



your story. **your** time. **your** wellbeing.

Resource 5:

What is Spiritual Listening?

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It is important to differentiate 'spiritual listening' from other talking therapies offered by healthcare professionals. Chaplains are **not** offering counselling or cognitive behavioural therapy or any kind of psychology, and the fact that many patients only come for one or two sessions emphasises this difference.

What is being offered is a quality of listening, offered without agenda apart from that of the patient, with no expected outcomes and thus completely person centred. Patients are encouraged to tell their story, and often this is all they need to do. To have someone listen to the issues they are struggling with is enough – the patient feels heard and is enabled to carry on. 'The patient talks, the Chaplain listens.' In this way a patient's felt response to transition and loss is normalised in a safe, non-judgemental space. Sometimes, in the telling of the story the patient hears themselves say what they need to hear, and he/she gains insight just from having put their story into words:

'I have just realised what I need to do – I have never thought about that before.'

'I have just heard the answer to my problem in what I have said.'

'Saying that made me hear and see my own story differently.'

Sometimes the story is very complex, with many different strands, and it can be the Chaplains' role to help the patient unravel some of these strands, to look at them in turn, and perhaps identify what some of their options are on their particular journey. This may involve change of future behaviour that contributes to their increased sense of wellbeing, but this will be something the patient comes to themselves. Chaplains help patients find coping mechanisms for life's difficult issues which may not change the situation but help change the response to it.

By listening to stories of loss and grief and listening to the existential questions of 'Why me?', 'What is the purpose?', 'What is the meaning of suffering?', 'Where is God?' Chaplains help the patient know that it is valid to ask these questions. Sitting alongside them as they ask them without pretending to have the answers, may help the patient to find their own inner resources to deal with their issues, and also find some hope and resolution and healing.

By listening to a patient's story Chaplains can make connections with other stories and offer therapeutic story telling as well as listening. The choice of relevant therapeutic stories is the diagnostic skill of the Chaplain and connections with other stories creates a space, where patients feel safe, connected and offers them time to reflect on their situation and make necessary changes to the way they are seeing and acting.

For a fuller description see pages 25-41 of Volume 16 2013 of the Scottish Journal of Healthcare Chaplaincy.