



A Case in Point:

Conversations at Midnight is a true story about the conversations between a dying husband, Herb, and his wife, Kay. Herb learns to come to terms with human mortality by calling death out of the shadows and making its acquaintance. As he struggles for the answers to his many questions, he undergoes a spiritual reawakening. The following is some of their dialogue on spirituality.

Herb: Even now, as I reach into myself for some greater meaning, some sense of larger purpose to my life, to all life, I'm still uncomfortable, out of my element, when I use the word *spiritual*. How can I find the spiritual core I am so avidly seeking as the dying process carries me along?

Kay: Your spiritual journey is evolving and you are finding answers within yourself. Even though you are not certain that they are the right answers, you are gaining trust and confidence in pursuing your inner journey. What is so gratifying to me is what I believe is your genuine discovery of an inner world by just following a process of deeper thought and curiosity. Your ability to see beauty in facing death, of being moved by it, is recognition of the preciousness of this experience.

H: I only wish I had been able to reflect on these issues earlier in life. In my world there was no teacher, no guidance, no insight into the meaning of life and death.

K: Now, you are really taking a significant, courageous step to change your life. You can't think about death and dying without changing your life. It makes it so much easier to face fear, to face the inevitable question, "Why me, now?" Now you think you are safe and can come to a place where there is nothing to fear. It makes such a difference in the quality of your living and in the quality of your dying.

Case study adapted from:

Conversations at Midnight

Coming to Terms with Dying and Death

By Herbert & Kay Kramer

Caring for a Terminally-Ill Loved One: Belief Systems – Faith & Spirituality



Webster defines **Faith** as "a belief and trust in and loyalty to God; a belief in the traditional doctrines of a religion; a firm belief in something for which there is no proof; complete trust." **Spirituality** in the context of belief systems is defined as "sensitivity or attachment to religious values; the quality or state of being spiritual." This distinction between faith and spirituality will not be explicitly differentiated in the following discussion. The term *spirituality* is more general and could be said to encompass faith and therefore will be used to represent both in the following discussion.

The Search for Life's Meaning – For many the approach of death inspires a deep search for the meaning and purpose of life. Terminally ill loved ones will often struggle with questions about their mortality and whether a greater power exists, forcing them to grapple with issues they had previously ignored. This search is often guided by religious and philosophical beliefs. Even if the dying and their families do not have a specific religious or philosophical belief system, counseling or discussions with chaplains, hospice volunteers, or others with special empathy and insight, may prove comforting.

Facing death, as well as making the sacrifices involved in caregiving, offers countless opportunities to discover meaning. When all else falls away, the personal meaning we attribute to our lives is perhaps the most essential and valuable part of our individual humanness.

Spirituality & Psychological Well-Being – The importance of spirituality as a central component of the psychological well-being of the dying person is increasingly recognized by medical & hospice professionals. While many individuals manage to avoid feeling distressed as they approach death, others experience feelings of depression, hopelessness, and anxiety. Because such psychological distresses happen frequently at the end of life, studies have shown that developing a sense of spiritual well-being can be an effective method of helping the dying to cope. The dying process affects people at all levels of their being. In times when the individual can feel most alone and afraid, the act of providing spiritual comfort satisfies a very basic, yet very important human need.

The role of spiritual care is most often fulfilled by chaplains, ministers, priests, rabbis, hospice volunteers, and other religious advisers to hospice or hospital palliative care teams. Spiritual care programs have also been found to be useful in helping caregivers and family members of the dying person to deal with the impending death of their loved one.

Compassionate Spiritual Support – Perhaps the most important aspect of providing compassionate spiritual care for your dying loved one is to support and encourage their existing belief system. This is not a time to convert them to a new religion or bring into question why they do or don't believe in a specific spiritual tradition. Be aware that questions may be posed by the dying person with the hope that their present beliefs and expectations will be reinforced by your answers.

Spiritual Care & Death Rituals – Spiritual caring also embraces those close to the dying person and extends beyond their death. Sensitive end-of-life care has traditionally made provision for religious rituals, such as the "last rites" of the Catholic Church, the Islamic rituals around the time of death, or the after-death and burial practices of the Jewish faith. Such rituals can bring a sense of peace to the dying person and allow the grieving process to begin for those left behind.

If a man wishes to be sure of the road he treads on, he must close his eyes and walk in the dark.

St. John of the Cross (1542-1591)