Spirituality, Illness Beliefs and Illness Suffering: Clinical Ideas for Loving and Healing Conversations

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ABSTRACT

Health care has become influenced by societal beliefs that overly values happiness and is unable to acknowledge and witness illness suffering. This has led our language with patients and families to change from inquiring and empathizing about suffering to adopting more upbeat language like ‘coping’, ‘adapting’, and ‘adjusting’. Even harsher expectations of dealing with illness suffering such as “it is what it is”; and “you need to accept your illness” have crept into our conversations when caring for patients/families. Language can inadvertently trigger spiritual suffering. Language changes have been coupled with unhelpful interventions in our caring of patients/families. This change in our professional language does not reflect our patients/families experience with illness suffering and particularly their spiritual suffering. It also interferes with potential healing conversations.

This presentation will encourage us to reflect and consider (re)embracing conversations of illness suffering with our patients/families that will open space to spiritual healing. From research and clinical practice, it has been determined that when suffering is softened, spiritual healing can most often occur. Healing conversations need to include: illness suffering being acknowledged, social support is available, constraining beliefs are challenged; being in the present moment is encouraged; offering curious compassion and hope. Specific relational practices will be suggested that enable patients/families to move from a place of illness suffering to spiritual healing. Specifically, love needs to be the foundation of all therapeutic conversations with individuals, couples, and families in our care.

Keywords: Spirituality, healing conversations, illness suffering, illness beliefs