

Hospice Chaplains and Spiritual Care

Misconceptions and Facts

Rev. 10/2021

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Chaplains are an important part of the team of professionals who care for Montgomery Hospice and Prince George's Hospice patients. Some of those patients, however, are reluctant to speak with the chaplain due to their misconceptions or preconceived notions, or simply because they lack understanding of the purpose of a hospice chaplain.

So, what does a hospice chaplain do?

Misconception: Hospice chaplains only provide support to patients who are religious, and they only talk about religious or spiritual matters.

FACT: Hospice chaplains provide compassionate, nonjudgmental support to people of all faiths and people of no faith, no matter what they believe or don't believe. Chaplains seek to identify and connect to the strengths that are most meaningful to each patient and, incidentally, rarely talk about religion or theology. Some people enjoy a good academic discussion now and then, but as people near death, more often their focus turns to their life and those they love. The chaplain follows the patient's lead and lets the patient do the talking.

Misconception: A hospice chaplain's role is to take the place of the patient's priest, pastor, rabbi or imam.

FACT: Hospice chaplains supplement but do not replace the support that the patient already receives from a spiritual leader. Specializing in end-of-life care, however, means that hospice chaplains bring an additional layer of education and comfort to this particular stage of life.

Misconception: A chaplain's main goal is to proselytize and convert patients to their own religious beliefs.

FACT: No, no, no. A hundred times no. Chaplains do not represent any religious belief system when they enter a patient's home; their goal is to support and respect whatever beliefs that patient has or doesn't have. In fact, chaplains often find themselves in the position of protecting patients from well-meaning friends, relatives or caregivers whose mission is to "save" or convert the patient before they die. Chaplains always advocate for a patient's beliefs to be respected.

Misconception: A visit from the chaplain means that death is imminent.

FACT: Hospice chaplains are about relationship, companionship, getting to know patients and having the privilege of walking with them along their way. The chaplain and the rest of the hospice team are there to support a person in their living and in their dying, to be a familiar, caring face as death comes closer and not a stranger who only shows up at the time of death.

Misconception: A chaplain's purpose with patients is to read scripture and pray with them.

FACT: For patients for whom prayer and scripture are meaningful, the chaplain is well-prepared and honored to be a support in this way, but a chaplain does so much more. Chaplains listen with acceptance and care. Chaplains listen with an ear to the spiritual and utilize a person's beliefs about day-to-day living and about death and dying. Chaplains provide a presence of acceptance and calm and meet patients where they are. Chaplains provide validation of patients' accomplishments and affirmation of their being. Chaplains allow patients to struggle with difficult feelings and to express their greatest joys. Chaplains normalize the messiness of life and offer opportunities for non-judgmental reflection; chaplains enable patients to see their own life story and to celebrate all of it.

What chaplains do	Stay calm
Listen with an open heart	Allow hard questions to be voiced
Focus on the patient	Explore beliefs and meaning
Are "present" and open	Allow for lighthearted moments, laugh
Listen with acceptance	Advocate for a patient's wishes
Allow expressions of anger, guilt, blame	Honor the patient's own wisdom
Allow for silence	LOVE, LISTEN, RESPECT
Pray if desired	
Accept tears as a normal response	

Patients often express surprise as their misconceptions dissolve and they come to realize that chaplain visits can "gentle their journey" in so many unforeseen and positive ways.



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