor told me I am dying,” she sobbed.
- “Do you feel like you are dying?”
- “No, I can’t be. I’ve been fighting so hard, for so long....I try to be positive. I know my mind has a lot of power over my body.....I go to Science of the Mind church.”


SYLVIA'S DILEMMA

- “Are you afraid to die?”
- “No, but I worry about my husband and my children. What will they do if I die? How will they handle it?”
- For their sakes, I feel I should keep fighting to live.
- I don't want them to pity me, but I want them to be with me. I want their love.”

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- “I am very weak now. I don’t have much energy.
 - I have pulled away from my children lately and only have enough energy for my husband. Is that wrong?”
 - I explained that withdrawing is a normal reaction at “the end.” Dying patients need to conserve their energy for the journey ahead.


SPIRIT'S INSPIRATION


- “I’ll come right back. I have a Scripture I’d like to share with you.
- 1 Corinthians 15, 35-44:
- “But someone may ask, ‘How will the dead be brought back to life again? What kind of bodies will they have?’ You will find the answer in your own garden!

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- “When you put a seed into the ground it doesn’t grow into a plant until it ‘dies’ first. And when the green shoot comes up out of the seed, it is very different from the seed you first planted.....
 - In the same way, our earthly bodies which die and decay are very different than the bodies we shall have....”

SYLVIA'S REACTION

- “Isn’t that beautiful, I have received that very same passage many times. I do believe it.
- I have had some very special experiences which I have been afraid to share, for fear people would think I am crazy.
- Many times when I am alone, I have felt a hand touch my head and stroke my hair. The energy has flowed from my head to my feet and I have felt such peace.”

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- I assured her that the Lord visits us in very special ways and I was sure it was His hand.
 - “Oh, yes, I do believe. I am so glad you have come today. I can see a golden aura of light around you. Yes, we both know the same thing.”
 - I feel certain the Lord wanted me to confirm His presence, to reassure her she was not crazy.

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- As I left the room, I said, “I know you are very special to the Lord. He does not show Himself so concretely to many people. He must love you very, very much.”
 - She smiled at me and her face was transformed. She was glowing with radiance and peace and joy.

FOLLOW UP

- The following 2 days I worked with Sylvia's husband and children, who had been afraid to cry or express their feelings – for fear of hurting her.
- I encouraged them to grieve openly with her and to let her grieve with them; to comfort each other.

THE SPIRIT MOVED QUICKLY WITH THIS FAMILY

- They cried and talked about her dying, confirmed their love, cradled one another.
- Sylvia's daughter gave her permission to "let go."
- Sylvia slipped into a coma the next day and peacefully drifted off.
- The family and I planned a beautiful memorial in the backyard of her home, surrounded by the pillows she had made and her beloved dog.

IN LOVING MEMORY OF SYLVIA



REFERENCES

- Links for research on the effects of prayer on health:
- www.cancer.org/treatment/treatmentsandsideeffects/complementaryandalternativemedicine/mindbodyandspirit/spirituality-and-prayer
- www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22894887
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