What Makes Us Whole?

Stacy M. Fischer, MD

We began to realize that for our existence to hold any value, it must end. To live meaningful lives, we must die and not return. The one human flaw that you spend your lifetimes distressing over … Mortality is the one thing … Well, it’s the one thing that makes you whole.

—Number Six, *Battlestar Galactica*

When I met MC he was 28 years old, and despite his great height, he could not have weighed more than 115 lbs. He had a venting gastric tube to resolve the acute symptoms of his complicated upper gastrointestinal obstruction. I came with the support of my full interdisciplinary palliative care team—a palliative care certified social worker, a chaplain, a nurse practitioner, and myself as the physician on the team. His distress was palpable when we entered the room. He was sitting in bed silently crying while his mother stood silently by the bedside looking out the window at the snow-covered mountains to the west of us. He started explaining that he had done everything asked of him, extensive complex surgeries, chemotherapy, and surveillance after treatment. He could not wrap his head around how or why he now sat here in this hospital bed, metastatic disease consuming his frail body, unable to tolerate even a sip of water.

We talked together for more than an hour. We listened, we empathized, we validated, and we grieved. We came back. Every time I saw him, I had the benefit of at least one other team member. To sit in the presence of his profound existential and spiritual distress was humbling, challenging, and exhausting. He often asked about physician-assisted suicide (not legal in Colorado). At one point, he made a comment focusing his frail body, unable to tolerate even a sip of water.

The field of palliative care research in spirituality and existential distress remains in its infancy. This is at least, in part, due to the challenges of obtaining funding to pursue this research. Focused funding opportunities in the form of Request for Applications or Program Announcements (RFAs) from the Veterans Administration or National Institute of Nursing Research could drive the field forward. Although the American Psychosocial Oncology Association incorporates the distress associated with spiritual or existential suffering within their core mission, other specialty associations such as the American Heart Association and American Thoracic Society should also advocate for the importance of addressing spiritual distress. Developing and testing interventions that address spiritual and existential distress should be at the forefront of this research agenda, for the current tested interventions are limited in their efficacy and scalability. Promising, theory-based interventions such as Dignity Therapy demonstrated subjective value and improvement, but did not have a significant impact on validated measures of dignity, meaning, and distress. This may have been due to a ceiling effect for participants had very low baseline distress. Later smaller trials showed some improvement but effects extinguish. Meaning-centered psychotherapy demonstrated significant improvements in measures of distress, some of which are sustained. However, results are not easily generalizable as enrollment rates were very low and drop-out rates very high, suggesting that the time-intensive intervention may not

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Stacy M. Fischer, MD

General Internal Medicine, University of Colorado Denver, Aurora, Colorado.
be easily scalable or accessible to most patients. A potentially promising avenue of research combines some of the meaning-centered work of Breitbart and a single dose administration of psilocybin (a purified extract of the psychedelic mushroom) in cancer patients. This intervention is both brief and scalable, and with publication of results from the two Phase 2 trials, we will learn whether there is preliminary objective evidence of the effectiveness and whether those effects are sustained.

What I had to offer to MC was empathy, compassionate listening, and, in lieu of physician-assisted suicide, the assurance that palliative sedation was an option if his suffering became unbearable. MC eventually was discharged from the hospital to home hospice. He remained obstructed and despite his hope to enjoy a single bite of a Big Mac®, he remained intolerant of any intake by mouth. I took comfort knowing that he would have the ongoing spiritual support through hospice care. I hope he found a sense of peace in his last days of life.

References