

Spiritual Aspect of Patient Care

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ILLNESS IS an inseparable thing of man's life. It is accompanied by pain and suffering. Man has tried many tricks to treat diseases and discovered many theories like therapies, medical science, homeopathy, unani cure, naturopathy, magnetic therapy, and invented drugs and surgeries. The changing concept of health brought the idea of change in a person's behaviour related to his psychological disturbance due to illness. Psychotherapy to control the behaviour of a person during illness works as a supportive system. In order to help the patient cope with experience of illness and treatment, another aspect of man's life is emphasised, and that is the spiritual aspect.

Concept of a Man

Man is unique in himself. He is physically unique because there is only one 'Me'. He is mentally unique because he can think and affirm, morally unique because he can choose, and spiritually unique because he can believe and pray. Although man is born free, his freedom has a fence, his choice has condition, his actions meet reactions. Between freedom and fence, choice and condition, action and reaction, he tries to enjoy his existence, accepting challenges of life within his limits. He has no control over the nature and it makes him to think of beyond his limits of supreme being a supernatural power.

According to Psychology, man is physical and his thinking and emotions are explained by physical-chemical reactions. Man has a mind and religion says that man has a spirit, and non-physical or extra-physical component help man to choose between good and bad.

Concept of Health

A person's health status is ever changing. The traditional meaning of health

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is "absence from disease". But the changing concept of health is psychological dysfunctioning of a part and its effect on the whole human being. The primitive man attributed disease, suffering and other calamities to the wrath of God. This theory is known as "supernatural theory of disease". Invasion of body from evil spirits or influence of planets are seen as cause of ill-health. In the modern age, these theories and beliefs are still held.

Concept of Patient Care

Patient care began as service to God and sympathy for the suffering. This feeling still remains. Patient care was rendered by women. Because of advancement in medical science and nursing practices, the traditional role of nurse in providing care, nurture, comfort continues to broaden as it encompasses health maintenance and encourages strategies for self-care. Nursing profession is directed towards meeting man's health and illness care needs.

Concept of Spirituality

To be thoughtful and contemplative about one's existence, to accept challenges of one's life, to seek and find the answer to personal question is to be spiritual. For many people, spirituality is expressed through identification with a particular religion. Cultural influence, spiritual value and beliefs direct the individual's behaviour and approach to health problems and health care in general. Spirituality often gets challenged during the experience of sickness. Sickness either enhances the man's faith in supernatural power or creates disbelief.

Concept of Healing

Healing is gradual and it is done by nature. Norman Vincent Peale in 'Today' says, "Man is healed in two ways: through science of medicine and surgery, and science of faith and prayer". The medical and other therapies act as

supportive system for a person to get well but he comes to the state of wellness by nature itself. Dr Elmer Hess says: "A physician who walks into the sick room is not alone. He can only minister to the ailing person with the material tools of scientific medicine. His faith in higher power does the rest". Florence Nightingale considered the goal of nursing as putting 'the patient in the best possible condition for nature to act upon'.

Illness Effects on Patient

Disease or illness is as inseparable to life as death. Myriad have been the diseases, old and new, to which a man has been subjected from the beginning. Many diseases end soon. But all are painful and unbearable. Some prefer to remain with the host till death. Some result in deformity, disfigurement and disability. Illness not only brings pain and suffering but also affects the whole man.

Physical factors: Exhaustion, pain and suffering, chemical changes in tissue results in physical and mental exhaustion; loss of appetite and sleep disturb the nutritional status, thus leaving no energy for activities. It results in impaired thinking, confusion, irritation, anxiety and depression.

Emotional factors: Shock of illness, specially when the illness is not anticipated, e.g., accident, chronic illness, incurable diseases like cancer, illnesses resulting in disfigurement and deformity. It not only ruins his plans and routine life but brings a drastic change which itself is a threat to patient. It leaves him in confusion leading to anxiety and depression.

Fear: There is uncertainty attached to all types of illness, acute or chronic, mild or grave. Every illness poses a threat to life and a fear of death. Disfigurement creates feelings of rejection. Illness also poses a threat to financial status causing dependency, specially if the person is earning, on expenses of medicines and surgery.

Psychological Factors

Total failure complex: Illness gives the feeling of inability to accomplish the task, ambition and fulfilment of desires in life. It gives him the feeling of failure in life. It also leads to depression and anxiety. So he sees a very bleak future.

Guilt feelings: Guilt and depression go together. Guilt feelings can result into a suicidal affair. It is very difficult to remove from the patient. These can be caused by others' opinion or one's own immaturity.

Social Factors

Isolation: Illness alters the social life of a person. He feels lonely during illness. He may feel loneliness even in a crowded place, like a hospital. It poses a threat to his security. Loneliness breeds doubts, despair and unbelief. It becomes a perfect incubator for anxiety and depression.

These are a few important but severe effects of illness on a person which has an adverse effect on already altered physical and psychological as well as pathological state of a patient.

Body's Response to Illness

Human body is wonderfully created. It has a very strong adaptive capacity. During illness, a body tends to adapt and adjust with the changes. It does so in two ways. The defence mechanisms are protective mechanisms that protect the body from harm and danger, e.g., immune response protects the body from invasion of organisms. Protective mechanisms are also depicted by the restriction or inhibition of activity of a particular part and also with signs like pain and raised body temperature. Then, there are compensatory mechanisms whose function is to restore the balance as much as possible. These may give rise to signs and symptoms which show failure of some part.

Importance of Adaptive Mechanisms

The adaptive mechanisms help the patient to cope with experiences of illness. Unless the patient is unconscious, he can actively participate in adaptive

measures. A person's adaptation is influenced by socio-cultural factors as well as by his educational and economic background, values, norms, beliefs of traditional traits, religious values, etc. Adaptive mechanisms of a body are supported by scientific tools of medicine, surgery, various therapies, social support, etc. Therapies help in the coping ability of the patient. Such efforts include strategies to modify the situation that causes stress or modifies the meaning of situation to reduce the stress and manage its symptoms. One such strategy is tapping and utilising the spiritual therapy.

Importance of Spiritual Therapy

The spiritual therapy mainly acts as a diversional therapy during illness. Suffering of any kind produces character which produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us. Hope is essential to life. The spiritual support gives a hope in life. It ensures courage to face the consequences of illness because it directs the thinking of a patient in a positive direction. It helps to control emotions and the whole behaviour of a patient is directed and controlled. The main function of spiritual support is to help the patient to go through the experience of illness patiently, courageously and confidently, whether it leads to recovery or otherwise.

Spiritual Aspects of Care

It includes a brief spiritual assessment of a patient. In order to get the complete information, a nurse has to focus her attention on three areas:

a) The extent to which religion is a part of an individual's life. How much a person realises or believes in supernatural powers. His way of life, thoughts may or may not be dominated by the religion. He may be a believer or non-believer.

b) Religious belief related to the individual's perception of health and illness. His perception about illness may be based on supernatural theory of disease or otherwise; or he may believe that health is maintained by the effect of adapting and using good health habits.

c) Religious practices he uses in his daily life. He may or may not begin the day with prayers and pooja. He may or may not be strictly practising rituals of prayers. He may be practising on occasions, like Id, Christmas, Diwali or only during the difficult days

Assessment of spiritual life is very essential to identify the solution and resources to be tapped for supportive therapy. It also gives a clue whether any factor is influencing the illness and treatment adversely. Assessment will also help to provide essential things to meet his spiritual requirement.

On the basis of religious background, information resources can be tapped:

- Arrange for the visit of religious heads, e.g., priest and minister, while the patient is sick. It is said that one should send for his minister as he sends for the doctor.

- Arrange to provide material on particular religion to be read or seen by the patient.

- Arrange or allow the patient to practise his religious rituals if patient is in habit of following them in routine life.

- Discuss with patient if he is interested.

- Encourage the family members.

- Establish and maintain a serene environment.

- Help the patient to think of pleasant things in his life.

- Help the patient to establish a disciplined routine while he is sick.

All these things are possible only when a nurse herself has a positive attitude towards life. Though she may be secular, yet she may have respect for each and every religion and know the basics of every religion. It is possible when a nurse herself is a believer. Then only she can guide the patient in spiritual matters and use this therapy for patient care individually.

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