



Craig Hospital

Redefining Possible for People with Spinal Cord and Brain Injuries

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Spirituality

What's it all about?

Because spinal cord injury can be a life changing event, your whole way of life—including your spirituality—is challenged. You may find yourself questioning your life goals, work, responsibilities to your spouse or children, parents and friends. While there are five dimensions that comprise good health—social, physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual—spirituality is the one dimension that is usually overlooked. It is probably the least talked about and addressed in hospitals and other health care settings. It is also the dimension that may be the most controversial and misunderstood.

Just what do we mean by “spiritual?”

At birth, when you inhaled your first breath, you became a spiritual being. But, what does that mean? The spiritual interacts with the other dimensions of life. It operates much like the traffic reports we get during rush hour. It senses what is going on within us. We can choose to ignore the “reports” or we can listen to them. More than that, just as a light needs electricity to work, so does the human body need the spirit to function.

Some people use the words “spiritual” and “religious” interchangeably, but spirituality is really a broad term; religious ideas and concerns are only a part of a much larger concept. So, while some people’s spirituality is very much related to God or a higher power and might include worship in a church, synagogue, or mosque, for others spirituality may have nothing to do with religion and things like praying or going to church. Some examples of spiritual activities are meditation, traveling, reading, learning or doing something new, focusing on nature, and becoming deeply moved by music.

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Believe it or not, there is evidence...

It is through our efforts to understand life's contradictions, problems, or paradoxes that our spiritual expressions and growth can occur. Spirituality, for some people, plays an important part in quality of life, coping, and the search for meaning in crises. Generally, researchers have also found that spiritual well-being and physical well-being are related. They have learned that such activities as attending religious meetings, meditating and praying, helping others through volunteer work, and being part of a support group or network are all related to health.

In fact, some recent studies demonstrated that those who attended religious services on a regular basis had lower death rates than those who attended infrequently, or those who did not attend religious services at all. One researcher concluded that those who didn't have "strengths or comforts from religion had almost three times the risk of dying within six months of surgery." Spirituality has been shown to buffer against life's stresses and to help stave off depression. Although this probably does not mean that non-churchgoers can greatly improve their health by starting to attend services, it does suggest that regular, long-term attendance at religious services can make a positive difference.

Meditation and Prayer

These two activities are closely related and are an integral part of spirituality: meditation and prayer.

Meditation — which is not necessarily a religious activity — is an act of sitting quietly and alone in a quiet place with your eyes closed, paying attention to your breathing and repeating a word or phrase during the breathing cycle. It is a way of paying attention to your inner, or spiritual, self.

Fifteen years ago, Dr. Herbert Benson, in *The Relaxation Response*, showed that relaxation techniques such as meditation have immense physical benefits – like lowered blood pressure and a reduction of heart disease. More recently, the National Institute of Health Technology Assessment panel found evidence that relaxation techniques reduce chronic pain in a variety of medical conditions as well.

Prayer is reaching out to a higher power on behalf of yourself or others. It is something you might do regularly or in times of stress, pain, or joy. It can be an act of spiritual communication with another about your own or another's pain or problems, or when you are thankful for something good in your own or another's life.

Given that 92% of Americans believe in God or some other 'higher power' (2010 Gallup Poll), it is not surprising that many patients think their physicians should address spiritual issues as part of medical care. Dr. Larry Dossey, in his book, *Healing Words*, describes research that shows that prayer has an impact on a range of bodily ailments and illnesses: heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, cancer, and gastrointestinal disease.

While there is no conclusive proof of the power of prayer to actually heal, there is enough credible evidence to show that prayer has positive effects on the one who is prayed for as well as the one who prays.

Spirituality

What does this mean for you?

You may not consider yourself a spiritual person. You may not have attended religious services for a long time or even prayed for a long time. Perhaps, at the time of your accident and recovery you uttered a prayer or two –what some people call “Foxhole Religion.” That’s fairly normal. Indeed, in times of war or other national, regional, or personal crises, churches fill with people trying to find help and meaning in the midst of the terrible chaos that has invaded their lives.

So, what would be the advantages of thinking about or working on that spiritual dimension of your life? The advantages may be stress reduction, fewer aches and pains, a higher level of quality of life, and a better ability to cope with disability. These are not guaranteed, but many people have found positive results by focusing on the spiritual.

What can you do?

The following activities might help you to begin or continue your journey into spirituality.

- Try meditation. Pick up Benson’s book *The Relaxation Response* or his newest, *Beyond the Relaxation Response: How to Harness the Healing Power of Your Personal Beliefs*. Try your local library or an internet site like Amazon.com.
- Find a church, synagogue, or mosque that is accessible and see if it meets your spiritual needs. Places of worship provide strong social support to people with a variety of physical, emotional and spiritual needs.
- Volunteer for a religious organization or for other non-profit organizations. Helping others is also a protective factor.
- Read books on spirituality, meditation, or find audio tapes on related subjects. If you have a computer and internet access, look for sites that deal with spiritual concerns.
- Develop some spiritual disciplines. This might include prayer, Bible reading, study, or meditation.
- Take a course in meditation or spirituality at a local college, “Free” University, library, or religious organization.
- Find a support group or a network of people who have similar concerns or problems.
- Pray. Focus on your relationship with God, your family and friends, and your needs and concerns.
- Tell your doctor about your physical and spiritual needs. You could be surprised about his or her openness to spiritual needs.

You may find that one or more of these activities will get you in touch with your spiritual dimension and help you in your work at keeping well. Remember: research is already finding considerable evidence that spiritual practices help promote better health-related behavior and lifestyles; they lower your risk for

illnesses and strengthen your well-being. They also provide social support which lessens stress and reinforces your ability to cope with stress.

Other resources:

Healing Words: The Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine, by Larry Dossey, MD. Harper and Collins Publishers, 1993.

Recovering the Soul: A Scientific and Spiritual Search, by Larry Dossey, MD. Bantam Books, 1989.

Head First: the Biology of Hope and the Healing Power of the Human Spirit, by Norman Cousins. Penguin Books, 1990.

Anatomy of an Illness (revised edition), by Norman Cousins. Bantam Books, 1991.

Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth, by Richard Foster. Harper Publishers, 1988.

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