Assessing Spirituality
Healthcare Organizations Must Address
Their Employees' Spiritual Needs

By William J. Bazan & Daniel Dwyer, PhD

Our mission as healthcare workers and leaders is to remove or minimize pain and suffering in our patients. We are devoted to identifying healthcare needs and meeting them. We usually address these needs proactively, even aggressively.

However, we also face another patient population—our own colleagues. How do we, and other healthcare organizations, respond to our employees and associates undergoing crises about the meaning and purpose of life? Before we answer this question, let us first consider the case histories of Frank and Natalie. Their pain epitomizes a growing challenge that Catholic providers should be prepared to meet in our changing healthcare environment.

Frank is a 41-year-old chief operating officer (COO) of a major acute care hospital in a large midwestern city. He has been very successful in his career, moving quickly up the management and administrative ladder. Married to Elizabeth and the father of three children, he lives in an exclusive neighborhood in a beautiful home with scenic views of the suburban countryside. The children attend private schools, and Elizabeth works part-time as a substitute teacher at the local parochial school. They are both active in community work.

Neither feels comfortable with the time they spend alone together, however, and although they are doing well economically, their relationship is deteriorating. Both sense they are drinking too much. Frank is anxious to go to work in the morning and stays late at night. As the COO, he receives much attention and support at work. Although Elizabeth understands his responsibilities and appreciates the family's lifestyle, she has become suspicious of Frank's relationships with women.

Frank is plagued by physical complaints: gastrointestinal disorders, low back pain, and severe headaches. During these spells, he becomes resentful of demands from Elizabeth and his children.

Summary

Catholic institutions need to respond to their managers, physicians, and other employees experiencing deep pain about the meaning and purpose of life. Initial approaches to people in spiritual distress include “tough love,” codependence, and assistance programs, along with prayer and compassion.

But a different approach that gives people space and freedom to pursue their spiritual search and ask questions to discover deeper meaning in life may be more effective. It allows them to accept that they are where they need to be on their spiritual journey, even if that place is painful.

Healthcare organizations can, through their structures and culture, create environments that promote this spiritual work. The entire organization must be spiritually grounded. Organizations can develop specific programs to address employees' spiritual yearnings, including:

- Private spiritual direction or companionship
- Formal mentoring
- Renewal days or retreats
- Spirituality programs for professionals

Organizations must consider spirituality in recruiting, uphold policies on spirituality, and ensure physicians receive the same spiritual support as other employees. Resources should be allocated for expanded spiritual services, quiet places for reflection, meditation and related classes, traditional retreats, and qualified personnel.
Another approach sees a person’s stress as a starting point for growth.

**Natalie: Work and Emotional Stress**

Natalie is a highly esteemed pediatrician; physicians and nurses take their children to her because they admire her work and compassion. She always wanted to be a “baby doctor.” Divorced for three years, she has two daughters, one of whom has an eating disorder.

Recently Natalie has been gripped with a profound sense of loneliness and sadness. After years of feeling confident in her abilities as a physician, she finds herself questioning her skills and decisions. Continual fatigue makes her feel like she is climbing a mountain with a 150-pound pack on her back. She is eating and drinking more than usual, and all she wants to do is sleep. Her physician friends recommend Prozac, and her women friends suggest a trip to Florida. She has started going to church again but sits in the pew fighting back tears at her sense of meaninglessness in her life.

**Conventional Approaches**

You probably know someone like Frank or Natalie. Perhaps you have felt as they do. Not completely physical or emotional, their condition is spiritual discomfort, a feeling of living without meaning and purpose.

As healthcare providers, we often initially respond in the following ways to help individuals such as Frank and Natalie in our organizations.

- **Apply “tough love.”** We challenge an individual such as Natalie to reconsider all she has achieved: status, money, power, and an opportunity to serve. Rather than feeling sorry for herself, we say, she should appreciate her good fortune and responsibilities and either reframe her negative thinking or resign.

- **Codependence/support for the dysfunctional behavior.** The organization may send the troubled person to yet another conference or management retreat at a plush resort or organize a counseling program for spouses of executive and middle managers.

- **Employee assistance programs.** Courses in time management and programs for impaired professionals are commonly offered.

- **Compassion and prayer.** Hoping to help colleagues, leaders rely on prayers and compassion to ease their pain. These approaches convey the need to support and assist persons unable to deal with their distress. But all these efforts are external to the person, directed at the individual’s deficits and current needs.

**A Spiritual Approach**

In another approach, paradoxical in nature, nothing is done other than to give individuals the space and freedom to be wherever they need to be and to do whatever the situation calls them to do. Specific programs to assist persons with this approach are discussed later. Acknowledging the person’s distress as a starting point for growth, this response honors pain, protects discomfort, and listens to the person’s feelings. This spiritual approach creates an opportunity for the individual to ask two important and interrelated questions: What is life asking of me? and What am I asking of life?

A person must ask these questions to discover deeper meaning in life. Using these questions as a prism through which to assess life’s experiences helps the individual to consider certain spiritual lessons that may apply to a spiritual journey.

**Spiritual Lessons**

To take a spiritual approach requires individuals to recognize that they are exactly where they need to be. This means that they must accept their spiritual distress as necessary in their search for meaning and purpose in life. They may not like where they are; they may want to change or remove the disturbing circumstances and leave a marriage or change a job. However, framing the situation in these terms helps individuals mobilize efforts to change the external factors and ignore their internal state of
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Organizations can create environments that enhance or impede spiritual work. What is the responsibility of a Catholic healthcare institution? What should be done, what is being done currently, and what more could be done for these individuals? Organizations may not directly meet the spiritual needs of their employees, but they create environments that enhance or impede their people's inner spiritual work. See the Box on p. 23 to determine how well your organization integrates spiritual needs into its structure. Ask the question, How do I experience my own organizational culture?

MISSION AND SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

Catholic healthcare organizations have a responsibility to their associates, whether physicians, managers, clinicians, or housekeepers, to respond to their need for spiritual development for the following reasons:

- In his teachings and through his example, Christ calls Catholic providers to a ministry that addresses the physical, emotional, and spiritual health of coworkers, medical staffs, and board members, as well as patients and communities.
- High-quality services cannot be delivered by organizations or people who are not spiritually grounded. Also, it is not enough to have a select group of people in mission effectiveness or pastoral care who are presumed to be "spiritually fit." Burnout distances caregivers from the recipients of their care, and the entire organization must be committed to employees' spiritual needs to assist in preventing these negative responses. Leadership without meaning and purpose can focus on the technical features of institutions, resulting in a unilateral response to internal and external challenges when relational power is needed.
- An intuitive application of the framework outlined in the Box may identify the opportunity for an organizational response to spiritual needs. However, the Franks and Natalies experiencing distress may not realize that they are on a spiritual...
journey and may not allow themselves to attend to
their own pain or relate to their work situation or
family. Healthcare organizations know they can
address employees' healthcare needs through
smoking cessation clinics, exercise facilities, and
stress management classes. Spiritual distress and
yearning call for an organizational response as well.

The opportunity to provide spiritual support
for employees and associates is challenging. Organizations can easily become confused about
the differences between spirituality and religion,
between a call to develop a context for a spiritual
practice and a sincere desire to spread the Good
News. The critical difference is that spirituality
can be described as a search for meaning and pur-
pose that is developmental in nature. A person
can clarify the different roles of spirituality and
religion in this way: My religious tradition, with
its symbols, teachings, and liturgical expressions,
is meant to serve my spiritual nature. Therefore
organizational leaders must be well integrated
spiritually to undertake the challenge of creating a
space where people can develop their own style
and practice of spirituality.

Some Catholic organizations have been doing
this work for decades and, more recently, have
been developing specific programs directed
toward addressing employees' spiritual yearnings.
Private Guidance An informal but effective structure
has been to provide private spiritual direction or a
form of spiritual companionship under the aus-
pices of the pastoral care/mission effectiveness
program. For many years, employees and physi-
cians have sought out this support when they
became aware of their need for spiritual guidance.
This service depends on the availability of qualified
professionals, usually women and men religious,
who become known through word of mouth.

Formal Mentoring Programs These programs relate
mission values to basic spiritual concepts. Lay
associates are recruited to these programs to
extend the presence of sponsoring communities.
Along with a mission values orientation, partici-
pants are offered opportunities to identify and
develop a spiritual practice that fits their unique
situation and capabilities.

Renewal Days or Staff Retreats Employees spend
time away from the workplace in remote settings
for reflection and inspiration under the guidance
of facilitators. Usually providing more didactic
discussion than time for reflection, these pro-
grams increase awareness of spiritual matters,
especially as they relate to the sponsor’s tradit-
tions. For example, Vincentian or Franciscan spir-
ituality may be offered so that participants can
better understand the healthcare mission, rather
than adopt a particular spiritual practice.

Spirituality Programs for Professionals These have
been developed to address the particular orienta-
tion of nurses or physicians. For example, two
programs are offered under the auspices of the
Catholic Health Association of Wisconsin. RISEN
(Re-Investing Spirituality and Ethics in Networks)
was initiated in 1985 and includes a three-part
program of mentor training, an intensive orienta-
tion and practicum in personal spirituality, and a
seminar in relational ethics. Medicine in Search of
Meaning is a weekend retreat for physicians that

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<th>ASSESSMENT OF HOW WELL AN ORGANIZATION'S CULTURE MEETS EMPLOYEES' SPIRITUAL NEEDS</th>
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<td>I. Assess where your organization is on a scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high) in promoting spiritual integration within each of the following structures:</td>
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<td>• Meetings ____</td>
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<td>• Educational programming ____</td>
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<td>• Board meetings ____</td>
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<td>• Performance appraisals ____</td>
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<td>• Partnership talks ____</td>
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<td>• Strategic planning ____</td>
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<td>• Budgeting process ____</td>
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<th>II. Assess where your organization falls on a continuum ranging from complete spiritual disintegration to full spiritual integration, according to your experiences:</th>
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<td>Spiritual Disintegration ——— Spiritual Integration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hopelessness</td>
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<td>Unsympathetic</td>
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<td>Fear</td>
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<td>Isolation</td>
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allows participants to reexamine their motivation for entering the medical profession and to consider current barriers to and opportunities for sustaining that drive. Structured with case studies and spiritual lessons, the program assists physicians to rekindle meaning and purpose in their professional and personal lives.

These efforts represent significant organizational responses to creating environments and cultures where spiritual practice and development can occur. The success of these programs suggests that additional efforts can expand their potential.

Organizations do not need to make people spiritual; spirituality does not develop from the outside. Even though everyone is born with a spiritual nature—a center of personal power—one’s spiritual capacity is often hidden, rather like a financial treasure growing in a savings account one does not know one has. Once they discover that they have this treasure, they can access its energy and power.

What types of resources can organizations provide to foster and nurture that spiritual treasure inherent in its employees? How would a healthcare organization change if all its people had a clear connection to their source of personal power, their spiritual nature and capacity? This certainly would help physicians, leaders, managers, and employees renew themselves and their commitment to their work.

**Opportunities for Spiritual Growth**

Healthcare organizations should ask the following questions about their structures and how they relate to issues of spirituality:

- Do recruiting and hiring practices consider the spirituality of candidates for employment, especially in executive leadership positions? Does the organization ask candidates to describe their spiritual practices and what they might need to sustain them?
- Does the organization uphold a stated policy on spirituality, a statement that affirms and supports developing and maintaining a spiritual practice? Are resources allocated for the necessary personnel and programs to implement this policy?
- What type of spiritual support is offered to physicians? Does the organization perceive them as being different and not needing what it offers to other employees?

These questions can help to identify issues and opportunities within already existing structures for personal and cultural enhancements. More extensive efforts with greater resource requirements might consist of the following efforts for both physicians and organizational personnel:

- Active promotion and underwriting of spiritual direction or mentor services
- Provision of quiet space within or near the institution for meditation, prayer, and reflection
- Classes on meditation, yoga, or tai chi
- A benefit plan that includes therapeutic massage, integration of body structures, and other physical programs
- An organized weekend or week-long retreats—traditional silent retreats with facilitators in appropriate retreat centers, not golf courses or expensive resorts
- An active, ongoing search for individuals who have a calling to provide spiritual companionship to colleagues, with training and support to extend their ministries

Catholic providers and healthcare employees are exactly where they need to be on their journey toward more spiritually developed and sustaining organizations. It may seem ironic that at a time when organizations are struggling with questions about Catholic identity, their leaders would be called to look inward at the spiritual foundation of their organizations and acknowledge the spiritual needs of all employees and associates. They are where they need to be, however, and accepting this can be the starting point of promoting the spiritual development of their colleagues in need.