

# Spirituality and healing



**Shireen Pesznecker spent a** month at Eastside Hospital in Redmond about a year ago, recovering from several major surgeries. “There was a point when I was so sick I wanted to die,” she remembers. “Then a nurse came to me in the middle of the night and I asked if he would pray with me. He did, and from then on I knew that I was going to make it and be OK.”

In a *Newsweek* poll conducted a few years ago, 53 percent of participants said they’ve personally relied on religious faith to help them get through a major illness or health problem. Eighty-four percent said praying for others can have a positive effect on their recovery. And 72 percent believe that prayer can cure people who are given no chance of survival by medical science.

A growing body of research, including more than 1,000 scientific studies in the last few decades, has examined the relationship between faith and healing. Many studies indicate that prayer and faith can speed recovery from a wide variety of health problems. Other studies show no connection between prayer and healing. Nobody disputes, however, that in times of difficulty, spirituality provides enormous comfort to a large number of people.

Group Health otolaryngologist Dennis Elonka, MD, says spirituality most often comes up in conversations with patients confronting serious illnesses, such as cancer or heart disease, but he welcomes the discussion at any time. “We don’t usually spend a lot of time talking about spiritual beliefs, but knowing that those beliefs are important to patients helps me better treat the whole person, not just the disease.”

Still, Dr. Elonka treads lightly when it comes to spirituality. “I wait for my patients to give me a cue. If they mention that spirituality is important to them, or that they have people praying for them, I’ll let them

About 15 years ago, only three medical schools in the United States offered courses on spirituality. Today, classes are offered at more than 100 medical schools—including the University of Washington.

know that I believe faith and prayer can be very helpful.”

“We’re all made up of physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual components,” says Ben Haslund, MD, a Group Health surgeon. “Western medicine typically addresses the physical component, focusing on

minimizing the experience of illness. But that only gets us part of the way toward optimizing health. People also need to feel loved and engaged, mentally challenged and rewarded, and spiritually connected and nurtured.”

Spiritual beliefs give people a sense that there is meaning to life, that they’re here for a purpose, and that they have something to hope for, says Stephen Smith, MD, whose Group Health practice focuses on nursing home and hospice patients. “Hope is essential in the healing process—whether it’s hope for a full recovery, or even for a peaceful death.”

Elizabeth Fowler, MD, who retired from Group Health last month, recalls a patient with colon cancer who had outlasted her life expectancy by a couple of years. “She wasn’t affiliated with an organized religion, but she had a real zest for life and a huge sense of spirit. And her body benefited from that.”

Dr. Fowler believes that it’s important for clinicians to be open to a patient’s spiritual beliefs. “To me, part of the richness of practicing medicine is being able to care for people wherever they are on the spiritual or cultural spectrum.”—by *Ginny Smith*