

Spiritual Support

Rabbi Mackenzie Zev Reynolds is a palliative care chaplain at Mount Sinai in New York City.

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Can you describe your role?

I am a member of a palliative care team who has clinical training in providing spiritual care and emotional support to patients, family and friends. Many of us are ordained, but not all. We work multireligiously, including with secular and nonreligious people, to provide wide-ranging support.

How do you work as a team?

Your oncology team might call in the palliative care team for additional support for pain and other symptoms. The team generally includes physicians, nurses, social workers and chaplains. You can find us in inpatient cancer settings and, increasingly, in outpatient settings.

How do you support people with cancer?

Cancer affects a person's sense of self extremely deeply. We give space for people to find, name and express whatever is going on for them emotionally. I work with people to explore what matters most, what's been lost, what's hoped for and feared and what sustains them.

When should someone with cancer seek out a chaplain?

At any point that you have things you want to explore. You might be experiencing a lot more anxiety than normal. It might be during a transition, such as diagnosis, going into remission, having a relapse or facing a change in treatment.

Do you ever refer a patient to a mental health professional?

We work in tandem with social workers, psychologists and psychiatrists. In cases where the support needed goes beyond our clinical training and capacity, we refer to one of these [mental health professionals], usually in collaboration with our palliative care teams.

Do you work with people of differing faiths and beliefs?

I work with everybody. I see the work that I do as being both existential and spiritual. Some people are not religious or spiritual at all, and some people are religious in practice but maybe not

particularly theistic.

The work is around what matters most. What are the positive sources of support and strength? What do people hope and fear? Are there any regular practices people use that nurture and sustain them?

For people who are religious or spiritual, I might incorporate prayer, meditation or spiritual reflection into the sessions. You may want to engage in tradition-specific practices or prayers that you need some support with. I can facilitate those or find the appropriate person who can do so. For people who are not religious or spiritual, I offer space for reflection and expression. I'm led by what's helpful for a person. There may be creative practices, mindfulness exercises, music or dancing.

How can someone find a palliative care chaplain?

Start with your provider. You might also check with the chaplaincy office of any hospital to which you are admitted. Spiritual care services are part of inpatient care—patients are not billed for these conversations. When chaplaincy is available [on an] outpatient [basis], it is also similarly not billed.

What inspires you?

Being able to collaborate with my team members to support our patients as holistically as possible. We make sure that all aspects of a person's self are really present in the minds of the treatment team.