

Autism & Grief Project

Role of Spirituality & Religion Fact Sheet



Relying on spiritual and religious beliefs is a common way to cope with loss. An essential question in grief counseling is always: In what ways do your spiritual beliefs help or hinder you as you cope with your loss?

There is limited research on the spiritual or religious beliefs of individuals on the autism spectrum. What little research there is suggests that autistics vary in their spiritual and religious beliefs similar to those in the neurotypical population. Some may be highly religious while others may not follow traditional religious teachings but retain a deep spirituality. Many people, autistic and neurotypical, define themselves as agnostic or atheistic, and many find a deeply spiritual connection with nature. Spiritual and religious differences can exist within families, and those differences should be respected. No one should be forced to participate in religious activities that make them uncomfortable.

Having verbal skills is not a requirement for spirituality; those on the spectrum who are non-speaking may have a profound spirituality expressed in ways unique to them. For example, Abe Isanon (2001), the author of *Spirituality and the Autism Spectrum: Of Falling Sparrows* suggests that some adults on the autism spectrum may process and express their spirituality using pictures and symbols instead of words.

Some autistic adults interviewed in the process of building this website also said that while they were religious and wanted to be connected to a faith community, they had never felt welcome by that community and therefore avoided attending services.

Difference between Spirituality and Religion

The role of spirituality and religion in grief can be significant for some and completely insignificant for others. For many, loss can be a spiritual crisis that challenges meaning and connectedness. We may wonder why our loved one had to die, why they had to die the way they did, what happens after death, and what that means for us. These are all deeply spiritual questions.

Spiritual and religious beliefs can sometimes facilitate our ability to cope with the loss and at other times they can complicate our grief. There is a difference between spirituality and religion, although many people interpret them as the same.

Spirituality — Usually defined broadly as a way of finding meaning and connectedness in the world. We can be spiritual without adhering to a particular religious faith.

Religion — A set of beliefs and practices shared within a community of people. In some cases, our religion may solely define our spiritual beliefs and experiences.

Suggestions for Helping Your Autistic Loved One

Keeping in mind whatever method and depth of communication works best for your autistic loved one, you can explore their faith or religious beliefs as a resource to help with grief. The following strategies are based on support techniques for neurotypical individuals, and they can also be helpful for autistic adults:

- Beliefs — Religious beliefs may seem illogical to many autistic people who are concrete thinkers. If religious practice involves symbolic or supernatural rituals, it may be appropriate address these by asking: “Are there beliefs or things that people have said that confuse you?” “Are any of your beliefs troubling to you?”
- Practices — Most faith traditions use practices such as music and hymns, prayer, meditation, or reading scripture or other sacred words. “Are there some practices that you might want to try?”
- Rituals — All cultures and faith traditions have rituals around dying and death, which many find helpful in processing and expressing grief. Many faith practices and rituals have a repetitive quality that some autistic individuals may find comforting. You may want to ask “Is there a special way you would like to remember the person who died?”
- Other Aspects of Spirituality — Some may access spirituality in a number of ways, such as in nature, through pets and other animals, or with music and art. Help your loved one renew or discover new ways to connect with their spirituality. It may help to suggest spiritual connections. For example, you could ask, “Would you like listen to special music?”

Religious Language Can be Confusing

People in religious and/or spiritual settings may often say things that are confusing to an adult on the spectrum. This may include euphemisms like “He’s gone to a better place” or “She’s gone home to be with Jesus.” These are meant to be comforting, but may not be.

Unhelpful comments could include the line of thinking that the deceased person did something wrong and was being punished or that if they were more faithful, they would have been healed. Sometimes people are trying to answer their own questions of “Why?” a death happened or want to share their own reasoning about the death. Remember that asking “Why?” and lamenting are just as much a part of the grief process and of faith traditions, as are hope, presence, love, and comfort.

Supporting Someone with Limited Verbal Capacity

Spirituality can provide comfort after loss for anyone, but loss can also challenge long-held beliefs. To support spirituality when verbal words are not available:

- Observe differences in behavior as well as what seems to offer comfort as they adapt to the loss. Behavior is a form of communication, so allow them to inform you about your loved one's needs and how they are grieving.
- Demonstrate support through nonverbal expressions, such as touch, pictures, music, and rituals.
- Use appropriate communication techniques to explore feelings around death, death rituals, and spirituality.
- Seek assistance from a faith community or trusted clergyperson if appropriate. This website's section for clergy can help.
- Enlist the support of friends. With your loved one's permission and input, friends can be immensely helpful at this time.