



AVILA INSTITUTE
of GERONTOLOGY, Inc.
Education for Compassionate Care



AN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE FROM THE AVILA INSTITUTE OF GERONTOLOGY

Six Mini-Lessons in Geriatric Spiritual Care

About the Avila Institute of Gerontology, Inc.

People in all stages of life deserve to be cared for with a person-centered approach. With this philosophy, our faculty bring years of academic expertise and compassionate hands-on care. As the educational arm for the Carmelite Sisters for the Aged and Infirm, our educational services thoroughly commit to quality and loving care in an atmosphere of respect for each human life. The Institute strives to present the most recent information to enhance the field of gerontology.

Invest in your employees and residents, and experience the difference that AIG will help you make in your facility. Learn more at www.avilainstitute.org.

Six Mini-Lessons in Geriatric Spiritual Care

In 2014, the Avila Institute published six mini-lessons with their email subscribers on geriatric spiritual care to celebrate their 10th Geriatric Spiritual Care Program to be held in 2015.

These lessons give a glimpse of the expansive content taught in the program. The first lesson is an introduction to what a spiritual caregiver is. The next five lessons instruct on one topic from each of the four modules and the clinical experience.

To learn more about the Geriatric Spiritual Care Certificate Program please visit our website www.avilainstitute.org.



Introduction - What is a Spiritual Caregiver?

A spiritual caregiver is someone who attends to the spiritual needs of people, in this case the elders we serve in long-term care. We all know how a life crisis can make people feel confusion, denial and despair. They feel that there is no meaning and can be overwhelmed with feelings of regret and remorse. As spiritual caregivers, we help people to understand these negative emotions and find forgiveness and acceptance.

*“Of one thing I am certain, the body is not the measure of healing, peace is the measure.”
– Phyllis McGinley*

As spiritual caregivers we must:

- Be there without judgment and with genuine interest and attentive listening.
- Be there to hear the pain and distress deep in the inner core of the person.
- Be there to help give voice to their pain – and feel heard and understood.
- Be there to help them feel their worth and dignity as human beings in a medical system that can so easily neglect and de-humanize the sick person.
- Be there, not as the one with answers, or easy solutions, but rather as one who can listen to the questions as the person struggles through his or her own personal relationship with the Holy Spirit.



Some perks of being a spiritual caregiver:

- We are constantly touched and challenged by the stories we hear and the courage we encounter in the midst of great struggle.
- We learn and understand our own values, attitudes and beliefs.
- We are challenged to grow through our reflection on the experiences we have, especially those that touch our hearts.

Being a spiritual caregiver is a profession that requires advanced skills such as sensitivity and compassion. The spiritual pains of people may not seem as important or urgent in today's medical world but, if unaddressed, they can lead to years of anguish and pain. Often these pains are hard to express, especially for those suffering from forms of dementia and other memory impairments, and can even trigger challenging behaviors. Through the guidance of spiritual care we can help our elders enjoy and find peace in the autumn years of their lives.

This Geriatric Spiritual Care Mini-Lesson "What is a Spiritual Care Giver?" comes from the Geriatric Spiritual Care Certificate Program taught by the Avila Institute of Gerontology. This program was designed to address the spiritual needs of elders, especially those living in a long-term care setting. To learn more about this program, please visit www.avilainstitute.org.

Geriatric Spiritual Care Mini-Lesson #2



The Importance of Life Review

Life review is a helpful tool and process that is used to understand people's most important beliefs, values, stories and life lessons that were significant and helped to shape them into the person they are today. It helps a spiritual caregiver to understand the "places" of comfort as well as the areas that bring discomfort and pain. A life review tells stories of the past, evaluates memories, encourages nostalgic reminiscence, prepares someone for death and finds meaning in all phases of their life including their present phase.

"How elders view their living situation is more critical than their actual living situation."

Life review is creating and understanding a life story:

- It leaves a legacy that outlasts all worldly possessions.
- It's a way of being "remembered."
- It inspires, educates and entertains.
- It captures family stories to pass on.
- It shares life lessons and wisdom.
- It identifies blessings and requests for the future with the Holy Spirit.

Significance of life review discussion:

- A concrete way to engage people spiritually.
- Helps people articulate their own stories.
- Offers opportunities for group sharing and discussion.
- Provides a framework to help others find meaning.
- Allows a spiritual caregiver to listen to what is important.
- Helps to support a basic need of residents.
- Offers a new way to link with residents' families.

Mizanur Khondoker et al, Positive and Negative Experiences of Social Support and Risk of Dementia in Later Life: An Investigation Using the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing, *Journal of Alzheimer's Disease* (2017)

Ashwin A. Kotwal et al, Social Function and Cognitive Status: Results from a US Nationally Representative Survey of Older Adults, *Journal of General Internal Medicine* (2016).



Want to create a life review?

In the program we walk our students through the process of creating a life review using the book *"Leaving a Spiritual Legacy: Writing a Spiritual Will"* by Louise and Joseph Colletti. You can start today by identifying:

- Your life map – What places, events, people and heritage have been most significant in your life?
- Your values and core beliefs
- Your family stories
- What you are grateful for
- Your blessings and requests for the future

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Helping Others with Grief

The emotional response to any form of loss is grief. It may vary in intensity and duration but it is a functional necessity, not a weakness. It is a part of the “letting go” and restoration process where one works through the pain of loss and separation. This involves regaining a sense of balance and integration in his/her own life.

When working through grief it is helpful to identify, legitimize and normalize one’s feelings to reduce anxiety. Redefine terms like “lose control” or “breakdown.” Acknowledge their intensity but use terms such as “intense feelings” and “emotional release.” Crying and being intensely upset is not loss of control. It is unexpressed emotion that will create loss of control so it is best to process painful emotions as they occur to avoid accumulation and explosion later. Encourage expressing feelings in a comfortable and non-threatening private setting.

“One must work through painful feelings in order to detach from the deceased or the loss in order to reinvest in life.”

Stages of Grief

1. Shock and denial

Person will feel confusion, disbelief, emptiness, numbness. They think “It can’t be”.

2. Sadness and depression

This is a difficult phase where the numbness begins to wear off. Person will feel fatigue, isolation, withdrawal, intense pain and suffering.

3. Guilt and remorse

The person will want to change the outcome, reminiscing and regretting, thinking “if only” or “it’s my fault that I did not notice/visit/help.”

4. Anger and blame

Person will blame others, feel unfairness, anger at God and loved ones.

5. Acceptance and rebuilding

The person begins to heal and still feels pain, but he or she is no longer paralyzed by it. Suffering takes on new meaning.



Signs and Symptoms of Grief

- **Body:** fatigue, illness, sleep disturbances, sighing
- **Mind:** distraction, confusion, lack of concentration, forgetfulness
- **Spirit:** anxiety, inability to pray as before, lack of engagement, disinterested, listlessness, anger at God
- **Emotions:** sadness, anger, guilt, shock, jealousy, loneliness, disbelief, confusion, preoccupation

When dealing with the mourning/grief period, remember to accept the reality of the loss. It’s okay for one to experience the pain. It will take time to adjust to the environment where the loved one is missing. When helping others through their loss, remember to give opportunity for anticipatory grief. The grief doesn’t have to be short nor is it an illness that goes on indefinitely. Grief and suffering should never be suppressed by drugs, alcohol or even avoidance. Never undermine the loss and take the time to help them process the loss – usually the depth of the relationship is the depth of the pain.

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Geriatric Spiritual Care Mini-Lesson #4



Being a Good Listener

Did you know that we spend about 45 percent of our waking time listening, but we forget about half of what we hear? Listening is an important skill for all people to have - it can boost their career, maintain healthy relationships with friends and family, and help those they are caring for. We must remember that listening is a give and take relationship. Often others won't listen unless they feel they are being listened to in return. When people feel truly listened to, they feel accepted and appreciated rather than unwanted and isolated. When we feel listened to, we feel important and that's how we want others to feel when we listen to them.

*“The most basic of all human needs is the need to understand and be understood. The best way to understand people is to listen to them.”
— Ralph Nichols*

When it comes to being a good listener there are many behaviors that we shouldn't do. Many of these mistakes are so common you are probably thinking "I do that all the time!" The key is awareness and practice. If you find yourself committing a common behavior to avoid, center and focus back on the speaker.

Here are a few common listening behaviors to avoid:

- Listening to your own thoughts or planning your response rather than hearing the person speaking.
- Interrupting or even trying to stop the speaker's story.
- Assuming you know what the speaker will say AND finishing his or her sentences.
- Either ignoring or focusing too heavily on non-verbal signals such as tone, pitch and body language.
- Projecting your feelings and thoughts onto the speaker including judgment, advice and criticism.

The most important thing to do when listening is to be present, show interest and convey warmth and respect. The person speaking wants to feel that she is being heard, that she is safe to express herself with no judgment.

Try using some of these helpful behaviors:

- Meet the listener with openness and acceptance.
- Keep the focus on the speaker, allowing him or her to control the discussion.
- Give brief verbal and nonverbal responses and reinforcements such as "Mm-mmm", "I see" and "yes," and occasional head nods.
- Appropriately interpret, summarize, and rephrase what has been said back to the speaker.

Resources:

- "Now Hear this! Good Listeners have success" From the column of Harvey Mackay, Sunday January 16, 2005.
- The Art of Listening, Hearing with Your Heart by Ann Cavera, Liguorian, October 2008, pgs 28-31.
- Effective Helping: Interviewing and Counseling Techniques by Barbara F. Okun
- The Gift to Listen, the Courage to Hear by Rev. Cari Jackson International Listening Association - www.listen.org

"Listening is noting what, when and how something is being said. Listening is distinguishing what is not being said from what is silence. Listening is not acting like you're in a hurry, even if you are. Listening is eye contact, a hand placed gently upon an arm. Sometimes, listening is taking careful notes in the person's own words. Listening involves suspension of judgment. It is neither analyzing nor racking your brain for labels, diagnoses, or remedies before the person is done relating her symptoms. Listening, like labor assisting, creates a safe space where whatever needs to happen or be said can come." — Allison Para Bastien

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Ethical Decision Making

What do we mean by ethics? Ethics is a practical discipline that studies actions and norms that bring human fulfillment; it is a method of identifying, organizing and analyzing the “rightness” or “wrongness” of an action; it gives rise to principles often embedded in codes, laws or standards. Ethics requires freedom which includes free choice, free will, free actions – if we’re not free, there is no such thing as “ethics.” Ethics is concerned with the “good” (preserve life, form community, seek truth) and the fulfillment of human needs (physical, psychological, social, creative, spiritual).

“The moral response is one that most fully respects and promotes human life in relation with God, with other human beings and with all of creation.”
— Kenneth Overberg



How we decide what is “good” is based on our values (those qualities which give direction and meaning to our lives). The influences that develop our values include family, community, society, constitution, professional organizations, life experiences and faith. Common themes and values for ethical decision making include human dignity, the common good, stewardship, justice and human rights and preferential option for the poor.

Often when we have to make ethical decisions we come across ethical dilemmas. An ethical dilemma is defined as “a complex situation that often involves an apparent mental conflict between moral imperatives, in which to obey, one would result in transgressing another.”

Characteristics of ethical dilemmas:

- Choice between equally undesirable alternatives
- Conflict of “goods”
- Usually no action is worse than making a choice
- Conflict among rights, roles, rules, needs, values... a crisis of conscience

It is often very difficult to make decisions especially during ethical dilemmas. People are often emotional, confused and working through the opinions and requests of others.

Here are some helpful steps to keep in mind when making a decision:

- First identify all involved – including the decision maker and the community of concern
- Clarify the question, the intentions and the circumstances
- Get the facts
- Determine the values in conflict
- Take time, reflect and pray
- Take action

Here are some helpful questions to use as a guide:

- Is my response life-giving?
- What is the loving thing to do?
- Does this decision promote human dignity?
- Am I addressing the needs of the poor?
- Am I responding to God?

Moral choice has more to do with responding not to principles but to persons.

RESOURCES

The Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services, often called the ERDs or the Directives, is the document that offers moral guidance, drawn from the Catholic Church’s theological and moral teachings, on various aspects of health care delivery. The Directives can be found on the website of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

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Geriatric Spiritual Care Mini-Lesson #6



Theological Reflection

Theological Reflection is a term used for “learning from your experience.” It deals directly with the person’s experience and helps them learn from the experiences and events that make up the person’s life. Involving God makes it theological. Theological reflection helps one to discover God’s presence in the event, the difference God makes and what God expects as a result. Reflecting (by oneself or with a group) helps to grasp life events, analyze them, see patterns, find meaning, draw conclusions and more.

*“Theological reflection takes place within history, but the history within which it takes place is an ongoing, open-ended process.”
— David Novak*

How is theological reflection done?

There are many different methods and models for performing a Theological Reflection. Here are the basic steps.

1. **Select an experience:** The events of your life run together and overlap. They do not neatly separate. However, to do theological reflection, one must separate them in order to focus on meaningful experiences.
2. **Describe the experience:** When reflecting, it's important to know what happened; one must make the experience available for reflection.
3. **Enter the experience:** One must relive the experience from the inside so one can learn what it has to teach.
4. **Learning from an experience:** Grasp what the experience teaches by relating it to what you already know and what the experience prompts you to learn.
5. **Enacting the Learning:** Incorporate the lesson into the pattern of one's life. Once the person has done this, continue the reflection process with new experiences.

What kinds of experiences should be selected for reflection?

There are no criteria for selecting a particular experience. Important ones usually occur subtly, suggesting something more is going on. Significant events suggest a sense of something larger, more engaging or more demanding than others. A larger world of meaning is opened up for a person or group from this important event. What is important is that these experiences lead a person to a new, more expansive and more meaningful way of reflection.

What makes theological reflection work?

- **A group:** Theological reflection works best in a group because a group is more likely to see everything in a given experience and keeps individuals from distorting or misreading an experience.
- **A meaningful experience:** Pick an experience that grabs attention, has an impact, and wants to be discussed.
- **A faith-theological perspective:** Look at the experience through religious beliefs and your understanding of them.
- **A practical outcome:** Theological reflection begins with the events of daily life and then helps shape the events which will follow. Events can't be controlled but TR can guide life according to one's beliefs.
- **A continuous process:** Theological perspective does not have its full effect when done sparingly. It is a skill which must be practiced regularly.

Theological reflection places the reflector in conversation with other sources of the revelation of God, primarily the faith tradition of the person or community. The world context of the experience is also particularly revelatory of meaning and the living God. The faith tradition and spirituality of the reflector are additional significant sources revealing the experience of God. Critical conversation among the sources is a process by which clarification, differences, or insights mutually challenge and expand each other. From this deepened awareness of God's presence in the experience, decisions are made for more relevant and prophetic choices in ministry. Through this critical conversation the reflector is often challenged to a response of conversion of heart, mind, and action.

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