

# The Heart of Stress Management

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In my job as a full time nurse, stress management educator and guide, I devote my time to helping patients cope with the stresses of illness and their treatments. At my presentation at the conference I will share my “jewels of stress management” I have culled from over 20,000 inpatient contacts in a major academic medical center in Durham, North Carolina since 1990.

A couple of examples of the jewels I share are relaxation practice and spirituality. In the hospital everyone tells a patient to relax and don’t worry! but seldom is the patient (or family member) effectively taught how. I teach them how. To help focus the relaxation sessions I do, I perform a spiritual assessment. Frankly, if spirituality is important to a patient or client, it can be a valuable tool in stress management. It is easier than you think to include such an assessment in your care giving. Let me begin first with the relaxation I teach patients to use when they are dealing with an unwanted health problem or if they are in the limbo of waiting and not knowing.

The relaxation technique, involves 3 simple steps. The first is what I call, soft belly breathing. There are many names for conscious breathing relaxation, including relaxation breathing, abdominal breathing, soft abdominal breathing, mindful breathing, etc.

To get the idea, place your hand on your abdomen and softly breathe into it, so that it rises with the inhale and falls with the exhale. I encourage soft belly breathing because many, when they learn breathing techniques, make a lot of effort and push the abdominal muscles out. There is more force and effort than what is simply needed. Soft belly breathing, softly aims the breath into the belly, fully expanding the lungs and the palm of the hand and abdomen gently rise.

The second step of the relaxation involves, consciously feeling the contact with the bed (or the chair and floor) and let the surface support your weight. Let the bed or chair do the work, you don’t have to. Try this out.

The final step of the technique involves silently repeating a word or phrase to your self. Each patient is instructed to kindly and gently return to the word or phrase when they notice the mind wandering to thoughts, images, sounds, etc.

To assess the interest in spirituality, I ask, “Is religion or spirituality important to you? For some people it is and for some it isn’t. How about you?”

I find that I invariably get one of four answers to this assessment:

1. Yes. Or, yes, it is important to me.
2. Well, I don’t go to church but I do believe in God.
3. I’m not sure about God but I think there is something spiritual or a higher

power. Or, a statement that recognizes personal spiritual feelings.

4. No, not really.

## The right phrase

As part of this relaxation practice, I typically encourage the patient to select a soothing phrase to concentrate on. If the patient told me religion was important and they were Christian, I might suggest concentrating on a phrase like, “the Lord is my shepherd” or perhaps “God is with me.” I always ask if they are comfortable with any phrase I suggest.

Naturally, the key is to posit a phrase that fits his or her particular religion. If the person is Jewish, I suggest a Hebrew phrase. Shalom, (peace) or Shema Israel. (Hear Oh Israel). If the patient is Muslim, I suggest a Muslim phrase like La Il Allah ha. Il Allah hu. (There is no God but God.). And so on.

On the other hand, if the patient isn’t religious or spiritually inclined, I suggest a positive phrase such as Easy does it. Or I might ask the patient to choose a phrase that would be comforting, relaxing, and supportive. I have had many teenage patients choose the phrase I love my mom.

It is important to be very sensitive ethically about encouraging spirituality! Above all, it is best to avoid making any efforts to push a vulnerable patient or client to go along with your religious belief system or to shame a person who isn’t religious. I never challenge beliefs that a person finds to be of comfort. The goals are to relieve suffering, improve quality of life and improve physical functioning through stress management, not to convert or convince someone.

The only challenge with this spiritual assessment during my 15 years of clinical practice was from two patients who informed me they belonged to the Church of Satan. How would you respond? For each of these individuals, I suggested the phrase, “Easy does it.” They both liked that. I have had a couple of hospital chaplains who suggested I could have offered the phrase, “Go to hell,” as an option.

As I continue the stress management teaching after relaxation teaching and practice, spirituality as a coping strategy is encouraged based on the patient’s answer to the spirituality assessment. I practice in the Bible belt, so 90% of the patients I see say that religion or spirituality is important to them. Many have simply said God is the best stress management. For those who have little or no spiritual or religious inclination, as well as those that do, I have many other jewels of stress management to share, including behavioral medicine approaches, a listening ear without taking on the pain, compassion and clinical expertise gleaned from my 30 years of hospital work.

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