

The “Healing” Pillow: A Practical Spiritual Tool for Coping with Illness

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ABSTRACT: *The illness journey is a difficult and complex voyage that creates a detour on a person's life path. Illness impacts the patient's total being: body, mind, and spirit. Moreover, ripple effects of illness draw in family members, caregivers, friends, and health and mental health care professionals as they try to help the patient. From the unsettling moments of receiving an initial diagnosis to the lengthy wandering through today's high tech medical labyrinth, patients experience a host of vulnerable emotions, confusion, and isolation that can depress their spirits. It becomes a daily challenge to sustain one's spirits and preserve identity in the midst of illness. Exploring how spirituality can be a resource in illness situations is a useful pursuit. Helping patients create a down-to-earth spiritual toolbox can strengthen their perceived coping and renew their spirits. Having a repertoire of practices that soothe, distract, and inspire can counter anxiety and pain, while actively using the tools stimulates patients in their own healing. While spiritual tools do not cure illness, they can sustain patients' spirits to persist in coping efforts. The author introduces a “Healing” Pillow as one of many coping tools in a repertoire of resources for patients. The pillow has aesthetic images, inspirational words, and the special quality of touch to comfort the patient. Following a description of the concept and origin of the pillow, the author shares brief vignettes from her own experience to illustrate the impact of the pillow on patients and their families. In addition, sources for readings to accompany the pillow are suggested.*

Key words: *Spirituality, religion, coping tools, touch, social support*

INTRODUCTION

Illness plays no favorites in attacking people of all races, creeds, socioeconomic and cultural groups, and its ripple effects entangle patients, family members, caregivers, friends, and the professionals who care for them. Over 130 million people in America face chronic illness (Jackson, 2009). Millions struggle with injury and loss, as well as the over 45,000 returning troops plagued with continuing physical wounds and emotional trauma (Institute of Medicine, 2013). Over 65 million Americans provide care to elderly, disabled, and chronically ill family members (Margolis, 2013). A sudden diagnosis of illness creates vulnerability, confusion, and isolation, generating a range of difficult emotions and spiritual questions. Patients are thrown off balance and forced to follow a detour off their life path into the complex high tech medical system, which may feel like wandering alone in a vast wilderness without a map, iPhone, or working GPS.

A Yiddish proverb says it simply: “A small hole in the body produces a greater hole in the soul.” The illness experience is more than the disease. Twentieth century theologian and social activist Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote: “Sickness ...is a crisis of the total person, not only a physical disorder. There is a spiritual dimension to sickness.” (Heschel, 1964). Illness is a time when people feel alone, helpless, and in need of comfort and support. It is a time when patients may search outside themselves for answers and help because the task of sustaining one's spirits and preserving identity during illness is a daily challenge.

A Practical Spiritual Perspective suggests that spirituality can play a significant role in the process of healing from illness. Healing, from the word, “holos,” refers to becoming more whole, or closing the hole in the soul created by illness. Healing can be attained through the provision of comfort, reducing isolation, finding new meaning,

restoring relationships, personal empowerment, or accessing spiritual connections. Healing can occur even in the absence of cure, such as during terminal illness, when patients are able to find peace through reconciling relationships at the end of life.

The term Practical Spirituality (Meyerstein, 2014) references both inner and outer spiritual experiences as well as down-to-earth behavioral practices. While people vary greatly in their relationship to religion and spirituality, the majority of Americans feel religion and spirituality are important in their lives (Wicker, 2009). Over 350 studies show that both religion and spirituality exert a beneficial effect on health (Larson, 2001; Levin, 2001).

Patients can benefit from a “down-to-earth spiritual toolbox” (Meyerstein, 2014) containing a wide repertoire of resources from varied traditions such as complementary and alternative medicine (acupuncture, homeopathy, massage, yoga), creative expression (art, humor, journaling, music, poetry), inspirational wisdom, meditative approaches (mindfulness and guided imagery), nature, Psalms, prayer, ritual, stories and texts, and *tikkun olam* (repairing the world). Cultural differences may be a factor influencing patients' preferences regarding spiritual care and tools (Schultz et al., 2014). Even people who don't consider themselves religious may find spiritual inspiration through pathways such as nature, creative expression, meditation, or music. The Healing Pillow is just one of the many concrete and pragmatic tools that can provide physical soothing, hopeful inspiration, and a spiritual connection. Moreover, it addresses patients' sense of isolation in the world of the sick by offering touch and a message that others care (Figure 1).

DESCRIPTION OF THE PILLOW

On my hospital bed following major surgery, I clutched a silky pillow with a beautiful picture of Jerusalem on it, along with the

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Figure 1. The Healing Pillow

words, “*El na refa na la*” inscribed in Hebrew. These words mean “please, God, heal her please,” and come from the very first personal prayer in the Hebrew Bible. When Moses’ sister Miriam fell ill, he cried out these words on her behalf. I also gazed at the “*hamsa*,” or Middle Eastern symbol for protection against the evil eye and for good luck. Being in a vulnerable place emotionally and physically, these little symbols took on greater significance. They expressed my dependence on a Higher Power, my hopes for recovery, and a spiritual connection to my religious tradition and community.

The healing pillow “works” to provide physical comfort, hope, and spiritual inspiration. Accompanied by several prayers and readings from the patient’s religious tradition or culture, the pillow gives spiritual support to help patients feel more connected to their community. The psychological and physiological benefits of prayer have made it the most common unconventional healing practice in America (Oz, 1998; Dossey, 1993). While intercessory prayer remains controversial (Levin, 2001), there is no doubt that the patient’s spirits are boosted upon learning that others are reaching out in a caring way and keeping the patient in their thoughts and prayers. The pillow communicates the all-important message: “I am here for you,” because presence is one of the greatest gifts we can give to another person (Meyerstein, 1994).

Decades of research emphasize how social support operates as a buffer to illness (Berkman & Syme, 1979; Cohen, 1990; Sagan, 1990). When we reach for, receive, and even give social support to others, protective hormones are released in us that stimulate resilience (McGonigal, 2013). Touching is literally good for our health (Dworkin-McDaniel, 2011). During illness some patients may feel “untouchable” because of their disease, or experience isolation when others, even doctors, keep their distance. The pillow creates a sense of touch and offers gentle comfort to rest one’s head or feet on or to hold closely.

Admittedly, the pillow is a physical object and not a substitute for human contact, but having a pillow to hug can help a patient deal with being alone for many hours in a sterile hospital room, especially a patient without visitors. The pillow is like a “long distance hug” or transitional object to remind the patient that others care. In situations of terminal illness, the pillow can be a primal way of “holding on” to something concrete. For example, one of the first patients to whom we gave a pillow was a man dying in the hospital. He held it during his last days for security and to calm himself. After his death, his young, grieving daughter would clutch the pillow for comfort because it reminded her of her attachment to her father.

In selecting the readings to accompany the pillow, it is important to take patients’ cultural background and level of spirituality into account so that the messages are suitable and respectful. For patients with a religious or spiritual bent, the prayers can strengthen an already supportive connection to a Higher Power, tradition, or religious community. A powerful yet simple prayer from Biblical tradition is “*El na refa na la*,” or “Please God, heal her (him) please.” The author’s selection of readings stems from her familiarity with Biblical traditions.

However, prayers can be taken from any inspirational source that may be comforting and fitting for the patient. For those who are non-religious, it is advisable to select readings that are more secular and universal in nature. Longer readings can be included separately, along with the pillow. One can find pillows with designs of nature, growing leaves, birds, butterflies, or attractive patterns to use and then calligraph the prayer(s) or sayings on them. The pillow has been given to religious, spiritual, and secular patients, and the overwhelming response by recipients seems to be “feeling touched” and appreciating the concern shown to them in their difficult situation.

Brief Vignettes

#1 After sending a healing pillow inscribed with a beautiful prayer from the Virgin Mary to the poor Indian Juan Diego, to a devoutly Catholic friend, the patient’s wife called with the following message: “We were so touched to receive the beautiful pillow and its inscription. It will certainly help Benito as he struggles with his medical condition. But I have to tell you how magical the pillow really was. The exact day we received the pillow, we were sitting with our closest friends whose adult child had just committed suicide, so we gave them the pillow for comfort.” Months later, the same Catholic friend wrote after the sudden illness and death of their son: “We are in deep grieving, but our neighbors came over and brought back the pillow, because they knew we needed it more in our time of grief.” And several years later, when Benito died from his progressive illness, his widow wrote to me: “The pillow is still offering comfort to me in our home.”

#2 The sudden diagnosis of an illness throws patient and family off balance as they struggle to obtain multiple opinions, anxiously wait for results, and feel overwhelmed by having to make major decisions about treatment. Friends often don’t know what to do to help. This note came from the mother of a young woman struck by late stage lymphoma: “From the moment of diagnosis you swooped in and provided comfort and “*chizuk*” (strength) by bringing the beautiful turquoise pillow, the color of our daughter’s eyes, with the butterfly on it. While my daughter wasn’t so into the spiritual readings, for me as her mother, they were so helpful. Reading the Power of Hope (Maurice Lamm) raised my spirits for the long journey ahead.”

#3 A religious man diagnosed with glioblastoma, received the pillow shortly after his shocking diagnosis. The family placed the pillow on the couch in the center of the living room, where it was always present. The patient’s widow told me: “During his treatment, remission, and even after his final recurrence 4½ years later, we looked at the pillow every day, so did our children and grandchildren when they visited. It reminded us to not lose hope and it steadied our spirits.”

#4 A traditionally religious mental health professional facing significant hip and shoulder surgery, wrote: “I keep your pillow by my side and it is quite a conversation piece in the hospital and rehab facility. It fascinated my Muslim doctor and my Orthodox Jewish occupational therapist. You have no idea how much your beautiful healing pillow and comforting words and prayers lessened my anxiety and lifted my spirits, even more than ordinary good wishes

or flowers. It was practical, and besides helping me, you are helping others. I will try to do the same when I get better. Moreover, the pillow gave me physical comfort through back support and helped me on my road to “*refuah shelaymah*” (full healing of body and spirit).

SUMMARY

Comfort is a universal need, not just during illness. It is important for healing in many situations, including injury, loss, trauma, and other crises that affect body and soul. Others have recognized the benefit of tangible physical objects such as blankets (“knitting us together in love” or “blanketed by kindness”). The Healing pillow is just one tool in a spiritual approach to illness that offers soothing, inspiration, and a feeling of being cared about to patients and families, who can always use additional support at a most difficult time in their lives.

About the Author

Israella Meyerstein, LCSW-C, LCMFT is a social worker and family therapist with forty years of experience helping families, couples, and individuals. She is in private practice in Baltimore, Maryland Her recently published book, BRIDGE TO HEALING; FINDING STRENGTH TO COPE WITH ILLNESS, offers comfort, insights, and practical spiritual coping tools to help patients, family members, caregivers, and health and mental health care professionals. www.bridge-to-healing.com

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